

Abstract for Mainland Southeast Asian Languages: The State of the Art in 2012
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Despite decades of solid research on Southeast Asian tone languages, the stereotypical view about tonality in Mainland Southeast Asia (MSEA) is still that languages of the area tend to have unusually complex tone systems. In this talk, I will present a more balanced view of tonal diversity in MSEA and discuss some of the issues that have been raised in recent literature.

I will characterize Southeast Asian language diversity as a tri-dimensional space where the first axis is the number of pitch-contrasting tonemes, the second the number of phonation contrasts accompanying these tonemes and the third the variety of phonological processes affecting tones.

In terms of number of tonemes, the most complex languages are found (or originate) in the northern part of the linguistic area (Vietnamese, Hmong and Tai languages), while languages spoken in the southern part of the area usually have more modest inventories. Typical Mon-Khmer languages have a two-way register systems where pitch plays a limited role and most Austronesian languages are still atonal.

Turning to the voice quality dimension, recent phonetic research has demonstrated the prevalence of phonation cues in Mainland Southeast Asian tonal contrasts. Cases range from complex tone systems with phonation properties in languages like Northern Vietnamese (Michaud 2004; Brunelle et al. 2010; Kirby 2010) and Hmong (Esposito 2006) to complex tonal systems without any clear phonation contrasts, like Thai and Southern Vietnamese (Brunelle 2009; Kirby 2010). A number of additional combinations are also attested: tonal contrasts mostly based on phonation, as in Burmese (Gruber 2011), register systems in which the pitch contrast is fully redundant with phonation, as in Cham, Wa and Khmer (Watkins 2002; Wayland & Jongman 2003; Brunelle 2012) and systems with complex phonation contrasts where pitch plays a marginal role, as in Chong (DiCano 2009). In fact, the exploration of the role of phonation in tonal system is arguably the most significant development in the past decade.

Lastly, there are few phonological tone processes in MSEA. Tone sandhis are common in Hmong (Mortenson 2004; Ratliff 2010) and attested in Tibeto-Burman (Thurgood & LaPolla 2003), but they are surprisingly rare in other language family. Synchronic morphophonological processes involving tones are also rare in the area, even if they are common in other tone areas.

A last question that is only starting to be raised in the literature on Southeast Asian tone languages, but that is likely to give rise to some debate in years to come is the issue of tonal decompositionality, a question that directly derives from the basic tenets of autosegmental phonology. While some authors have maintained the traditional view that contour tones can be decomposed into sequences of level tones (Morén & Zsiga 2001; Zsiga & Nitisaroj 2007), others see little phonological evidence for such an approach in MSEA languages (Brunelle 2009; Clements et al. 2010).

A significant part of the talk will deal with linguistic geography. Rather than considering the area as a whole, I will insist on sub-regional diversity. I will also show that although language contact is obviously playing a role in the diffusion of tone in the area, languages do not necessarily acquire tone systems similar to those of their neighbors. This will lead me to propose that we need to tackle issues of contact and change more carefully, at a micro-sociolinguistic level involving both phonetics and phonology, rather than just attributing all surface similarities between contiguous languages to contact.

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