ASKING QUESTIONS IN HMONG AND OTHER SOUTHEAST ASIAN LANGUAGES

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Many of the languages of mainland Southeast Asia share a similar devise for asking yes-no questions, that is, questions such as in (1) which request an affirmative or negative response rather than other information.

(1) Is she going to Chiang-Mai?  
   (Yes, she is.  or  No, she isn't.)
   Do you have any rice?  
   (Yes, I do.  or  No, I don't.)

Such questions in these languages tend to take the form of alternative propositions. That is, the verb put into question is stated in a positive proposition and then is opposed by a negative proposition of the same verb. One type of yes-no question in Standard (Mandarin) Chinese is an explicit example of the notion of alternative propositions. The sentence in (2) has first a positive proposition of the verb याओ, followed by a negative proposition, बु याओ, of the same verb.

(2) ताः याओ बु याओ माय माय? (ताः)याओ (माय).  (ताः)बु याओ (माय).
   Chi 3rd Person want not want buy rice 3P want buy 3P not want buy
   'Does she want to buy some rice?'  'Yes, she does.'  'No, she doesn't.'

As shown, the appropriate answer to such a question is the affirmation or negative assertion of the verb.

Christian Bauer (p.c.) says that it is possible to have a V-Neg-V question in the Mon language spoken in Thailand but not that spoken in Burma. He gives the example in (3), with the pre-verbal negative हुः.

(3) कलन हुः कलन?
   Mon come Neg come
   'Are you coming, or not?'

He states, however, that this form is "un-Mon" and is a recent grammatical loan. Since this form is also un-Tai, perhaps it is borrowed from Tibeto-Burman Yi northern neighbors.

This same form, V-not-V, is permissible in Hmong. The sentence in (4), from Lyman 1974:186, is a Green Hmong sentence. The sentence in (5) is a White Hmong sentence, as are most of the Hmong examples.

(4) को मुा त्शुा नो त्सी मुा?
    Hmg you have drug eat not have
    'Do you have any medicine?'

(5) को मु मु त्सी मु?
    Hmg you go not go
    मु (नाव).  त्सी मु.
    go sure not go
    'Are you going?'  'Yes, I'm going.'  'No, I'm not going.'

Again, the response is affirmation or negation of the verb in question.

However, this form is not so common in Hmong. There is a strong preference for making a more explicit alternation by separating the positive and negative propositions with the alternative 'or', as in (6) and (7).

(6) को मु लो त्सी मु?
    Hmg you go or not go
    'Are you going?'

(7) ने क्हो ताव लाव?  लो त्सेंग? त्सी ताव (क्हो)?
    Hmg you2 repair able already or still not able repair
    'Can you repair it already or do you need to do it again?'
In fact, most of the languages in the area permit the use of a full explicit positive-negative alternation with the alternative 'or'; that is, V-or-not-V, where the verbs are identical, the 'or' is the customary 'or' in either-or questions (as in (8)), and the 'not' is the customary negative used before the first verb in negative statements (as in (9)).

(8) K'O mûa nplë lô k'o mûa txhû? (Heimbach 1979:116)  
Hmg you have hulled rice or you have unhulled rice  
'Do you have hulled or unhulled rice?'

(9) Tû nêng pûa tsî mûa dâtsi nô tsî mûa dâtsi hnû. (PXNNH:37)  
Hmg animate person poor not have what eat not have what wear  
'Poor people have nothing to eat and nothing to wear.'

In Hmong, the use of a full alternating V-or-not-V pattern is quite usual and does not imply particular emphasis. In most other languages, however, such a pattern does have particular emphasis. In Vietnamese, as in (10), the use of 'or' seems to emphasize the negative and create some expectancy of a negative response. Unlike Chinese and Hmong, the repeat of the verb is optional in Vietnamese.

(10) Chí mû'n mua gào hay khóng (mû'n)?  
Vtn older sister want buy husked rice or not want  
'Do you, older sister, want to buy some rice or not?'

Similarly, in Thai the V-or-not-V form carries negative emphasis (and is somewhat archaic, according to Anthony Diller (p.c.), who gave the example in (11)).

(11) Khun pay rûm mây (pay)? 'Are you going or not?'  
Thai you(Polite) go or not go

Hmong employs the V-or-not-V form in tag questions, in which case the two verbs are different, V1-or-not-V2, and the second verb is usually tâu 'able' which occurs with this meaning following other verbs (see (7) above and cf. Thai vày and Vietnamese được). An example is the sentence in (12).

(12) Kû mûa râu kô làw? lô tsî tâu?  
Hmg I hand to you already or not able  
'Did I give it to you already?'

From the evidence presented here and below, it is apparent that the (Sbj)V-or-not-V pattern, so regularly used in Hmong for yes-no questions, represents an areal pattern. In fact, it may be an underlying historical pattern from which different languages have selected preferred versions. This becomes clearer from a comprehensive examination of yes-no question patterns in mainland Southeast Asia. The chart in Table 1 gives an overall view of V-or-not-V-type patterns used for yes-no questions in some mainland Southeast Asian languages, arranged by language family. XX marks the more dominant patterns for given languages. More data to illustrate the various patterns follows. (AA = Austroasiatic, M-Y = Miao-Yao, S-T = Sino-Tibetan, St.Chinese = Standard (Mandarin) Chinese, T-B = Tibeto-Burman.)
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<thead>
<tr>
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* tone difference in not
† an irregular negative

Table 1 Utilization of the V-or-not-V question pattern

The most common yes-no question form in Vietnamese is simply a statement of the verb in question followed by không 'not', with the negative expression of the verb merely implied by the presence of the preverbal negative. The use of 'not' in a straightforward negative sentence (not-V) is shown in the negative response to the yes-no question in (13) which takes the form V-not.

Vtn sister know road that not know 'Do you know that road?' 'Yes, I know it.' 'No, I don't know it.'

The use of V-not-V, as occurs in Chinese and Hmong, is not allowed in Vietnamese:

(14) Chí muốn không muốn mua gạo? Chí biết đường đó không biết?
Vtn sis. want not want buy rice sis. know road that not know 'Do you want to buy rice?' 'Do you know that road?'

Vietnamese has another negative which functions in the same way as không 'not'. That is chưa 'not yet'. Examples of a negative statement with preverbal chưa and a yes-no question with postverbal chưa are given in (15) and (16) respectively.

(15) Anh ấy đi chợ chưa về.
Vtn older brother that go market not yet return 'He went to the market and hasn't returned yet.'

(16) Anh ấy đã về nhà chưa?
Vtn brother that Past return house not yet 'Has he returned home yet?'

The form V-not-V is also disallowed in the Tai languages, whose yes-no questions may, like Vietnamese, take the form V-not. When the form V-not is used in Lao, the negative undergoes a tone change. In (17) the negative บ่อ (mid tone) is used in a straightforward negative sentence.

(17) Làaw บ่อ si pay Lועq P้าbaaŋ.
Lao 3P not Future go Luang Prabang 'She's not going to go to Luang Prabang.'

In a yes-no question, as in (18), the tone is usually low tone.

(18) Làaw si pay L으q Pabaangs บ่อ? บ่อ pay.
Lao 3P Future go Luang Prabang not not go 'Is she going to go to Luang Prabang? 'No, she's not going.'
negative, to be written differently in the script, in accordance with the different pronunciation. In a negative sentence, mây (always falling tone) is used:

(19) Khåw (ca) mây suôm khåaw(-sáam). 'They're not going to buy rice.'
Thai 3P Future not buy (milled) rice
(Anthony Diller, p.c.)

In a yes-no question, as in (20), the tone of the postverbal question negative in normal speech is high tone. (Slow or spelling pronunciation is rising tone: mây.)

(20) Khåw (ca) suôm khåaw(-sáam) mây? 'Are they going to buy rice?'
Thai 3P Future buy (milled) rice not
(Anthony Diller, p.c.)

Most grammarians (e.g. Noss 1964, Vichin 1970) treat mây and mây as two distinct lexical items, negative and question word/particle. However, there are strong arguments for considering the question word to be related to the preverbal negative in both Thai and Lao. First, although Thai mây/mây and Lao bôô/bôô are clearly not cognates, a similar type tone difference occurs in identical functions, suggesting that the tone difference is grammatically conditioned, probably by intonational factors. Furthermore, other Thai dialects and Tai languages do not have a tone difference between the preverbal negative and the postverbal question negative. Example sentences from Songkhla, a Southern Thai dialect, (given by Anthony Diller, p.c.), Nung (from Saul & Wilson 1980:47 & 116), and Black Tai (from Fippinger 1975: 151 & 157) illustrate the use of the same word for both negative and question "particle" in each case.

(21) Kûa mây hên kây.
Song - I not see chicken
khla 'I don't see the chicken.'
Mûng hên kây mây?
you see chicken not
'Do you see the chicken?'

(22) Câu saôm chông mi hân muûn.
Nung I also then not see 3P
I also didn't see him.

(23) Pô kê hêht ânh hon mi?
Nung mâû old make Csf house not
'Is uncle building a house?'

(24) ...bau² mi⁴ saq¹ ka:⁴ lâm¹.
Black not exist anything at all
goi cast net not
'Hai⁴ tuk² he¹ bau²?
'There's nothing there at all.'

In Chrau, a South Bahnaric Mountain Mon-Khmer language of Viet-Nam, one of several postverbal question words is also a negative. Thus, the yes-no question in (25), from Dorothy Thomas 1978:282, has the V-not form.

(25) Pôp ơh lêt camvûm ânh nhài gal dâng?
Chrau sibling hear word I speak right no
'Don't you think that's right (what I say)'

The V-not question form in Khmer is somewhat different in that the negative that occurs postverbally in yes-no questions never occurs before the verb. It does, however, occur in straightforward negative sentences, still after the verb and accompanying another negative which occurs before the verb. The sentence in (26), from Huffman 1970:23, is a negative sentence with the preverbal negative mën and the postverbal negative tee. Neang Yun (p.c.) suggests that the presence of tee implies a response, i.e. 'No, I don't want any coffee.'

(26) Khöm mën trow-kaa kafei tee.
Khöm I not want coffee not
'No, I don't want any coffee.'