

ASKING QUESTIONS IN HMONG AND OTHER SOUTHEAST ASIAN LANGUAGES<sup>1</sup>

Marybeth Clark  
Australian National University

Many of the languages of mainland Southeast Asia share a similar device 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. 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 *yào*, followed by a negative proposition, *bu yào*, of the same verb.

- (2) *Tā yào bu yào mǎi mǐ?* (*Tā*) *yào (mǎi).* (*Tā*) *bu yào (mǎi).*<sup>2</sup>  
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 *hù*?

- (3) *Klɛŋ hù? klɛŋ?* 'Are you coming, or not?'  
Mon come Neg come

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) *Kɔ mɔa tshɔa nɔ tsi mɔa?* 'Do you have any medicine?'  
Hmg you have drug eat not have  
(5) *Kɔ mù tsi mù?* *Mù (náv).* *Tsi mù.*  
Hmg you go not go 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) *Kɔ mù lò tsi mù?* 'Are you going?'  
Hmg you go or not go

- (7) *Né kho tau lăw? lò tsèng? tsi tau* (kho)?  
Hmg vou2 repair able already or still not able repair

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) Kó mũa nplê      lò kó mũa txhũ?      (Heimbach 1979:116)  
Hmg you have hulled rice or you have unhulled rice  
'Do you have hulled or unhulled rice?'

(9) Tù      nēng      plũa      tsì mũa      dấtsi nồ      tsi mũa      dấtsi hnă.      (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) Chì      muốn mua gạo      hay không (muốn)?  
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 rủm 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, V<sup>1</sup>-or-not-V<sup>2</sup>, and the second verb is usually tau 'able' which occurs with this meaning following other verbs (see (7) above and cf. Thai đay and Vietnamese được). An example is the sentence in (12).

(12) Kủ mũa rau kồ lăw?      lò tsì tau?  
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.)

		V or not V	V not V	V or not	V not	V or	V V
Tai	Thai	X		X	XX*	XX	
	Lao	X		?	XX*		
	Black Tai	?			XX		
	Nung			X	XX		
AA	Vietnamese	X		X	XX		
	Khmer	X		X(Neg†)	XX(Neg†)	XX	
	Chrau	?		X	XX		
M-Y	Hmong	XX	X			X	
S-T	St.Chinese	X	XX				
	Some T-B	X	XX?				XX?

\* 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.

- (13) *Chị biết đường đó không? Biết. Không (biết).*  
 Vtn sister know road that not know 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) \* *Chị muốn không muốn mua gạo? \* Chị 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 *bɔɔ* (mid tone) is used in a straightforward negative sentence.

- (17) *Láaw bɔɔ si pay Lǎang Phābaang.*  
 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) *Láaw si pay Lǎang Phābaang bɔɔ? Bɔɔ pay.*  
 Lao 3P Future go Luang Prabang not not go  
 'Is she going to go to Luang Prabang?' 'No, she's not going.'

In Central (Bangkok) Thai, a similar tone change seems to have become lexical-

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) Kháw (ca) mây súm khâaw (-sǎan). '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: máy.)

- (20) Kháw (ca) súm khâaw (-sǎan) máy? '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 máy 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/máy and Lao bɔɔ/bɔɔ 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) Kūu māay hén kāy. Mùq hén kāy māay?  
 Song- I not see chicken you see chicken not  
 khla 'I don't see the chicken.' 'Do you see the chicken?'  
 (22) Cáu sahm chông mi hahn mưn. 'I also didn't see him.'  
 Nung I also then not see 3P  
 (23) Pô ké hênt ahn hon mi? 'Is uncle building a house?'  
 Nung man old make Clsf house not  
 (24) ...bau<sup>2</sup> mi<sup>4</sup> saŋ<sup>1</sup> ka<sup>4</sup> lvu<sup>1</sup>. Hai<sup>1</sup> tuk<sup>2</sup> he<sup>1</sup> bau<sup>2</sup>?  
 Black not exist anything at all go cast net not  
 Tai 'There's nothing there at all.' 'Have you gone fishing?'

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 ôh lêť camvũm ănh nhai gal dăng?  
 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 min 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) Kñom min trew-kaa kafei tee.  
 I not want coffee Neg

The preverbal negative *min* does not occur in yes-no questions. This is consistent with the alternating proposition hypothesis. In this hypothesis the first verb should be positive and, in Khmer, the already postverbal negative *tee* serves to present a negative proposition of the verb in a V-Neg form (Huffman 1970:150):

(27) *K'om kcay məkku mək baan tee?* 'Could I borrow a pair?'  
 Khm I borrow one pair hither able Neg

Huffman (1970:24) states that *tee* always "has a connotation of negation".

Those languages which use a V-not pattern also employ this pattern as a tag question. The verb in this case is a stative verb meaning 'correct, true' or one meaning 'be able' and the tag question implies the expectation of verification of the statement being tagged. This use is shown by the Chrau sentence in (25) above and the Nung sentence in (28) from Saul & Wilson 1980:117, both using 'true not?'.

(28) *Pô kê hēht áhn hóm sŭ ml?* (Cf. (24).)  
 Nung man old make Clsf. house true not  
 'Uncle is making a house, isn't that true?'

The Khmer sentence in (27) above and the Vietnamese one in (29) use 'able not?' as a tag. (The sentence in (29), with a pause, contrasts with an untagged sentence of the same form but without a pause, meaning 'Are you able to read this letter?'.)

(29) *Chị đọc bức thư này, được không?*  
 Vtn sister read sheet letter this able not  
 'Would you read this letter?'

In Central Khmer, Central Thai, and southern Hmong (at least), yes-no questions can use simply the alternative 'or' to suggest a negative proposition of the verb:

(30) *Luəŋ kuəŋ (nɨw) kənlaəŋ nih rɨɨ?* (Huffman 1970:230)  
 Khm king reside (Royal) in place this or  
 'Does the king reside here?'

(31) *Kháw pay taláat rúm?* (Anthony Diller, p.c.)  
 Thai 3P go market or  
 'So they're going to the market, eh?'

(32) *Kô mŋa nplê lò?* 'Do you have any rice?' (Lyman 1974:162)  
 Hmg you have rice or

This form is not possible in other Tai languages nor in Northern Khmer (David Thomas, p.c.) and apparently not in other Mon-Khmer languages. Nor does the V-or form occur in Vietnamese or Chinese. It is interesting to speculate on the origin of this form.

In Nasu, a verb-final Yi Tibeto-Burman language, yes-no questions can be asked in the V-not-V pattern, as in Chinese and Hmong.

(33) *Na vi le ma le?* (T'sou n.d.)  
 Nasu you elder sister come Neg come  
 'Is your elder sister coming or not?'

What is interesting in this verb-final language is that, according to T'sou, a yes-no question may be asked with only a duplication of the verb and no explicit expression of negation or alternation, as shown in (34), from T'sou n.d.

(34) *A p'i na sa ti mu na na?*  
 Nasu mother-in-law you sweet fruit want want

This is also true in Sani, another verb-final Yi language, as shown in (35).

- (35) Na ce sI so so? (T'sou n.d.)  
 Sani you Chinese language learn learn  
 'Are you learning Chinese?'

T'sou (n.d.) also gives an example from Nasu of a V-or-not-V form of question:

- (36) Na dzu bu no ma bu? 'Have you eaten fully or not?'  
 Nasu you eat full or Neg full

He further suggests that the V-Neg-V and V-V patterns, as well as the V-Neg patterns of other languages, are derivatives of a V-Disjunctive-Negative-V historical pattern. I believe he is correct, and the areal evidence given here supports this hypothesis.

Chinese has another way of asking yes-no questions which is probably more common in Chinese than the V-not-V form. That is with a question word following the verb, customarily sentence final. This V-Q form is common to most Sino-Tibetan languages, e.g. Tibetan and other Tibeto-Burman languages, as well as to Mountain Mon-Khmer languages in Viet-Nam. There is some evidence to suggest that at least some of these question words are derived from negatives or possibly alternatives. (Cf., for example, Chinese question word *ma* and Sino-Tibetan Nasu and Lisu negative *ma*, which may or may not be related.) In fact, as noted above for Mon-Khmer Chrau, one of the question "particles" (shown in (25)) is also a preverbal negative as well as a sentence-final emphatic negative (David Thomas 1971:183-5). In Pacoh, a Katuic Mon-Khmer language, the preverbal negative *layq* occurs as a postverbal question word (Watson 1966:169,185).

A yes-no question form most unusual in the area is the use of a question word preceding the verb which is being questioned. This form is very common in Hmong and occurs in at least two Mountain Mon-Khmer languages, Sedang and Bahnar. Smith (1979:107) gives (a)hôm as the regular question word for yes-no questions in Sedang. Interestingly, an affirmative answer is *hôm* 'yes'. He gives the example:

- (37) Eh a hôm hlo rotam me? 'Have you seen that boy?'  
 Sdg you Ques. see boy that

The preverbal question word for Bahnar is *hām* (Banker 1964:36,38).

Hmong *pua* 'whether' occurs only as a preverbal question word, as in (38) and (39).

- (38) Kô pua mûa í dăi dúa mûa rau kǔ?  
 Hmg you whether have one sheet picture hand to I  
 'Do you have a picture you can give to me?'

- (39) Tù txǐ nēng ntǎw nǎw pua hau yéng?  
 Hmg animate male person that 3P whether imbibe opium  
 'That man, does he smoke opium?'

This question word can be used as a tag question:

- (40) Thǎ kô pá nqa lò rau kǔ, pua tau?  
 Hmg request you help carry hither to I whether able  
 'Please bring it to me, can you do that?'

The Hmong preverbal question word can occasionally occur with the V-or-not-V pattern, especially with the verb tau 'got, have been able to'. as in (41).

- (41) Né pua tau mũa pé cồ pã-ntáu tã (làu?) lò tsì tau?  
 Hmg you2 whether got sell we group needlework finished already or not got  
 'Have you two been able to sell all our needlework (yet)?'

The question word can also occur in an indirect question, as in the second use in (42), where it is supplemented by the V-or-not-V form.

- (42) Kó pua páu pua yũa mũa nễng yũa lò tsì mũa?  
 Hmg you whether know whether will have person buy or not have  
 'Do you know whether there will be anyone who will buy (it) or not?'

Much more investigation needs to be done to find clues regarding the historical and/or areal significance of this uncharacteristic Q-V form.

## NOTES

1 The kernel idea for this paper came from a paper given by Benjamin T'sou some years ago (T'sou n.d. - early 1970's?) on this subject. I have been unable to verify with him the notions and data given on his handout, but have gone ahead and used them anyway. I am indebted to Anthony Diller and Christian Bauer for discussion of linguistic ideas and language data. I have also benefited from consultation with and letters from Vangkoua Cheurtong, Neng Chue Yang, and Joua Vang (all southern Hmong speakers from Laos), and consultation with Wong Yin-Wai, Beverly Hong-Fincher, Svetlana Dyer, Preecha Juntanamalaga, and Neang Yun.

2 Standard pinyin orthography is used in the Chinese examples and standard Vietnamese orthography is used in those examples. The roman transcriptions used for Thai and Lao are the widely accepted ones. The orthography used in the Hmong examples is the 'standard' romanized orthography used by the Hmong in Laos (see Smalley 1976:87-88 and Bertrais 1979), except that tone diacritics are those used for Thai with the addition of ~ for the low falling breathy tone (-g in Bertrais) and ~ for the low rising and falling tone (-d in Bertrais), and Vng instead of VV. The transcriptions used for other languages are those used in the specific references cited.

## REFERENCES

- Banker, John E. 1964. Transformational paradigms of Bahnar clauses. Mon-Khmer Studies I: 7-39.
- Bertrais, Yves. 1979. Dictionnaire Hmong-Francais. Bangkok: Imprimerie de l'Assomption.
- Chang, Kun & Betty Shefts. 1964. A Manual of Spoken Tibetan (Lhasa Dialect). Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Clark, Marybeth. 1978. Coverbs and Case in Vietnamese. Pacific Linguistics B48. Canberra: Australian National University Research School of Pacific Studies.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1982. Some auxiliary verbs in Hmong. The Hmong in the West: Observations and Reports, 125-141. Papers of the 1981 Hmong Research Conference, University of Minnesota, ed. by Bruce T. Downing & Douglas P. Olney, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project.
- \_\_\_\_\_. & Amara Prasithrathsint. Forthcoming. Synchronic lexical derivation in Southeast Asian languages. To appear in a festschrift in honor of A. Haudricourt, Mahidol University, Bangkok.
- Crisfield, Arthur. 1970. Lao language lessons. Xerox, University of Hawaii.

- Ehrman, Madeline (with Kem Sos). 1972. Contemporary Cambodian. Washington: Foreign Service Institute.
- Fippinger, Jay W. 1975. Black Tai sentence types, A generative approach. Studies in Tai Linguistics in Honor of William J. Gedney, ed. by Jimmy G. Harris & James R. Chamberlain, 130-169. Bangkok: Central Institute of English Language, Office of State Universities.
- Heimbach, Ernest E. 1979. White Hmong - English Dictionary. Southeast Asia Data Paper 75, Ithaca: Cornell University Department of Asian Studies.
- Hope, Edward Reginald. 1974. The Deep Syntax of Lisu Sentences. A Transformational Grammar. Pacific Linguistics B34. Canberra: Australian National University Research School of Pacific Studies.
- Huffman, Franklin E. 1970. Modern Spoken Cambodian. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.
- . 1973. Thai and Cambodian - A case of syntactic borrowing? J. American Oriental Society 93.4: 488-509.
- Lyman, Thomas Amis. 1974. Dictionary of Mong Njua, A Miao (Meo) language of Southeast Asia. The Hague: Mouton.
- Manley, Timothy M. 1972. Outline of Sre Structure. Oceanic Linguistics Special Publication No. 12, Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.
- Noss, Richard B. 1964. Thai Reference Grammar. Washington: Foreign Service Institute.
- Phau Xyaum Nyeem Ntawv Hmoob (Text for Learning to Read Hmong). (1976) Rooj Ntawv Hmoob (Hmong Academy), Bangkok: Assumption Printing Press.
- Ross, Marion Wright. 1971. Questions in Vietnamese. Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, Ann Arbor: University Microfilm International.
- Saul, Janice E. & Nancy Freiburger Wilson. 1980. Nung Grammar. Dallas, Texas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
- Smalley, William A. 1976. Phonemes and Orthography: Language Planning in Ten Minority Languages of Thailand. Pacific Linguistics C43. Canberra: Australian National University Research School of Pacific Studies.
- Smith, Kenneth D. 1979. Sedang Grammar, Phonological and Syntactic Structure. Pacific Linguistics B50. Canberra: Australian National University Research School of Pacific Studies.
- Thomas, David D. 1971. Chrau Grammar. Oceanic Linguistics Special Publication No. 7, Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii.
- Thomas, Dorothy. 1978. The discourse level in Chrau. Mon-Khmer Studies VII: 233-295.
- T'sou, Benjamin K. n.d. Reduplication and reduction in Loloish question derivation. Handout sheet for presentation, University of Hawaii.
- Vichin Panupong. 1970. Inter-Sentence Relations in Modern Conversational Thai. Bangkok: The Siam Society.
- Watson, Richard. 1966. Clause to sentence gradations in Pacoh. Lingua 16.2: 166-188.