On the status of tones in the Suomo dialect of rGyarong

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rGyarong is an independent language of the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan. Because it is rich in unique characteristics and preserves many features of Proto-Tibeto-Burman, this language has been the subject of the attention of Chinese and other scholars for quite some time. Whether or not rGyarong has phonemic tones is one question that scholars have focused on particularly. Almost all of these scholars have concluded that tones do not play a significant part in lexical distinctions, and thus classify rGyarong as a non-tonal language, though one where high-pitch lexical items are common. The separation of rGyarong from the tonal Sino-Tibetan languages should be seen as a breakthrough in the study of tone, yet the question of whether or not rGyarong actually has tones, and what role they play in the language still needs to be looked into. This question involves not only the facts of the language, but also some theoretical considerations, such as what standard we use in determining whether or not a language has tones, and how we determine what role the tones play in the language. The question of tone in rGyarong is particularly important for our understanding of the origin and development of tone in Tibeto-Burman.

The data used here are from the rGyarong dialect spoken in Wangjia Zhai, Suomo Xiang, Maerkang County, Sichuan Province, China (hereafter referred to as Suomo).

I.

In Suomo, every syllable has a stable tone. By stable tone we mean that (a) aside from rule-governed sandhi tone changes in certain syllables, the tones cannot be changed; (b) the tones are in general constant across time, occasion, and speaker.

1 See the entry for rGyarong in the Languages and Writing Systems volume of The Great Chinese Encyclopedia (1988); also "The phonetics and morphology of the Suomo dialect of rGyarong," by Jin Peng, Tang Kerang, Qu Aitang, & Lin Xiangrong (Yuyan Yanjiu 1957.2/1958.3); and "On the question of tones in rGyarong," by Lin Xiangrong (Journal of the Central Institute of Nationalities 1989.5).

2 One of the two authors, Yanmchu, is of the rGyarong nationality, and grew up with the Suomo dialect of rGyarong as his mother tongue. He later learned to speak Chinese. He is now a teacher in the Aba Prefecture of Sichuan.
There are two main tones in Suomo, a high level (55) tone and a falling (51) tone. These tones occur in both monosyllabic and polysyllabic words. Besides these, there is also a mid level (33) tone and a mid rising (24) tone, both of which occur only in polysyllabic words. The former appears on prefixes, but is otherwise mainly a sandhi tone; the latter is used to express a certain grammatical meaning. Taken together, there are then four tones in Suomo, each with its own distribution. Below we will discuss each one individually.

The **high level** tone mainly appears on syllables ending in -p, -t, or -k:

- **p:** kap\textsuperscript{55}rja\textsuperscript{55}p stand tep\textsuperscript{55}p blink, wink kse\textsuperscript{55}p stud horse
- **t:** t\textsuperscript{55}chet matte\textsuperscript{55}p goat met\textsuperscript{55}p other khut\textsuperscript{55}p willing
- **k:** prak\textsuperscript{55}p cliff pak\textsuperscript{55}p pig mak\textsuperscript{55}p is not

The high level tone also appears on syllables that end in glottal stop, but since the glottal stop automatically appears on words with non-stop finals in the high tone, there is no need to mark it explicitly. Among these syllables, those that have a nasal before the glottal stop have a slightly lower initial tone, with a slight rise at the end (445). There are also several syllables ending in -1 on which the high tone appears:

- **open syllables:**
  \begin{itemize}
  \item ca\textsuperscript{55}p meat
  \item ti\textsuperscript{55}p wheat
  \item wa\textsuperscript{55}p goose
  \item spu\textsuperscript{55}p back of a house
  \item ndi\textsuperscript{55}p stone wall
  \item zgru\textsuperscript{55}p boat
  \end{itemize}

- **nasal-final syllables:**
  \begin{itemize}
  \item zde\textsuperscript{55}m (445) shade
  \item t\textsuperscript{55}n (445) reason
  \item k\textsuperscript{55}n (445) price
  \item ca\textsuperscript{55}m (445) iron
  \item ka\textsuperscript{33}nd\textsuperscript{55}n (445) read
  \end{itemize}

- **lateral-final syllables:**
  \begin{itemize}
  \item ka\textsuperscript{33}tal\textsuperscript{55}p slowpoke, sluggard
  \item ka\textsuperscript{33}t\textsuperscript{55}ulu\textsuperscript{55}p roll
  \end{itemize}

The **falling** tone mainly appears on open syllables and syllables with a final sonorant (-n, -ŋ, -r, -l) or -s:

- **open syllables:**
  \begin{itemize}
  \item tsh\textsuperscript{51}p salt
  \item mtsh\textsuperscript{51}p lake
  \item pka\textsuperscript{51}p chicken
  \end{itemize}

- **m:**
  \begin{itemize}
  \item ka\textsuperscript{33}sm\textsuperscript{51}p three
  \item ti\textsuperscript{33}k\textsuperscript{51}ram\textsuperscript{51}p courtyard
  \item te\textsuperscript{33}b\textsuperscript{51}um\textsuperscript{51}p pile (CLF)
  \end{itemize}
-n:  
sməŋ⁵¹ medicine spəŋ⁵¹ thigh

-y:  
cəŋ⁵¹ mud wall bzaŋ⁵¹ bronze khuŋ⁵¹ tiger

-r:  
səŋ⁵¹ louse zgər⁵¹ tent cər⁵¹ east

-s:  
phoks⁵¹ salary ras⁵¹ cloth theks⁵¹ straight line

-l:  
kəəl⁵¹ glass zgə⁵³jol⁵¹ corridor kə⁵³rəəl⁵¹ withered

On syllables ending with -s or -r, the tone contour is actually 551, with the tone being level for all of the syllable except for the final -s or -r, then falling on the final. If there is a vowel immediately preceding the final -s or -r, then a glottal stop is heard between the vowel and the final (i.e. -ʔs or -ʔr), as in spəs⁵¹ [spɔʔs⁵⁵] ‘fragrant’ and sər⁵¹ [sɔʔr⁵¹] ‘louse’.

The falling tone also appears on a small number of stopped syllables, contrasting with the high level tone, as in the pairs dək⁵⁵ ‘poison’/dək⁵¹ ‘crisp’; ze⁵⁵ ‘time’/ze⁵¹ ‘skin on boiled milk’.

The mid-level tone mainly appears on the first syllable of bisyllabic words. Some of these are the stable tones of prefixes, and some are the sandhi variants of high-level or falling tones:

tə³³ mnak⁵⁵ eye  
tə³³ mŋam⁵⁵ deaf person  
mak⁵⁵/³³ mə⁵¹ army  
ça⁵⁵/³³ ni⁵¹ fresh meat  
pka⁵¹/³³ təu⁵¹ chicken  
ca⁵⁵/³³ stsa⁵¹ rust  
ka³³ rnakə⁵¹ deep  
ka³³ stə⁵¹ straight  
ɕtca⁵⁵/³³ tek⁵⁵ eleven  
ɕe⁵⁵/³³ ɕjek⁵⁵ leaf  
sməŋ⁵¹/³³ be⁵¹ doctor  
kə³³ ɕa⁵³/³³ na⁵¹ dog

The mid-level tone also appears on the first and second syllables of three-syllable compounds:

kha³³ rdai³³ lu³⁵ loach  
kham³³ tə³³ rdəŋk⁵⁵ lizard

The mid-level also appears on the second token of reduplicated words, in this case being the sandhi realization of a high level or falling tone. The pitch contour has a slight fall to it:
The \textit{mid-rising} tone is used mainly for expressing the grammatical category of evidentiality, and so is part of the morphology:

\begin{verbatim}
ka\textsuperscript{33} kts\textsubscript{51}em
ka\textsuperscript{55} kts\textsubscript{24}em

t\textsubscript{sha}\textsuperscript{55/33} ka\textsuperscript{33} let\textsuperscript{55}
t\textsubscript{sha}\textsuperscript{55/33} ka\textsuperscript{55} let\textsuperscript{24}
\end{verbatim}

He/she closed it (indirect evidence).

He/she poured tea (indirect evidence).

Most of the lexicon of Suomo is made up of monosyllabic and disyllabic words, especially the latter. Words consisting of more than two syllables are relatively rare. Because the conditions for the appearance of tones are closely related to syllable structure in Suomo, the possible combinations of syllable/word-type and tone are limited. This situation is not found in languages with richer tone systems. The patterns we find in Suomo are mainly of the following six types:

1. 55  
   pak\textsuperscript{55}  
   c\textsubscript{55}a
   plg  
   wooden plate

2. 51  
   p\textsubscript{51}  
   c\textsubscript{51}a
   bushel  
   river deer

3. 33 + 55  
   ka\textsuperscript{33} st\textsuperscript{55}o
   ta\textsuperscript{33} ro\textsuperscript{55}
   hug  
   leader

4. 33 + 51  
   ka\textsuperscript{33} st\textsuperscript{51}o
   ta\textsuperscript{33} ro\textsuperscript{51}
   straight  
   chest

5. 33 + 33 + 55  
   ka\textsuperscript{33} sa\textsuperscript{33} nj\textsuperscript{55}o
   ke\textsuperscript{33} ne\textsuperscript{33} pu\textsuperscript{55}
   slippery  
   soft

6. 33 + 33 + 51  
   ke\textsuperscript{33} ne\textsuperscript{33} mer\textsuperscript{51}
   la\textsuperscript{33} b\textsuperscript{33} t\textsubscript{51}h\textsubscript{51}e
   oil  
   elephant

In complex words of three or more syllables, because the bonding between the syllables is rather loose, the individual morphemes retain their original tones, and do not participate in the patterns listed above:

\begin{verbatim}
ka\textsuperscript{33} r\textsubscript{5}zap\textsuperscript{55}  
pha\textsuperscript{33} wja\textsuperscript{55}
\end{verbatim}

husband and wife

\begin{verbatim}
tha\textsuperscript{33} w\textsubscript{5}ja\textsuperscript{55}
\end{verbatim}

husband

\footnote{The first token of a reduplicated falling tone syllable becomes high level. [Ed.]}