Sentence negatives — words that negate the whole proposition of a sentence, like English “not”— are considered part of the grammatical toolkit of a language, not subject to replacement by borrowing or rapid change over time. Nonetheless, words for this basic function show remarkable variety in closely related languages in Southeast Asia: across the languages of the Tai-Kadai family (to which Thai and Lao belong) there are at least six completely different words for “not”, and across the smaller Hmong-Mien family there are at least three. The questions I address in this talk are (1) Which of the three Hmong-Mien negatives is the oldest? (2) Where did the newer words come from? (3) By what process did speakers replace a word as deeply embedded as “not”? (4) Why should they have done so?

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