A note on tone registers and tongue-root position

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A Note on Tone Registers and Tongue-root Position

The riddle of tone is solved.

Others may have said it before, but it was the signif-
icance of J. M. Stewart's "Tongue-Root Position in Akan
(West Africa) Vowel Harmony"[1] which caught Kenneth Pike's
eye and stimulated the latter's "Tongue-Root Position in
Practical Phonetics."[2] What did the articles say about
tone?

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[1]Phonetica 16:185-204 (1967)

[2]Phonetica 17:129-140 (1967)

"Backed tongue root position raises pitch; advanced
tongue root position lowers it."

Pike's piece in turn rang bells for members of the
Summer Institute of Linguistics working on Mon-Khmer languages.
Working from it and from Stewart, Kenneth Gregerson drafted
his "Tongue-root and Register in Mon-Khmer", showing how
neatly the tongue root (TR) explanation tied together the
register, vowel quality, and tone phenomena described by
earlier British, French and American linguists.

When Gregerson's first draft reached Nepal in early
1970, members of the Tribhuvan University-SIL project in
Kathmandu observed the way it tied their studies in with
Sprigg's Tibeto-Burman articles and sent the results to the
University of Michigan's Wolfenden Series for publication.

At the University of North Dakota this summer (1970) it
was found that Fang Kuei Li's Tai languages material also
agrees. Jay Fippinger, drawing on his own Black Tai work as
well as on Li, Handricourt, Gedney, Brown and Greenberg was
able to show, in his paper on the development of Tai
register patterns, how the TR factor explains the two directions
followed by the two main branches of the Tai family.

Charles Keller, checking back on Henri Maspero's 1912
Annamese comparison found that Maspero's listed correlation
between high pitch and retroflexion agrees with TR theory.

But how can two tongure-root positions give three, four,
five, six or even eight tones? By the patterns in which they
occur. Two different positions give four different possible
sequences: back back, back front, front back, front front,
which may result in either high (back back), mid (back front),

iii

and low (front front), or in high (back back), falling (back front), rising (front back), or low (front front). Secondary developments, arising especially from the manner in which the articulators are released (glottalized or aspirated) multiply the number higher. Contraction of two syllables into one, without loss of the distinctive two-syllable tone pattern, left the tones in their present apparent one-to-one relation, two or more contrastive tone potentials to each syllable.

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iv