The role of the iambic-trochaic law in iambicity and monosyllabization in Mainland Southeast Asia

It has long been noted that Mainland Southeast Asian languages have a tendency towards iambicity. Iambs, often realized as sesquisyllables, can be reconstructed for most of the proto-languages of the area (Tai, Mon-Khmer, Sino-Tibetan). Another common trend in the area is the evolution of sesquisyllabic systems towards monosyllabicity (Alieva 1994; Ferlus 1996; Ferlus 1997; Thach 1999; Thurgood 1999; Brunelle 2008; Brunelle 2009). These processes manifest two asymmetries in diachrony of prosodic shift. First, while some originally trochaic languages have become iambic (Thurgood 1999; Pittayaporn 2005), the converse change, from iambs to trochees, is much less frequent and only attested in reconstructions (Donegan 1993; Donegan and Stampe 2004). Secondly, while iambic systems often become monosyllabic, there are to our knowledge no clear cases of trochaic systems following a similar path.

The general path towards iambicity and monosyllabicity has often been attributed to language contact. Although it is likely that contact strengthens internal change, we propose that general properties of prosodic systems, combined with phonetic drift, are sufficient to account for the two asymmetries noted above. Most relevant is a strong universal preference for balanced trochees and unbalanced iambs. This has been formulated as the iambic-trochaic law (Hayes 1985; Prince 1990; Kager 1993; Hayes 1995; Revithiadou 2004), which ranks feet according to their relative well-formedness, as schematized in (1), where H=heavy, L=light, bold=stress and “≻” = better than:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Iambs} & \quad (LH) \quad \succ (H), (LL) \quad \succ (L) \quad *HL \\
\text{Trochees} & \quad (LL), (H) \quad \succ (HL) \quad \succ (L) \quad *LH
\end{align*}
\]

Due to the prevalence of disyllabic and monosyllabic prosodic systems in Mainland Southeast Asia, the area is an ideal test-ground for assessing the effects of the iamb-trochaic law on diachronic shifts. Irrespective of the motivation for this law (Hayes 1985; Prince 1990; Kager 1993; Hayes 1995; Revithiadou 2004), the distribution in (1) accounts for the directionality of prosodic change in Mainland Southeast Asia. First, a trochee, be it (LL) or (H), may undergo a stress-shift and become a well-formed, though not ideal iamb (H) or (LL). However, an iamb that goes through a similar stress-shift would become an ill-formed trochee (*LH). Secondly, ideal iambs (LH), i.e. sesquisyllables, can undergo phonetic erosion and become monosyllables (H) without violating the iamb-trochaic law. Ideal disyllabic trochees (LL), on the other hand, are unlikely to become monosyllabic because such erosion would yield a strongly dispreferred foot (L). In contrast, this model claims that monosyllabization of unbalanced trochees is a likely change. This is because loosing the unstressed light syllable in an unbalanced trochee yields a better foot according to the trochaic-iambic law (H) ≻ (HL).
References


