

TONE BORROWING IN FIVE NORTHEASTERN DIALECTS

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Brown (1965 : 157) suggests that tone shapes may be borrowed but patterns of coalescence and splitting may not. If true, this statement may say something very important about tone languages and tone in general in relation to the phonological classification of lexical items in the brain. In this paper I would like to present evidence in favor of Brown's hypothesis. This evidence, while not entirely conclusive to my mind, does show that tone patterns are indeed not borrowed, at least to the same degree as tone shapes.

I have selected for study five Tai dialects from the Northeast of Thailand all found within a relatively small geographical area. With the exception of Nakhon Phanom Lao these dialects represent recent intrusions into the area from the Hua Phan districts in northern Laos and adjacent Thanh Hoa province in North Vietnam. As a control language in this comparison the dialect of Sam Neua has been included.

Turning now to the map and the dialects under study we note that the most different of all linguistically is the Saek language. It is, in fact, a member of the Northern Tai branch of the Tai family whose closest relatives are in southern China and North Vietnam. It is spoken in Thailand in only four villages but there are more speakers on the Laotian side of the border. The Nyø language is spoken primarily in Amphur Tha Uthen but there are scattered villages in Amphur Srisongkham. This dialect may be related to the so-called Yo of Sakon Nakhon who range as far south as Roi-et. The Nyø or Yo were originally located in Thanh Hoa province in North Vietnam (Robequain 1929). Yooy (spelled *yüey* by Seidenfaden (1967), is spoken in Amphurs Akat and Wanoniwat in Sakon Nakhon province. Robequain (111) notes the existence of a group known as "Yois" in Hua Phan Province. Phu Tai was likewise spoken near this location in northern Laos and has migrated south into southern Laos and Thailand.

The original Tai language in this part of the Northeast is assumed to be Lao, a variety very similar to that spoken in Vientiane. It is probably true that the borrowing considered here was in all cases borrowing from Lao.

For purposes of limitation we shall examine only the A column of these languages. Every A1 box has a rising tone (usually low rising but Simmonds (1965) does not specify for Nyɔ). If we look at boxes 2 and 3 we see they have coalesced with 1 in Yooy, Phu Tai, and Saek, but with 4 in Nyɔ. In Lao boxes 2 and 3 have a tone separate from both 1 and 4, and in Saek we notice the very unusual split within the A1 box.

In other words, the pitch contours have been borrowed but the patterns have not. Wherever possible the contours have been borrowed onto their cognate lexical items up to the point where the borrowing interferes with the tonal pattern. For instance, because boxes A1 and A2 are tonally distinct in Lao but not in Phu Tai, when Phu Tai borrows the A1 tone it borrows it also onto lexical items in A2, which must, according to the phonology of Phu Tai, have the same tone as those items in A1.

It is noteworthy, assuming the borrowing to be from Lao, that in the cases of Saek, Phu Tai, and Yooy, the A1 tone is borrowed, not the A23 tone. This may be because lexical items in A1 are more numerous.

From the present study it must be concluded that Brown's hypothesis appears to be correct: tone shapes are borrowed but no tone patterns. However, more evidence is needed to support this theory. The languages examined here have all intruded relatively recently into the area. If we look elsewhere we may be able to find arguments against this hypothesis from languages which have been in contact for longer periods of time. I am thinking specifically of cases like the Lue dialects which have been recorded with two different splits in the A column, A12-34 like in Yuan and Khün, and A123-4 like in White Tai. Here it would seem that the tonal pattern must have been borrowed.

It is interesting to speculate on the possible theoretical applications of this information. The instability of tonal contours may be related to Woo's (1969) hypothesis that dynamic tones are really surface manifestations of underlying stationary tones, that is, dynamic tones are not stable diachronically. And we still must account for the fact that tones are borrowed independently of lexical items.

SOURCES OF DATA

1. Saek of Ban BaWa : Author's fieldnotes.
2. Lao of Nakhon Phanom : Egerod (1961).
3. Phu Tai : Brown (1965).
4. Nyɔ : Simmonds (1965).
5. Yooy : Author's fieldnotes.
6. Sam Neua : Author's fieldnotes.

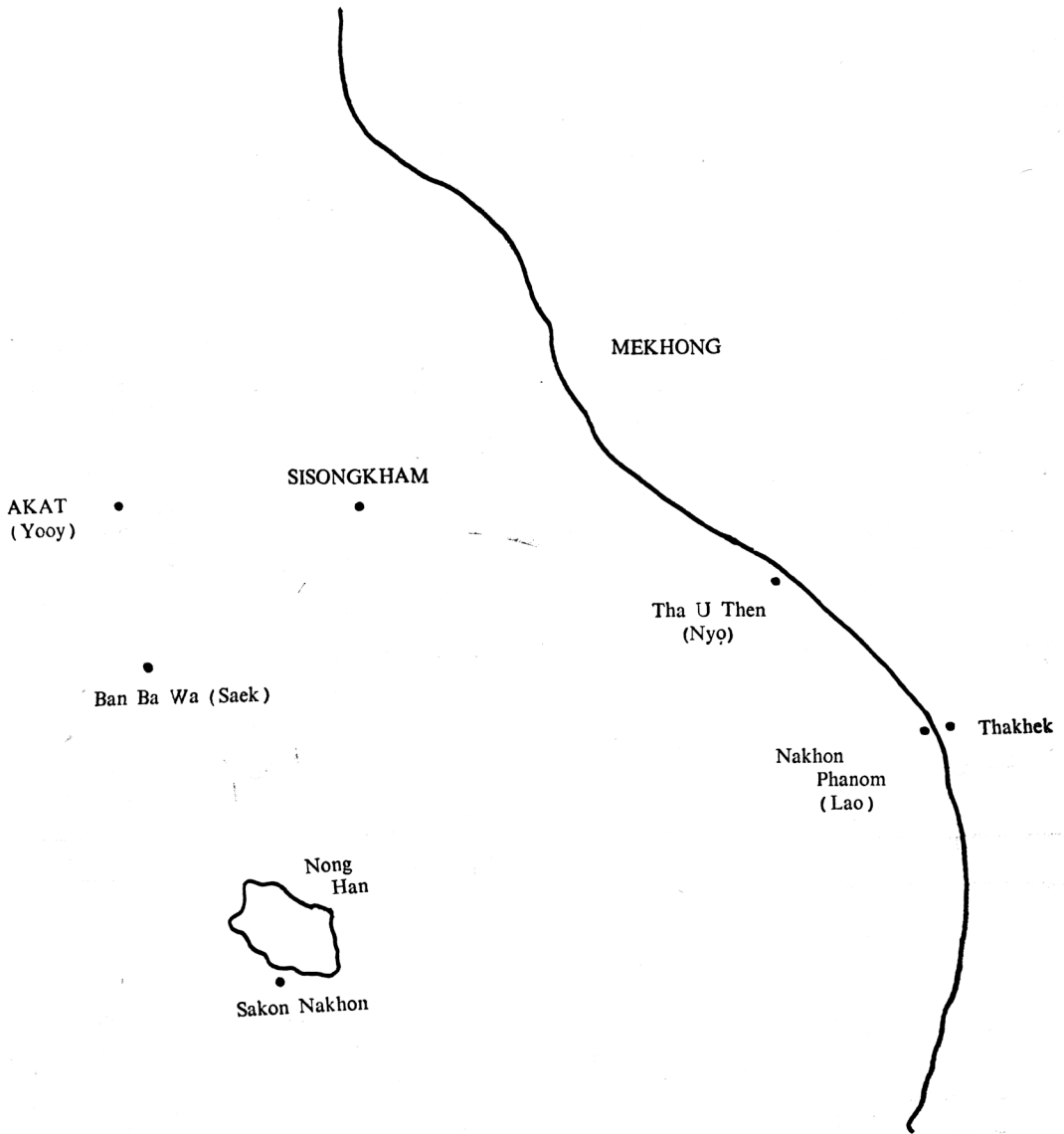


Figure 1. Map of the Area

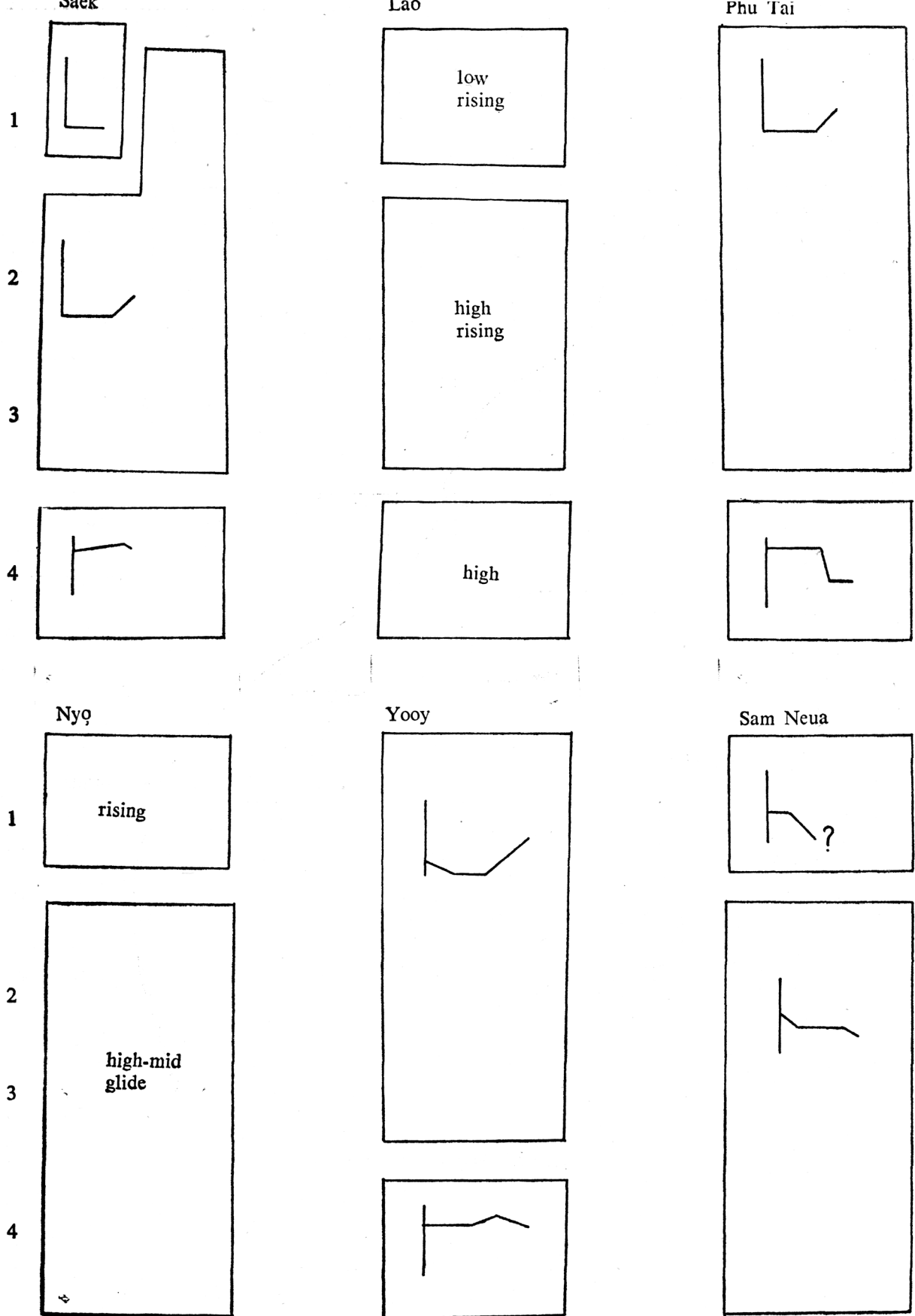


Figure 2. A column Splits