SYLLABIC m̥ IN TAI-LUE AND NEIGHBOURING TAI DIALECTS

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The appearance of syllabic m̥ in Tai-Lue is a case of reduction of morphemes that are syntactically, semantically and phonologically weak. This three-pointed conspiracy is quite prominent in Lue where the number of morphemes that have been levelled to m̥ is probably greater than in other dialects. Early visitors among the Lue in Yunnan, in fact, described Lue speech as having a mumbling quality when compared to what they judged to be the clarity of Siamese (Central Thai) or Yuan (Northern Thai). While Siamese does not have an authentic m̥, it does participate in the general process that we are describing. The reduction of Siamese /maak^{2}/ to an unstressed syllable /mă/ as in /mă muaŋ^{3}/ *'mango'* is an example of the closest that Siamese comes to the Lue phenomenon where we find Lue /m̥^{2}mooŋ^{5}/ [m̥^{1}mooŋ^{5}]. Northern Thai, closely documented on the colloquial level in Purnell and Hope 1962, is like Lue. Northern Thai, Purnell and Hope (1962:28) note, has "the prefix bà- or m̀- to indicate fruit and some other roundish, lumpy objects". Shan shares with Lue the negative expressed as m̥ (Cushing 1914; Egerod 1957). Black Tai speakers reportedly use m̥, but the actual data have not come to my attention. Likewise, one hears comments that the Cantonese negative, like Lue and Shan is a syllabic m̥. If the geographic spread of syllabic m̥ is extensive, we may be dealing with an areal feature not limited to Tai dialects.

This paper[1] is restricted to data which are available to the author in order to trace, in part, the development of syllabic m̥ in Tai-Lue

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and to make occasional references and comparisons to other dialects: Siamese, Northern Thai, White and Black Tai, Shan, and Lao, all of which lie within the Southwestern branch of the Tai language family (Li 1960) and Tho, a Tai dialect spoken in N. Vietnam. As a point of reference, the relevant details of the matrix developed by Gedney 1964 illustrating the development of tones from Proto-Tai categories may be used.

Proto-Tai Tones

	A	B	C	D-long	D-short
Voiceless (-Initials at time of vl/vd split)	(1)	(2)	(3)		
Voiced	(4)	(5)	(6)		
	Smooth syllables			*Checked syllables*	

CHART I

Lue spoken at Chieng Hung (Ch'e-li), Yunnan replicates the tonal splits numbered in Chart I. Lue of Ceng Tong (Li 1964) and Lue of Chiengkham, Thailand (Weroha 1974) have the same tonal pattern as Chieng Hung. Lue of Moeng Yong, Burma (Gedney 1969) is slightly different, but identical to the splits of Yuan and Khuen (Egerod 1959). The order and number of synchronic tones here, in fact, reflects the knowledge of an educated Lue informant.[1] The system of numbered tones facilitates comparisons across dialects. However, an alternate method used chiefly in Chinese linguistics is excellent for recording impressions of tonal shapes. Chart II combines the features of both systems.

The Tones of Tai-Lue spoken at Chieng Hung, Yunnan

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D-long)	(D-short)
**voiceless* (yin)	#1, high-level ˥55	#2, mid-rising ˧35	#3, low, glot.,slt. 13	=2 ˨	=1 ˥
**voiced* (yang)	#4, falling ˩51	#5, mid-level ˧33	#6, low, level, slt. rise ˩11	=5 ˧	=5 ˧
	Smooth syllables			*Checked syllables*	

CHART II

[1] Mr Seree Weroha, a Lue-speaking graduate student at the University of Michigan, provided data for his dialect for which I express my thanks.

We shall proceed now to elaborate the individual instances of syllabic m̥ in Lue.[1]

I. The negative: bau^{2} ↰ m^{2}↰. In an excellent study of Lue of Chieng Hung, Fu 1956 provides the following information on the negative. (Here I use my own transcription and add the tone numbers according to the combinations in Chart II.)

bau^{2}↰ *or* (m̥^{2}↰)	pay^{1} ↰ *'not go'* maa^{4} ↘ *'not come'*
bau^{1}↰ *or* (m̥^{1}↰)	paak^{2}↰ *'not say'* laa^{3} ↗ *'not far'* maa^{5} → *'not rotten'* laan^{6}↳ *'not bald, blunt'*

Fu and his co-workers do not go on to comment on the m̥^{1} and m̥^{2} variants of the negative. It appears that tonal assimilation or dissimilation is taking place; the question is to what. Referring to Chart II and combining synchronic and diachronic information, the m̥^{2} variant is seen as unaltered by a following "A" (1,4) tone, while the m̥^{1} complement is marked by a following "B,C" (2,5,3,6) tonal environment. In a diachronic sense, these two m̥ variants are assimilating or dissimilating to an earlier stage in Lue where the tones A, B, and C were undifferentiated, i.e. before undergoing the *voiced-voiceless initials bifurcation. Synchronically we arrive at the same end result by looking at the entry point of the six tones. Provisionally taking m̥^{2} as the base form, it can be said that it is unaltered when followed by tones that begin at the highest point or level 5. But by a modified "flip-flop" rule, m̥^{2} is deflected up to m̥^{1} when followed by tones whose entry points are mid (level 3) or low (level 1). That is m̥^{2} (-high) changes to m̥^{1} (+high) when followed by any tones whose entry point is -high. The rule, which will be revised below, could read

$$\text{m̥}^{2} \longrightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{m̥}^{2}/\_\_\_\_\text{+high entry point} \\ \text{m̥}^{1}/\_\_\_\_\text{-high entry point} \end{array} \right\}$$

Schematically, the diachronic-synchronic tonal environments conditioning the variation in m̥ appear in Chart III.

[1]Field research in Thailand was supported by a Fulbright-Hays dissertation grant; the National Research Council of Thailand facilitated my work among the Tai-Lue.

Diachronic	A (high)	B (mid)	C (low)
Synchronic	5 — 5 (1) 1 (4)	5 (2) 3 — 3 (5)	3 (3) 1 — 1 (6)
	+high entry	-high entry point	

CHART III

II. **The prefix maak^2 ˥** *'fruit; classifier for spherical objects'*. In Fu 1956, we find the following list for the prefix maak^2 ˥ (again the revised transcription is used):

maak fuuŋ ˧		m̥ fuuŋ ˧ *'plums'*
maak kɔɔ ˥	mak kɔɔ ˥	m̥ kɔɔ ˥ *'chestnuts'*
maak huu ˦	mak huu ˦	m̥ huu ˦ *'strawberry'*
maak fay ˩		m̥ fay ˩ *'fire fruit'*
maak mooŋ ˨	mak mooŋ ˨	m̥ mooŋ ˨ *'mango'*
maak pau ˩˧	mak pau ˩˧	m̥ pau ˩˧ *'coconut'*

The m̥^{1} and m̥^{2} variants derived from maak^2 precede the same tones as the syllabic negative did. Indeed, the list is arranged accordingly. Implied in the Fu 1956 data on maak^2 are the following rules. First, D-long, the checked syllable with a long vowel (Chart II), becomes D-short under conditions of light stress.

$$-VV \longrightarrow -V/\_\_\_\_\text{-stress}^1$$

Again, following Chart II, we see that accompanying the change in vowel length is a change of tone.

$$\text{D-long tone 2} \longrightarrow \text{D-short tone 1}$$

The final -k of the form which has become mak is deleted.

$$-k \longrightarrow \emptyset \ /\_\_\_\_\#$$

This gives us the syllable with light stress that we find in Siamese: mă. Applying a further reduction of stress in Lue, the vowel is deleted and any vestige of tone with it.

$$\text{mă} \longrightarrow \text{m̥} \ /\_\_\_\_\text{-stress}^2$$

Finally tone is "regenerated" for the syllabic m̥ through dissimilation (polarisation) according to the rules presented in section 1 above, but now revised as: