

Emergent Word Tone in Kham:
A Tibeto-Burman Halfway House

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The Tibeto-Burman languages of Southeast Asia have long been characterized as solidly monosyllabic. And rightly so. Words, phrases, and sentences consisted of phonologically discreet monosyllabic morphemes marching along to the cadence of one tone per syllable. On occasion, of course, questions were raised as to the efficacy of the traditional view. Tone sandhi with its polysyllabic government was found to occur here and there; and weak or unstressed syllables were swept into the orb of stronger ones so that tonal units encompassed more than a single syllable, and a purely syllabic prosody was not always possible (Bradley 1971, Lehman 1973). But from a diachronic point of view such languages were still monosyllabic and the steps could be reconstructed (or at least imagined), with a considerable degree of confidence, showing their evolution from their former "pure" state.

The polysynthetic Tibeto-Burman languages of the Himalayan region, however, were considerably more problematic. In the Bodish languages especially, the word (a lexical item together with its full array of affixes) was found to be the domain of contrastive tone. The question which naturally emerged was: Could these word-tone systems have evolved from an earlier monosyllabic tone system? Given the Southeast Asian-centricity of Tibeto-Burman tonal studies up to that point, the expected answer was probably in the affirmative. But that made for its own set of problems. The real difficulty lay in positing

reasonable hypothetical steps to account for the shift from one tone type to the other and still account for certain *features of the modern languages*. So for lack of a comprehensive theory, we had to be content with broad speculative principles and describe a given language as one type or the other, quietly relegating the anomalies to an appendix.

Believing in principle that the tone shift from syllable to word was at least possible, Matisoff (1973) suggested the possible mechanism of "syllable reduction through human laziness." After a language reaches a stage in its development where there are polysyllabic compound words, and each syllable still has its own tone, the language then comes to a stage where the syllables in compounds tend more and more to be pronounced laxly. Vowels lose their stress and are reduced to schwa. These unstressed syllables also lose their tone and attach themselves to the adjacent syllable in the compound. Eventually polysyllabic units become the domain for tone.

Others, notably Mazaudon (1976), maintains that although Matisoff's mechanism may be a possible origin for languages which have shwa syllables (i.e. unstressed syllables which have lost both their vocalic and tonal distinctiveness) it is "not a satisfactory explanation for languages of the Bodish group, where all the syllables have the same stress, all the segments, vowel or consonant, have the full array of the distinctive possibilities in each syllable, and yet there is only one tone per word" (p. 85). Because the modern Bodish languages fail to give evidence of the kind of syllabic decay one would expect in a Matisoff type scenario, she opted for the view that "it is at least likely that the tone systems were never more complete than they are now."

Kham [Kham-Magar] of Nepal is a language of the Himalayan region, and though not classified as Bodish, it does share in

the Bodish feature of full vocalic distinctiveness on each syllable of the word--in other words, a "non-shwa" language. However, unlike the Bodish languages, Kham in certain respects resembles the monosyllabic tonal languages of Southeast Asia, and in other respects the word-tone languages of the Himalayan region. As such, it seems to lie at a midway point between the two types--an emerging word-tone system--and offers a number of valuable insights into the possible dynamics of such a change.

My first description of the phonology of Kham was in a short paper done in 1971 and mimeographed in Kathmandu, Nepal. My basic view then, as now, differed in no significant way from the view held by other scholars in the Himalayan area: a "four-box" system in which the two binary oppositions of pitch and voice register intersect to form a contrastive four tone system.

	tense	lax
Tone-1	hi level ('CV)	hi level ('CVh)
Tone-2	mid level (CV)	mid falling (CVh)

Figure 1. The contrastive four-box system in Kham tone.

Built into the Kham description, however, were a number of complexities which were apparent deviations from the TB norm. Most of these complexities involved further binary oppositions subordinate to the basic two illustrated in Figure 1: those of pitch and register. For example, one of the oppositions I discussed was the distinction between the "stem pitch" and the "suffix pitch" of a given tone. This binary opposition was

set up primarily to account for the anomalous behavior I found in Tone-1--a high pitch on a stem, versus a low pitch on a suffix (if in speech the suffix happened to occur).

	tense	lax
T-1 stem	hi level	hi level
suffix	lo level	lo level
T-2 stem	mid level	mid falling
suffix	mid level	mid falling

Figure 2. Stem and suffix pitches on each of the four Kham tones.

According to that view, tone was potentially complex, and only those words which were morphologically whole, viz. those which were made up of a stem and suffix, were capable of manifesting both parts of the tonal character. Whenever a word occurred in a grammatical string without an attached suffix, the tonal character of the unrealized suffix pitch would be felt on the following stem in the form of allophonic modification or tone sandhi. As intimated earlier, this modification was evident only in Tone-1, as can be illustrated in examples 1 and 2 below. In example 1, the word consists of both a Tone-1 stem ('zihm) and a Tone-1 suffix (-'da), thereby manifesting both parts of the Tone-1 tonal character--a high-low opposition. In example 2, however, even though the Tone-1 stem 'zihm occurs without a morphological suffix, the influence of the "would-be" low-pitch suffix causes a pitch perturbation on the following high-pitch stem 'cyu: such that it is realized on a lower level that it would be under normal, unimpeded conditions.

- 1) 'zihm-'da 'to the house'
- 2) 'zihm 'cyu:-'keo 'he looked at the house'