NOTES ON TONE ALTERNATION IN MARU VERBS

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1. INTRODUCTION[1]

Tone alternation, of one type or another, is known in many of the languages of the Sino-Tibetan area. It may be phonologically conditioned, as in the often cited case of tone sandhi in Chinese; or grammatically conditioned, as in the possessive form of nouns in Burmese and Lahu, or the indicative/subjunctive verb forms in Tiddim Chin.

There are also cases in which tone alternation is conditioned neither by phonology, nor (in the usual sense) by grammar, but simply by a subsequent morpheme: a word bears one tone when followed by morpheme X, and another when followed by morpheme Y. This type is found in nouns in Tiddim Chin, where certain nominal suffixes condition a change from level tone to rising, or from rising tone to falling, or from falling tone to level (Henderson 1965: 59, 70, 101). Something similar happens to verbs in Akha, where /njá/ 'able to' changes a preceding high tone to mid tone, and /nja/ 'sentence particle' demands a preceding high tone (Egerod 1973). David Bradley (personal communication) reports a comparable phenomenon in Mpi, and R.K. Sprigg himself (personal communication) has told me that there is a similar feature in Bodo.

The purpose of these notes is to set on record a case of this type of tone alternation that seems hitherto to have escaped mention, and possibly even to have escaped notice: verbs in Maru are subject to an entirely regular tone alternation, conditioned by a subsequent morpheme. I also hope that recording the facts will prove useful to subsequent students of Maru: a knowledge of the workings of tone alternation in its verbs should save some of the initial puzzlement that I experienced myself.

Maru (or Lawngwaw, the Marus' own name for themselves) is a member of the 'North Burmish' group of languages within Lolo-Burmese. Its speakers live in the Kachin State and

Northern Shan States in the north of Burma. The language has been brought to the notice of the Sino-Tibetanist fraternity by the writings of Robbins Burling - particularly his spectacular article on final stops (Burling 1966). My material was provided by Kha Lum, an informant of great patience and generosity from near Myitkyina, who worked with me in Mandalay in 1969.

1. Tone in Maru

Tones in Maru are engagingly straightforward: there are three tones (high, mid and low) in unchecked syllables (i.e. those with vowel or nasal final), and two tones (high and low) in checked syllables (i.e. those with stop final):

unchecked	checked	here written
high	high	´
mid	-	-
low	low	`

Examples:

unchecked	high:	*bó*	be light	*láŋ*	be short
	mid:	*pō*	be thin	*lām*	believe
	low:	*pò*	embrace	*làm*	be warm
checked	high:	*nó?*	be early	*khhúk*	break
	low:	*nyò?*	be cooked	*khyùk*	be sweet

2. Tone alternation in verbs

A relatively short acquaintance with Maru reveals that verbs occur sometimes with one tone and sometimes with another. At first the observer suffers an ebbing of confidence in his ability to hear pitch, but a closer look shows that there is a pattern:

in unchecked syllables

some are high with no alternation
some are high alternating with mid
some are mid alternating with low

in checked syllables

some are high with no alternation
some are high alternating with low

In other words what is happening is that something is raising the tones one step: under certain conditions

unchecked low	>	mid
unchecked mid	>	high
checked low	>	high

while

unchecked	}	high stays high: there is
and checked	}	no higher step to go to.

(Contrast the circular pattern of Tiddim Chin (Henderson 1965:70): 3 → 2, 2 → 1, 1 → 3.)

3. What conditions the rise?

The cause of the raising evidently lies in the syllable following the verb. Maru, like its cousins, has verb strings and post-verbal particles. Some of these condition a rise in the tone of the verb they follow, and others leave it unaltered; e.g.

auxiliary verb meaning 'command to' conditions no rise in the preceding verb:

low stays low:	*dò˜ʔnō*	he told someone to carry
mid stays mid:	*tō˜ʔnō*	he told someone to run
high stays high:	*tá ʔnō*	he told someone to say

but: auxiliary verb meaning 'continuative' does condition a rise in the preceding verb:

low	>	mid:	*dō˜nā*	he is carrying
mid	>	high:	*tò˜ nā*	he is running
high stays high			*tá nā*	he is saying

All items that can follow verbs in Maru, then, must be divided into 'raisers': those that raise the tone of the verb they follow; and 'non-raisers': those that don't.

4. Post-verbal particle *zero*?

One feature that deserves particular mention is that when a verb is not followed by another item it nonetheless undergoes tone raising:

dò˜	carry	>	*dō˜*	he carries
tō˜	run	>	*tó˜*	he runs
tá	say	stays	*tá*	he says

The arguments against avoidable use of *zero* are strong; but this pattern of tone raising makes a good case for including a particle *zero* 'assertive' in the list of raisers. This audible but invisible item was a rich source of confusion in my initial note taking.

We can even go on to say that a negated verb is *not* followed by *zero:*

mədò˜	he doesnt carry
mətō˜	he doesnt run
mətá	he doesnt say

One might be tempted to say instead that the negative prefix blocks tone raising; but this would raise complications, since even a negated verb, if followed by a raiser, undergoes raising in the expected way:

mədō˜nà	he isnt carrying
mətó˜nà	he isnt running
mətá nà	he isnt saying

5. Longer strings

What happens with strings of the form verb+raiser+raiser, or verb+nonraiser+raiser? It seems that raising applies smoothly and regularly to the preceding syllable and no further, regardless of what follows or precedes the pair concerned:

dò˜	+	*nà*	+	*rá*	>	*dō˜*	*nā*	*rá*
		(raiser)		(raiser)		(raised)	(raised)	
carry		cont.		assertive		he is carrying		

dò˜	+	*ʔnò*	+	*rá*	>	*dò˜*	*ʔnō*	*rá*
		(nonraiser)		(raiser)		(unraised)	(raised)	
carry		command		assertive		he told him to carry		

Even the intrusion of a negative prefix into a string does not interfere with raising:

vò˜	*mə*	*dām*	*rá*	>	*vō˜*	*mə*	*dám*	*rá*
(raiser)	(raiser)		(raised)					
enter	neg.	chop	assertive		he didnt go in and chop			

However, the 'absence of raiser *zero*' signalled by *mə* still applies at the end of a string:

mə	+	*bìn*	+	*tō˜*	>	*məbīn*	*tō˜*
				(raiser)		(raised)	(unraised)
neg.		finish		run		he hasnt run	

mə	+	*tō˜*	+	*phò*	>	*mətó˜*	*phò*
				(raiser)		(raised)	(unraised)
neg.		run		go		he didnt run away	

6. What distinguishes raisers from non-raisers?

One obvious point to look at was whether Maru tone raising was some kind of tone sandhi. There are however both raisers and non-raisers carrying all three tones; e.g.

raisers:	vb	+	*ʔyú*	look, try out vb
	vb	+	*tō*	set down, vb definitely
	vb	+	*nà*	be vbing
non-raisers:	vb	+	*né*	will vb
	vb	+	*mūŋ*	because he vbd
	vb	+	*nùk*	he wants to vb

So tone sandhi looks unlikely.

Another possibility was that the raisers might all belong to a limited set of word classes. It is true that there is a degree of predictability for some contexts: it seems true, for example, that any free form verb conditions raising; e.g.

chò˜	+	*tō˜*	+	*rá*	>	*chō˜*	*tó˜*	*rá*
		(free vb)		(raiser)		(raised)	(raised)	
accompany		run		assertive		he ran along with them		

nùk	+	*tō˜*	+	*rá*	>	*nûk*	*tó˜*	*rá*
		(free vb)		(raiser)		(raised)	(raised)	
want		run		assertive		he wants to run		

Also, raising evidently does not operate in verb plus noun compounds:

laùŋ	+	*yò?*	>	*laùŋ yò?*
be hot		time		hot season

nà	+	*?yàm*	>	*nà ?yàm*
live		house		residence

ȳam	+	*ʃè*	>	*ȳam ʃè*
chop		knife		chopper

-nor in forms with the nominalizer prefix:

ŋoè	like	>	*əŋoè*	liking
maī	be bruised	>	*əmaī*	bruise
múk	smear	>	*əmúk*	smear

But as the list below shows, there are raisers and non-raisers among auxiliary verbs, dependent verb clause markers and independent verb clause markers alike (the terminology is that of Okell 1969).

So far, then, raisers and non-raisers elude attempts to link their powers with other attributes. There seems no alternative to noting raising power, or lack of it, individually for any item that may follow a verb. The list below gives the post-verbal items that occurred in my notes. It makes no claim to comprehensiveness.

7. List of post-verbal items

(To amplify the English glosses, each item is followed by a form in brackets with the same or a similar meaning in Burmese).

Raisers   Non-raisers

(1)   verbs

apparently all free form verbs

<u>Raisers</u>   <u>Non-raisers</u>

(2)   auxiliary verbs

lí	(**lā**)	come	*chá*	(**ra**)	may, can
lò	(**lā**)	come	nùk	(**khyaṅ**)	want
lò	(**swā:**)	go	*ʔnò*	(**khuiṅ**)	command
yē	(**swā:**)	go	*gè*	(**kra**)	plural
phò	(**swā:**)	go	*kó*	(**kra**)	plural
nà	(**ne**)	continuative	*ʃī*	(**se:**)	still, yet
bín	(**prī:**)	perfective	*lō*	(**to.**)	finally
tō	(**thā:**)	permanently			
pyéʔ	(**pac**)	finish off			
ʔɣú	(**kraññ.**)	try out			
zō	(**cā:**)	seriously			
əkó	(**kra**)	plural			
kúm	(**ʔrhok**)	aimlessly			

(3)   dependent verb clause markers

rè	(**raṅ**)	if, when	*mé*	(**prī:**)	after
rá	(**tai.**)	attributive	*mūŋ*	(**to.**)	when, since
			yāŋ	(**lui./to.**)	because, since
			ūŋ	(**prī:/lui.**)	after, because
			ʃóʔ	(**oṅ**)	so as to
			yāŋ rē	(**pe mai.**)	although
			yē rē	(**pe mai.**)	although
			jō ʃóʔ	(**sañ ñ.tuiŋ.oṅ**)	even though
			mé˜à	(**lui.rhiraṅ**)	if
			né khyó	(**phui.**)	in order to

(4)   independent verb clause markers

zero	(tay)	assertive	*né*	(**may**)	future
gyè	(sā:pai)	emphatic	*làʔ*	(**zero**)	imperative
rù	(**tā**)	nominalizer	*àʔ*	(**zero**)	imperative
rá	(**tā pai**)	assertive	*làŋ*	(**ra oṅ**)	lets
			(or *lāŋ*)		
			ʔnaùŋ	(**ro**)	graphic
			yāŋ àʔ	(**pā ce**)	let
			vá	(**prī**)	perfective

NOTES

[1] The observations made in this paper were originally presented at the International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, Paris, 1979.

The vowel nasalisation sign [~] is here written after the vowel instead of in its usual position above the vowel.