Lai Reflexives and Reciprocals

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Lai is spoken in and around the town of Hakha, present administrative capital of Chin State, Myanmar. It is often called (Hakha) Chin in linguistic literature. According to *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), the total speaking population is 131,260, including a large number in Mizoram State, India. Lai is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Chin subgroup; as such it has the characteristic agreement system of verbs with their subjects and objects. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the 42nd International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, hosted by Payap University, November 2009.

**Agreement.** (1) illustrates the agreement pattern of intransitive verbs.

(1) a  ka ra  'I come'
b  na ra  'you come'
c  a ra  'he/she comes'
d  kan ra  'we come'
e  nan ra  'you come'
f  an ra  'they come'

The subject agreement markers *ka, na, a, kan, nan* and *an* vary according to the person and number of the subject.

There are also markers which vary similarly according to the object of a transitive verb. A few of them are illustrated in (2).

(2) a  na kan bawmh  'you help us'
b  na bawmh  'you help him/her'
c  na bawmh hna  'you help them'
d  kaan bawmh  'I help you'
e  kan in bawmh  'we help you (singular)'
f  kan in bawmh hna  'we help you (plural)'

As seen in (2), an object agreement marker comes between the subject agreement marker and the verb. The first person object agreement markers are *ka* and *kan*, the same as the subject agreement markers. The second person object agreement marker is *in*, which combines with a singular subject agreement marker to form *kaan* or *aan*. There is no third person object agreement marker, but the plural of a second or third person object is indicated by *hna* following the verb. For a more complete account of Lai agreement, see Bedell 1996.

The 'object agreement marker' *i*. Lai reflexive and reciprocal verb forms are as in (3).

(3) a  kaa bawm  'I help myself'
These forms consist of a verb stem bawm 'help' preceded by a subject agreement marker and i. The last occupies the position of the object agreement marker in ordinary transitive verb forms, but its realization does not vary according to the person or number of an object; rather it indicates coreference of the subject and object. When immediately following a singular subject agreement marker, like the second person object agreement marker in, it merges with the preceding short a into a long aa. Thus the paradigm in (3) resembles that of an intransitive verb in having only six forms according to the person and number of the subject.

There are other ways in which the verb forms in (3) resemble intransitives. The presence of i blocks the usual object agreement.

(4) a *ka ka bawm
   b *kaa ka bawm

(5) a *nan in bawm
   b *nan in bawm hna
   c *nan i bawm hna
   d *an i bawm hna

In (4), although it might appear that the object is first person singular, no object agreement marker ka may appear either in place of, or in addition to i. In (5), although it might appear that the object is second or third person plural, no second person object agreement marker in or plural object agreement marker hna may be used in place of or in addition to i. If the forms in (3) were intransitive, this would follow, since intransitive verb forms have no object to agree with.

The verb forms in (3) vary in agreement with their subject. Because of this agreement, it is often the case that the subject is identifiable without being mentioned. But it is always possible to make the subject overt. Ordinarily, only a pronoun may appear as the subject of a first or second person verb form.

(6) a Nangmah (cu) naa bawm.
    youSG that 2-RR help
    'You helped yourself.'

   b *Nangmah nih naa bawm.

(7) a Pa Lian (cu) aa bawm.
    Pa Lian that 3-RR help
    'PL helped himself.'

   b *Pa Lian nih aa bawm.

In (6a), the subject is the pronoun nangmah 'you (singular)', and in (7a) it is Pa Lian. An overt subject in sentences like (6a) or (7a) may be a bare noun phrase or may be followed by a demonstrative
such as *cu 'that', which can serve as a topic marker. It cannot be followed by the postposition *nih, which regularly accompanies the subject of a transitive verb form; (6b) and (7b) are ungrammatical. If the forms in (3) were intransitive, this would follow.

Finally, there is verb stem alternation. Many Lai verbs have two stem forms, conveniently referred to as stem1 and stem2. The stem2 form of transitive verbs is the default in (2). *Bawmh* is the stem2 form. But the corresponding stem1 forms appear in reflexive or reciprocals like (3). *Bawm* is the stem1 form. Intransitive verbs use stem1 as default. *Ra 'come' in (1) is the stem1 form; the stem2 form of this verb is *rat*. Thus if reflexives and reciprocals like (3) were intransitive forms derived from transitive verbs, their stem form difference could be accounted for as part of a more general distinction in transitivity.

**Reflexive or reciprocal pronouns.** Nevertheless it seems difficult to regard reflexive or reciprocal verb forms as syntactically intransitive because they can in fact have syntactic objects. The appearance of such objects is relatively rare, but this is no different from other pronominal objects.

(8)  
| a | *keimah le keimah kaa bawm* | 'I help myself' |
| b | *nangmah le nangmah naa bawm* | 'you help yourself' |
| c | *amah le amah aa bawm* | 'he/she helps him/herself' |
| d | *kanmah le kanmah kan i bawm* | 'we help ourselves/each other' |
| e | *nanmah le nanmah nan i bawm* | 'you help yourselves/each other' |
| f | *anmah le anmah an i bawm* | 'they help themselves/each other' |

They consist of a pronoun which agrees with the subject conjoined with itself. Forms like *nangmah le nangmah* 'yourself' or *anmah le anmah* 'themselves/each other' are at least superficially noun phrases, and occupy the position occupied by the object in an ordinary transitive sentence. They cannot be accompanied by *nih*.

(9)  
| a | *?Nangmah (cu) nangmah le nangmah naa bawm.*  
  | youSG that youSG and youSG 2-RR help  
  | 'You helped yourself.' |
| b | *Nangmah le nangmah nih naa bawm.* |

(10)  
| a | *Pa Lian-te (cu) anmah le anmah an i bawm.*  
  | Pa Lian-PL that they and they 3PL RR help  
  | 'PL and his family/friends helped themselves/each other.' |
| b | *Pa Liante (cu) anmah le anmah nih an i bawm.* |

Using an overt pronoun introduces an implicit contrast; (6) means 'you helped yourself (as opposed to others helping themselves)' while (8b) means 'you helped yourself (as opposed to you helping others)'. Semantic complexity and conflict in the implicit contrast make (9a) difficult to process.

That reflexive or reciprocal pronouns like *amah le amah* 'him/her self' are noun phrase objects is clear from answers like (11c) and (12c) to questions like (11a) and (12a).

(11)  
| a | *Aho-dah na bawm?*  
  | who-Q 2 help  
  | 'Who did you help?' |
b  Aho nih dah aan bawmh?
   who BY Q 3-2 help
   'Who helped you?'

c  Keimah le keimah.
   I and I
   'Myself.'

d  Keimah le keimah kaa bawm.
   I and I 1-RR help
   'I helped myself.'

(12) a  Pa Lian nih aho-dah a bawmh?
       Pa Lian BY who-Q 3 help
       'Who did PL help?'

   b  Aho nih dah Pa Lian a bawmh?
      who BY Q Pa Lian 3 help
      'Who helped PL?'

c  Amah le amah.
   he/she and he/she
   'Himself.'

d  Amah le amah aa bawm.
   he/she and he/she 3-RR help
   'He helped himself.'

Just as in English, answers like (11c) and (12c) to questions like (11b) and (12b), though understandable, are less natural than to questions like (11a) and (12a). More explicit answers such as (11d) and (12d) are more natural.

Similarly, reflexive or reciprocal pronouns appear in the focus position of cleft sentences like (13a) and (14a).

(13) a  Ka bawmh-mi cu keimah le keimah a si.
       1 help-REL that I and I 3 be
       'It was myself that I helped.'

       b  A ka bawm-tu cu keimah le keimah a si.
          3 1 help-REL that I and I 3 be
          'It was myself that helped me.'

(14) a  Pa Lian nih a bawmh-mi cu amah le amah a si.
       Pa Lian BY 3 help-REL that he/she and he/she 3 be
       'It was himself that PL helped.'

       b  Pa Lian a bawm-tu cu amah le amah a si.
          Pa Lian 3 help-REL that he/she and he/she 3 be
          'It was himself that helped PL.'
Sentences (13) and (14) contain relative clauses. Note that there is a different structure depending on whether it is the subject which is relativized or a non-subject. The subject relativizer -tu attaches to the stem1 verb form, while the non-subject relativizer -mi attaches to the stem2 form.

**Variations 1.** The i which appears in reflexive and reciprocal verb forms like those in (3) is not restricted to canonical reflexives or reciprocals. It may appear in sentences like (15a) and (16a) where the verb it accompanies is intransitive.

(15) a  
\[ Kaa \ lawm. \]
1-RR be.happy
'I am happy.'

b  
\[ *Keimah nih kaa lawm. \]

c  
\[ *Keimah le keimah kaa lawm. \]

d  
\[ Ka \ lawmh. \]
1 make.happy
'I made him/her happy.'

e  
\[ Ka \ lawmh-ter. \]
1 be.happy-CAUS
'I made him/her happy.'

(16) a  
\[ Pa Lian aa hngilh. \]
Pa Lian 3-RR sleep
'PL went to sleep.'

b  
\[ *Pa Lian nih aa hngilh. \]

c  
\[ *Pa Lian cu amah la amah aa hngilh. \]

d  
\[ *Pa Lian a hngilh. \]

e  
\[ Pa Lian ka hngilh-ter. \]
Pa Lian 1 sleep-CAUS
'I made/let PL go to sleep.'

An overt subject of such sentences may not be followed by nih; (15b) and (16b) are ungrammatical. And no object agreement is possible. But reflexive or reciprocal pronouns are also not allowed; (15c) and (16c) are likewise ungrammatical. Thus sentences like (15a) and (16a) are true intransitives, syntactically as well as semantically. The i which occurs with them is part of the lexical verb and cannot be dispensed with; (16d) is ungrammatical. (15d) appears to present a problem since there is no i and the stem2 form corresponding to lawm is lawmh. But lawmh in (15d) is not the same verb as lawm in (15a). Rather it is a lexical causative of i lawm 'be happy', and does not show stem alternation. The meaning of (15d) is similar to that of (15e) with the syntactic causative lawmhter rather than to that of (15a). Note that i hngilh 'go to sleep' has no such lexical causative. Note also that in causatives, whether lexical or syntactic, the i seen in simple clauses with these verbs disappears.
**Variations 2.** A different kind of *i* is illustrated in (17b) and (18b).

(17)  
\[ a \quad Pa \ Sui \ nih \ nupi \ a \ kawl. \]  
Pa Sui BY wife 3 look for  
'Pa Sui is looking for a wife.'

\[ b \quad Pa \ Sui \ nih \ nupi \ aa \ kawl. \]  
Pa Sui BY wife 3-RR look for  
'Pa Sui is looking for a wife for himself.'

\[ c \quad *Pa \ Sui \ nih \ amah \ le \ amah \ nupi \ aa \ kawl. \]

\[ d \quad Pa \ Sui \ nih \ nupi \ a \ kawl-piak. \]  
Pa Sui BY wife 3-RR look for-BEN  
'Pa Sui is looking for a wife for him.'

(18)  
\[ a \quad Mah \ lakswang \ hi \ keimah \ nih \ ka \ va \ lak. \]  
this present this I BY 1 away take  
'I took this present away.'

\[ b \quad Mah \ lakswang \ hi \ keimah \ nih \ ka \ vaa \ lak. \]  
this present this I BY 1 away-RR take  
'I took this present away for myself.'

\[ c \quad *Mah \ lakswang \ hi \ keimah \ nih \ keimah \ le \ keimah \ ka \ vaa \ lak. \]

\[ d \quad Mah \ lakswang \ hi \ keimah \ nih \ ka \ va \ in \ lak-piak. \]  
this present this I BY 1 away 2 take-BEN  
'I took this present away for you.'

These sentences differ from (17a) and (18a) only in the presence of *i* accompanying the transitive verb. As suggested by the English glosses, the variants with *i* have an additional benefactive argument interpreted as coreferential with the subject. Like (17a) and (18a), (17b) and (18b) are fully transitive; their subject can be marked with *nih*, and stem2 of the verb is used. The verb *kawl* in (17) does not alternate, but *lak* in (18) is stem2 corresponding to stem1 *la*. A reflexive or reciprocal pronoun cannot be used in these sentences; (17c) and (18c) are ungrammatical. In (18) there is a directional particle *va* which is located between the subject and object agreement markers; when followed by *i*, the same merger takes place as with singular subject agreement markers. This benefactive *i* can only have the coreferential meaning; to get an independent benefactive, a suffix *-piak* is used as in (17d) and (18d). The benefactive argument is treated as an object for purposes of agreement as in (18d).

**Variations 3.** While the examples in (17) and (18) involve a type of reflexive, those in (19) and (20) involve a type of reciprocal.

(19)  
\[ a \quad Ni \ Hu \ nih \ a \ pa \ a \ loh. \]  
Ni Hu BY 3 father 3 be similar  
'NH is similar to his father.'

\[ b \quad Ni \ Hu \ le \ a \ pa \ an \ i \ lo. \]  
Ni Hu and 3 father 3PL RR be similar
'NH and his father are similar.'

c  *Ni Hu le a pa an loh.

d  Ni Hu  a pa he an i lo.
    Ni Hu 3 father with 3PL RR be-similar
    'NH is similar to his father.'

e  *Ni Hu a pa he an loh.

f  *Ni Hu le a pa nih an i lo.

g  *Ni Hu nih a pa he an i lo.

h  Ni Hu le a pa anmah le anmah an i lo.
    Ni Hu 3 father they and they 3PL RR be-similar
    'NH and his father are similar to each other.'

i  *Ni Hu a pa he anmah le anmah an i lo.

j  *Ni Hu a pa he aa lo.

(20)  a  Keimah nih Pa Lian ka paih.
      I BY Pa Lian 1 wrestle
      'I wrestled PL.'

b  Pa Lian le keimah kan i pai.
    Pa Lian and I 1PL RR wrestle
    'PL and I wrestled.'

c  *Pa Lian le keimah kan paih.

d  Pa Lian he kan i pai.
    Pa Lian with 1PL RR wrestle
    'I wrestled with PL.'

e  *Pa Lian he kan paih.

f  *Pa Lian le keimah nih kan i pai.

g  *Keimah nih Pa Lian he kan i pai.

h  Pa Lian le keimah cu kannmah le kannmah kan i pai.
    Pa Lian and I that we and we 1PL RR wrestle
    'PL and I wrestled each other.'

i  *Keimah nih Pa Lian he kannmah le kannmah kan i pai.

j  *Pa Lian he kaa pai.
(19a) and (20a) are transitive sentences corresponding to reciprocal (19b) and (20b). (19d) and (20d) are variants in which one of the participants appears as a postpositional phrase object of he 'with'. The subject will have plural agreement and the verb will be accompanied by i in this case, just as in the reciprocals. (19ce) and (20ce) are ungrammatical due to the absence of i, and (19j) and (20j) are ungrammatical due to singular subject-verb agreement. Reciprocal pronouns are possible in reciprocals like (19h) and (20h), but not with postpositional phrases as in (19i) or (20i). Nih may not accompany the subject in either case; (19fg) and (20fg) are ungrammatical.

**Variations 4.** (21c) and (22) illustrate a rather specialized use of i.

(21) a. Pa Sui a thi.  
Pa Sui 3 die  
'PS died.'

b. Pa Sui a thih-ter.  
Pa Sui 3 die-CAUS  
'PS made/let her die.'

c. Pa Sui aa thih-ter.  
Pa Sui 3-RR die-CAUS  
'PS pretended to be dead.'

d. *Pa Sui nih aa thihter.

e. *Pa Sui amah le amah aa thihter.

(21c) appears to be a reflexive construction based on the causative (21b), in turn based on the intransitive (21a). But the meaning of (21c) is not 'PS caused himself to die'. Rather this is one way to convey in Lai the notion 'pretend'. Sentences like (21c) are strictly intransitive and do not permit their subject to be accompanied by nih, or any reflexive object. (21de) are ungrammatical. (22) is a parallel example which contrasts the construction in (21c) with that in (16a).

(22) Aa hngilh-ter-mi cu aa hngilh-mi nakin a thrangh an  
3-RR sleep-CAUS-REL that 3-RR sleep-REL than-P 3 awaken 3PL  
har deuh.  
difficult more  
'Those who are pretending to be asleep are more difficult to awaken than those who are really asleep.'

The i which appears in aa hngilhmi 'those who are asleep' is part of the verb i hngilh, but that in aa hngilhtermi 'those who pretend to be asleep' is the same as in (21c).

**Variations 5.** (23c) and (24c) illustrate another specialized use of i.

(23) a. Pa Lian cu a niam.  
Pa Lian that 3 short  
'PL is short.'

b. Pa Sui cu a sang.  
Pa Sui that 3 tall  
'PS is tall.'
Pa Lian and Pa Sui that 3PL RR short-tall 'PL and PS differ in height.'

*Pa Lian le Pa Sui nih an i niamsan.

*Pa Lian le Pa Sui cu anmah le anmah an i niamsan.

(24) a Ka angki orh-lei ban cu a chin.  
1 shirt right-side sleeve that 3 short  
'The right sleeve of my shirt is short.'

b Ka angki keh-lei ban cu a fual.  
1 shirt left-side sleeve that 3 long  
'The left sleeve of my shirt is long.'

c Ka angki cu a ban aa chin-fual.  
1 shirt that 3 sleeve 3-RR short-long  
'My shirt has sleeves of unequal length.'

d *Ka angki nih a ban aa chin-fual.

e *Ka angki cu a ban amah le amah aa chin-fual.

The main verb in both (23c) and (24c) is a compound of two stative verbs with opposite meaning, as illustrated in (23ab) and (24ab). In (23c) the subject is a conjoined noun phrase with each conjunct understood as the subject of one member of the compound. Though there is a conventional order within the compound verb (lesser followed by greater) there is no direct association of the components of the subject with those of the verb, so that (23c) contains less information than the conjunction of (23ab). Notice that the compound verbs are composed of stem2 forms. (24c) is of interest in having no overt conjoined subject. In neither case can the subject be accompanied by nih nor can there be a reciprocal pronoun object. (23de) and (24de) are ungrammatical.

**Conclusion.** We have surveyed some of the general and some of the specialized uses of *i*, the reflexive and reciprocal verb marker in Lai. There are other uses of both types, but our examples demonstrate the morphosyntactic variety of constructions in which it appears. Some people use 'middle verbs' or 'middle voice' as a cover for this variety, for example Smith 1998. Such terms are convenient for comparative or typological purposes, but they seem to us to disregard the structural complexity which we observe. We will conclude this discussion with a selection of examples extracted from the Lai translation of the Gospel According to Matthew (Lai Baibal Thiang 1999). (25) is a basic reflexive with an overt pronoun subject; the stem2 form of the verb dawt 'love' is due to the subordinate clause headed by bantuk 'as'.

(25) Na innpa cu nangmah naa dawt bantuk in na dawt lai,  
2 neighbor that youSG 2-RR love as P 2 love FUT  
(22:39)  
'You will love your neighbor as you love yourself.'
(26) contains four overt reflexives, two imperatives and two declaratives. The verb *thrial* is used for changes of residence.

(26)  
'I *thrial* law rili chung-ah i paih,' nan ti ahcun  
RR move IMP sea in-P RR throw.in 2PL say if  
aa *thrial* lai i aa paih ko lai. (21:21)  
3-RR move FUT and 3-RR throw-in EMPH FUT  
'If you say, 'Move and throw yourself into the sea,' it will move and throw itself in.'

(27) is plural reflexive contrasting with (28), a reciprocal. (28) contains a relative clause with a plural subject but singular subject agreement.

(27)  
nanmah le nanmah nan i philh i (16:24)  
youPL and youPL 2PL RR forget and  
'You (must) forget yourselves and ...'

(28)  
anmah le anmah aa do-mi bu an um (12:25)  
they and they 3-RR fight-REL group 3PL be  
'There are groups which fight each other.'

(29) and (30) illustrate *i* as a verb stem component.

(29)  
hi tuu pakhat cung-ah hin aa lawm deuh. (18:13)  
this sheep one about-P this 3-RR be.happy more  
'He is happier about this one sheep.'

(30)  
an i lawm tuk hringran. (2:10)  
3PL RR be.happy very extremely  
'They were extremely happy.'

(31) and (32) illustrate the reflexive benefactive *i*, and (33) shows that this is not a verb stem component.

(31)  
Cu thilnu, nu pakhat nih aa lak i (13:33)  
that yeast woman one BY 3-RR take and  
'A woman took that yeast and ...'

(32)  
Phaisa cu an i lak i (20:11)  
money that 3PL RR take and  
'They took the money and ...'

(33)  
a ruak kha an lak i an vui; (14:12)  
3 body that 3PL take and 3PL bury  
'They took his body and buried it.'

Finally, (34) illustrates the reciprocal use of *i* with a postpositional *he* phrase.

(34)  
Vancung Pennak cu thilnu he aa lo. (13:33)  
heaven kingdom that yeast with 3-RR be-similar  
'The Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast.'
Abbreviations

1 first person
2 second person
3 third person
BEN benefactive suffix
BY agentive postposition (or ergative case marker)
CAUS causative prefix or suffix
EMPH emphatic particle
FUT future particle
IMP imperative particle
NEG negative particle
NOM nominalizing suffix
ORD ordinal suffix
P postposition
PL plural suffix or particle
Q interrogative particle
PERF perfect particle
REL relative suffix
RR reflexive or reciprocal particle
S singular

References


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