

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 3 March 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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Tense and Aspect in Lai

George Bedell, Ph.D.

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Lai is a Kuki-Chin language spoken primarily in central Chin State, Myanmar. According to *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), the total speaking population is 131,260. The examples cited are taken from two Lai translations of the Gospel according to Matthew. Those from Van Bik 1999 are cited by chapter and verse; those from Sangawi 2002 are additionally marked with 's'. The latter are cited only if Van Bik 1999 has no appropriate example, or if there is a difference between the two versions which is of interest. All examples are given in standard Lai orthography. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the 38th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, hosted by Xiamen University, 2005.

Tense and aspect particles. Sentences (1) to (4) illustrate some of the tense and aspect particles (underlined) which accompany verbs in Lai.

- (1) *mei chungah paih an si lai.* (3:10)
'they will be thrown into the fire'
- (2) *ralbawi sal cu, cu can hrimhrim ah cun a rak dam.* (8:13)
'the centurion's servant was healed at that very moment'
- (3) *cu pa cu a lung chungin a sual cang.* (5:28)
'that man has already done wrong in his heart'
- (4) *Na siangpahrang cu nangmah leiah a ra lio.* (21: 5)
'your king is coming to you'

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Tense and Aspect in Lai

While *lai* as in (1), *cang* as in (3) and *lio* as in (4) follow the verb, *rak* as in (2) precedes it. The verbs in these examples are *si* 'be' in (1), *dam* 'be well, healthy' in (2), *sual* 'do wrong' in (3) and *ra* 'come' in (4).

Lai. Lai is a head-final language, with the verb generally the last major constituent of the sentence. In (1) *lai* follows the verb *si* and ends the sentence. It indicates future tense, and may be followed by a small number of other particles (underlined).

- (5) *pakhat tu kha cu ze ah nan rel lai lo.* (6:24)
'you will not regard the other as of any account'
- (6) *Belh cu kan va bot hna lai maw?* (13:28)
'shall we go gather the weeds?'
- (7) *Hi caah hin pei nan dantatnak kha a fah chinchin lai cu!* (23:14)
'for this your punishment will be even more painful!'

In (5), *lai* is followed by the negative particle *lo*, in (6) by the yes-no question particle *maw*, and in (7) by the deictic particle *cu*. Examples like (7) illustrate one kind of Lai exclamation; see Bedell 2001b for discussion. In addition to sentences like (5) to (7), *lai* also occurs in coordinate and subordinate clauses, where it may be followed by various conjunctions (underlined).

- (8) *thei thra a tlai lomi paoh cu hau an si lai i* (3:10)
'all that do not bear good fruit will be cut down, and ...'
- (9) *Thiang Thlarau in nau ka ngei lai ti kha a hngalh.* (1:18)
'she knew that she would bear a child by the holy spirit'
- (10) *a ra laimi Pathian thinhunnak* (s3: 7)
'God's anger which will come'

In (8), it is followed by the coordinating conjunction *i*, in (9) by the subordinating conjunction *ti*, and in (10) by the subordinating conjunction *mi*.

A larger number of particles may come between the verb and *lai*.

- (11) *Pathian nih an hnemh hna lai.* (5: 4)
'God will comfort you'
- (12) *Nawl hei pe law ka sinumpa cu a dam ko lai.* (8: 8)
'give the order, and my servant will be healed'
- (13) *an in lakter ko hna lai,* (21: 3)
'they will let you take them'

Hna in (11) and (13) indicates agreement with a second or third person plural object. See Bedell 1998 for a description of agreement in Lai. *Ko* in (12) and (13) has an emphatic meaning, something like 'indeed'.

- (14) *nan chaw a umnak ah khan nan lung zong a um ve lai.* (6:21)
'your heart also will be where your treasure is'
- (15) *cu bantuk cun vancung khua i a ummi ka Pa nih nannih zong cu an tuah ve hna lai,*
'my father in heaven will treat you also like this' (18:35)
- (16) *thaizing nih cun lungretheihnak cu a zaa in aa ngeih ve ko lai.* (6:34)
'tomorrow will have enough worries'

Ve in these examples implies a conjunction, something like 'also'.

- (17) *Nithum hnuah thawhter ka si thran lai,* (27:63)
'I will be rise again after three days'
- (18) *a leh thran ve lai.* (25:45)
'he will answer again'

Thran in these examples means something like 'again'.

- (19) *Vancung Pennak chungah nan lut bal lai lo.* (18: 3)
'you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'
- (20) *kei cu kan zamtak bal lai lo,* (26:33)
'I will never abandon you'

Bal in these examples means something like 'ever' or (together with the negative *lo*) 'never'.

- (21) *kan thlacam a sau ruangah hin Pathian nih a kan theihpiak deuh lai,* (6: 7)
'God will hear us better because our prayers are long'
- (22) *cu khuami nak cun Sodom le Gomorah khuami kha a zangfah deuh hna lai,* (10:15)
'the people of Sodom and Gomorrah will be pitied more than the people of that town'

Deuh in these examples means something like 'more'.

Some of the particles in question seem to be derived from verbs, and retain verbal properties when used as particles.

- (23) *Cu temhinnak a dih cangka cun* (s24:29)
'until that suffering is over'

(24) *a mitsurhang kha a chuak dih lai i* (9:17)
'its wine will all come out, and ...'

(25) *rawl cu a zah dih hna lai;* (3:12)
'he will winnow all the grain'

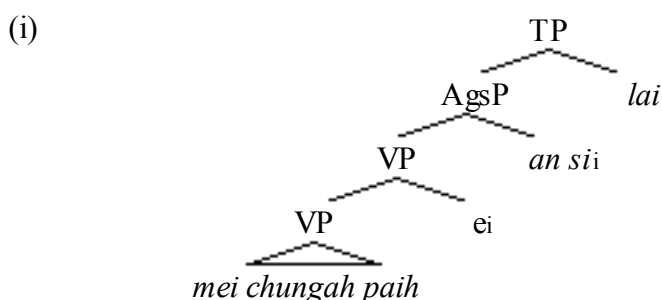
The verb *dih* in (23) means 'be complete'; the particle *dih* in (24) and (25) means 'all'. With an intransitive verb like *chuak* 'come out' in (24), *dih* is understood to modify the subject, but with a transitive verb like *zah* 'fan' in (25) it modifies the object.

(26) *zeitindah minung hi zat pek awk rawl cu kan hmuh khawh lai?* (15:33)
'how can we find enough food to give to these people?'

(27) *Ahodah khamnak a hmu kho kun lai?* (19:25)
'who can find salvation?'

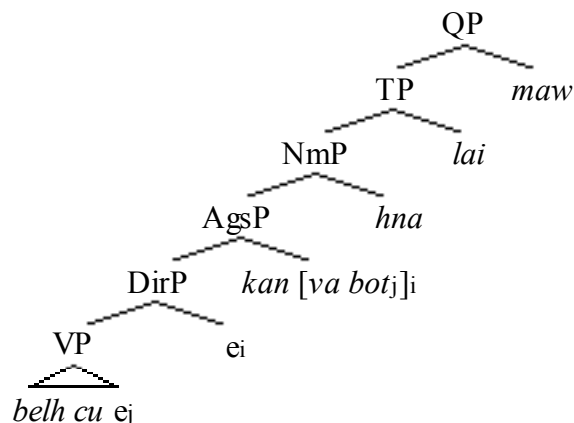
Kho and *khawh* in (26) and (27) do not occur as independent verbs, but as particles meaning 'can'. The difference between them reflects Lai verb stem alternation, with *kho* the stem I form like *hmu* 'find' in (27) and *khawh* the stem II form like *hmuh* in (26).

Structures 1. The structure assumed here for a sentence like (1) is as in (i).



That is, *lai* belongs to the syntactic category of tense particle (T) and together with a complement clause (AgsP) forms a tense phrase (TP). *Lai* is the head of TP, and located following its complement as normally in Lai. The other particles which may follow *lai* or intervene between it and the verb as in (5) through (27) are the heads of different categories located either above TP or between AgsP and TP. The structure of (6) will then be as in (vi).

(vi)



That is, *maw* belongs to the category of question particle (Q) and may combine with TP as its complement to form a question phrase (QP). And *hna* belongs to the category of number agreement particle (Nm) and may combine with a complement AgsP to form a number phrase (NmP). The internal structure of AgsP in (i) and (vi) is not at issue yet and is to be discussed later.

Rak. The particle *rak* was illustrated above in (2).

- (2) *ralbawi sal cu, cu can hrimhrim ah cun a rak dam.* (8:13)
'the centurion's servant was healed at that very moment'

It differs from *lai* and other tense or aspect particles in preceding rather than following the verb. There may be at most three particles preceding a verb, and the position of *rak* is rigidly fixed, as in (28).

- (28) *Bawipa, tangka thongnga na rak ka pek.* (25:20)
'master, you gave me five thousand coins'

In (28), *na* indicates agreement with a second person singular subject, and *ka* with a first person singular object; in the presence of such agreement overt personal pronouns need not appear. See Bedell 1998 for a description of agreement in Lai. *Rak* occurs invariably following a subject agreement particle and preceding an object agreement particle, if any. This position may be otherwise occupied by one of a set of directional particles. The syntactic behavior of *rak* may be explained if it is analyzed as a member of this set. See the discussion in Peterson 2003 and the references cited there. It resembles the verb *ra* 'come' (stem II *rat*), and sometimes correlates with directional motion toward the speaker as in (28). However, *rak* may be used when the implied direction is other than toward the speaker, as in (29), and it is not required even when there is such an implied direction as in (30).

- (29) *tlangbawi sinah khan ding teomao in va kal law rak in zoh seh.* (8: 4)
'go straight to the priest and let him look at you'

- (30) *Bawipa, talent panga na ka pek i* (s25:20)
'master, you gave me five talents, and ...'

In (29) *in* indicates agreement with a second person object; the meaning of *na rak ka pek* in (28) is the same as *na ka pek* in (30).

In sentences like (2) and (28), *rak* appears to indicate past tense. See the discussion in Peterson 2003 and the references cited there. But it cannot be generally characterized as a past tense any more than as a directional. It may co-occur with *lai* as in (31) and (32).

(31) *Annih nih cun nihchuak capo ah an rak ka ser lai i* (20:19)
'they will have made me a laughing stock, and ...'

(32) *Annih cu an theitlai khan nan rak hngalh ko hna lai.* (7:16)
'you will know them by their fruit'

Rak in these sentences cannot be understood as indicating past tense. As with (28) versus (30), it is not required here: compare (33) and (34).

(33) *nihchuak capo saih awk ... hlawt a si lai;* (s20:19)
'he will be handed over to be mocked ...'

(34) *Cu hna cu an theitlai in nan hngalh ko hna lai.* (s7:16)
'you will know them by their fruit'

Rak also occurs freely in imperatives like (35) and (36) where it also cannot be taken as past tense.

(35) *Bawipa cu a lam kha rak sialpiak u.* (3: 3)
'clear the lord's road for him'

(36) *mithi nih an mithi cu rak vui ko hna seh,* (8:22)
'let the dead bury their dead'

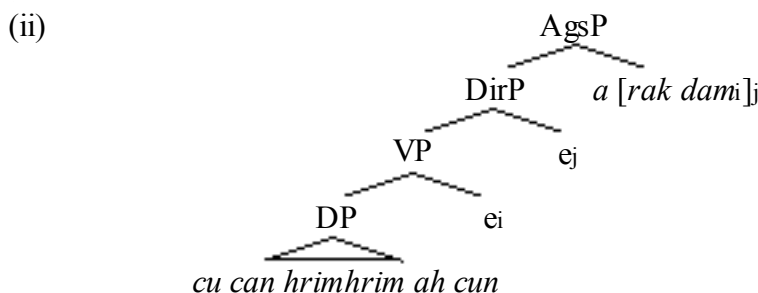
Rak must be distinguished from *ra* as illustrated in (37) and (38).

(37) *nan hmuh tikah ra ka chim thran u law* (2: 8)
'when you find him, come (and) talk to me again, and ...'

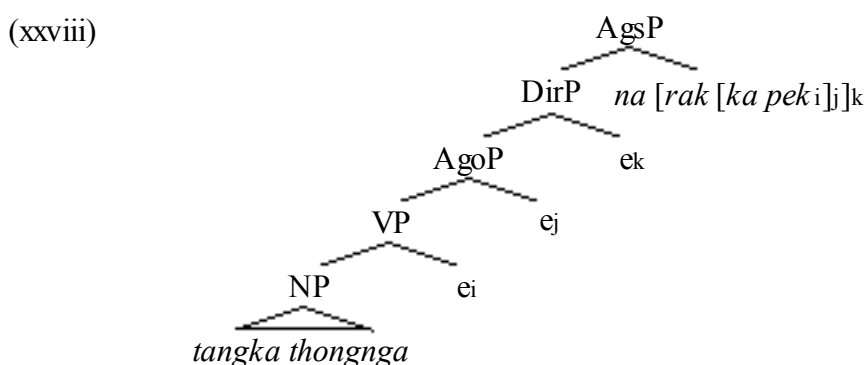
(38) *a ra kir i a zultu pathum hna cu an rak i hngilh kha a hmuh hna;* (26:40)
'he returned and found that his three followers were asleep'

This *ra* clearly does have the meaning of motion toward the speaker, by its subject. Though its syntactic position is very similar to that of *rak*, it has the full meaning of *ra* 'come', and probably is that verb. *Ra ka chim* in (37) might appear as *ra i ka chim*, the *ka* here showing object agreement of the verb *chim* 'talk to'. The construction resembles English 'come talk to me' versus 'come and talk to me'.

Structures 2. The structure assumed for a sentence like (2) is as in (ii).



In (ii) *rak* belongs to the category of directional particle (Dir) and may combine with a verb phrase (VP) to form a directional phrase (DirP). And *a* belongs to the category of subject agreement particle (Ags) which may combine with a directional phrase to form a subject agreement phrase (AgsP). These phrases differ from tense, question and number phrases as in (i) or (vi) in being head initial rather than head final. This is reflected in (ii) by the amalgamation of *dam* with *rak* and *rak dam* with *a*. The same is shown in (i) where there is no directional, and in (vi) where there is another more typical directional *va*, indicating motion away from the speaker. The maximal form is shown in (xxviii) where an object agreement particle also appears.



The representation in (i), (vi), (ii) and (xxviii) is not the only way to deal with head initial phrases, but the choice is not crucial for this discussion. The internal structure of VP in (ii) and (xxviii) is not at issue here. The subject in (2) and the vocative phrase in (28) have also been omitted in (ii) and (xxviii).

Cang. The particle *cang* was illustrated above in (3).

- (3) *cu pa cu a lung chungin a sual cang.* (5:28)
'that man has already done wrong in his heart'

Like *lai*, *cang* follows the verb; unlike *lai* it sometimes appears as an independent verb in the meaning 'become'.

- (39) *lung santlai bik ah a cang.* (21:42)

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'it has become the most useful stone'

- (40) *Thingkung ah a hung cang i* (13:32)
'it becomes a tree, and ...'

When *cang* appears it may be followed by the same particles as *lai*. Compare (41) to (45) with (5) to (10) above.

- (41) *Cu vialte cu nan theithiam cang maw?* (s13:51)
'have you understood all that?'
- (42) *An tuah man cu tlingte in pei an hmuh cang cu!* (6: 2)
'They have already found their reward!'
- (43) *Hi mi hna hi kan sinah nithum an um cang i* (15:32)
'these people have been with us three days, and ...'
- (44) *cu nih cun Pathian Pennak cu nan sin a phan cang ti kha a langhter ko.* (12:28)
'that shows that God's kingdom has already arrived for you'
- (45) *Bawipa sinah chiatser in nan i kam cangmi* (5:33)
'what you have promised to the lord'

There is no example in our texts of *cang* in a negative sentence followed by *lo*.

Similarly, compare (46) to (50) with (11) to (27) above for the order of *cang* with particles which precede *lai*.

- (46) *Ka cawtum hna le ka satril thauthau hna cu ka thah cang hna.* (22: 4)
'I have killed my bulls and my fat livestock'
- (47) *hlonh awk le lamh awk men a si ko cang.* (5:13)
'it has become worth being thrown away and stepped on'
- (48) *ngakchia le a nu kha Israel ram ah hun kirpi thran cang hna;* (2:20)
'return with the child and his mother to Israel again'
- (49) *Rawldanghnak cu timh a si dih cang.* (22: 4)
'the feast is all prepared'
- (50) *Barabas thlah i Jesuh thah awkin an rak lem khawh cang hna.* (s27:20)
'they were able to persuade them to free Barabbas and kill Jesus'

The only difference observed between *cang* and *lai* is that the number particle *hna* follows the former as in (46) or (48), but precedes the latter as in (11) or (13). No sentences in our texts

have *cang* with *ve*, *deuh* or *bal*. Some of these distributional restrictions may be due to semantic incompatibility.

Cang is generally said to indicate the perfect aspect, without necessarily defining what that is. See the discussion in Peterson 2003 and the references cited there. Many of the sentences in (39) to (50), like (3), are comfortably glossed using the English perfect. As in the case of *rak*, however, it is difficult to find a meaning which fits all the examples. Like *rak*, *cang* can be used together with *lai*, as in (51) and (52).

(51) *Mi Fapa hi mi kut chungah tuan ah pek a si cang lai, (17:22)*
'the Son of man will be given into the hands of men'

(52) *Kan thi dih cang lai hi ta, (8:25)*
'we will all die!'

While (51) might be considered to have the meaning of the English future perfect, (52) is difficult to see that way. *Cang* may also be used together with *rak*, as in (53) and (54).

(53) *nichuahlei ah an rak hmuh cangmi arfi kha (2: 9)*
'the star which they had seen in the east'

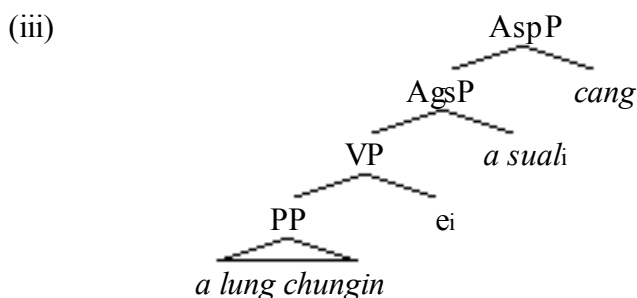
(54) *atu cu nan hmaiah Galili ram ah a rak kal chung cang: (28: 7)*
'now he is going ahead of you to Galilee'

While (53) might be considered to have the meaning of the English past perfect, (54) is difficult to see that way. Like *rak*, *cang* may also be found in imperative examples such as (55) and (56), and also (48) above.

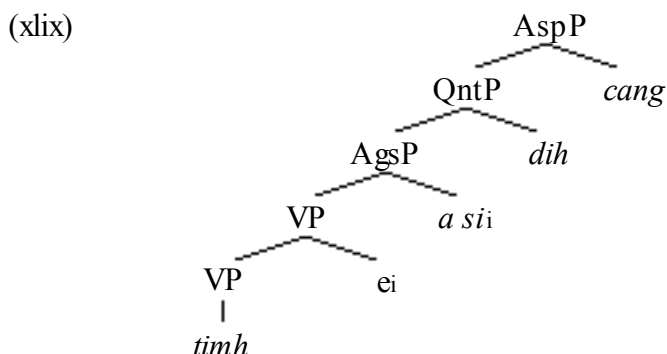
(55) *Thiang ko cang, (8: 3)*
'be clean'

(56) *A sawmmi kha, ra cang u, (22: 3)*
'you who are invited, come'

Structures 3. The structure of (3) is assumed to be as in (iii).



That is, *cang* belongs to the category of aspect particle (Asp) which may take a subject agreement phrase as its complement to form an aspect phrase (AspP).



Likewise *dih* belongs to the category of quantificational particle (Qnt) which may take a subject agreement phrase as its complement to form a quantificational phrase (QntP). In both (iii) and (xlix) the subject has been omitted as in (ii) above. Sentence (49) is a Lai passive, and the position of particles like *cang* and *dih* shows some variation. They may accompany either the main verb or, as in (49), the passive auxiliary *si* 'be'. See Bedell 2001 for a discussion of Lai passives.

(57) *Nupi thrit rawldanghnak ka tuahmi cu timh dih a si cang;* (22: 8)
'the wedding feast I planned is all prepared'

(58) *cu pennak cu aa thren dih cang a si ko caah* (12:26)
'because that kingdom has all fallen apart'

In (57) *dih* accompanies the main verb and *cang* the auxiliary, while in (58) both accompany the main verb. This freedom is not found with *lai* or *rak*, which always accompany the auxiliary. In the case of *rak*, this is no doubt related to its preverbal status with the agreement particles.

Lio. The particle *lio* was illustrated above in (4).

(4) *Na siangpahrang cu nangmah leiah a ra lio.* (21: 5)
'your king is coming to you'

Like *lai* and *cang*, *lio* follows the verb it accompanies; like *lai* and unlike *cang* it cannot be used as an independent verb. Sentence (4) where *lio* appears following the main verb is not typical; most examples are like (59).

(59) *Herod siangpahrang bawi a si lioah khan a chuak.* (2: 1)
'he was born during the reign of King Herod'

In (59) *lio* is followed by the postposition *ah* forming an adverbial clause. *Lio* may also be followed by *mi*, as in (60).

(60) *atu i a nung liomi an thih dih hlanah* (24:34)

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'before those who are now living have all died'

Like *cang*, *lio* precedes *hna* but follows *ko* and *thran*.

(61) *Cu bia cu Jesuh nih a chimh lio hna ah khan*, (9:18)
'while Jesus was saying those words'

(62) *biaceihnak thrutdan cung i a thrut ko lioah khan* (s27:19)
'while he was sitting in the judge's seat'

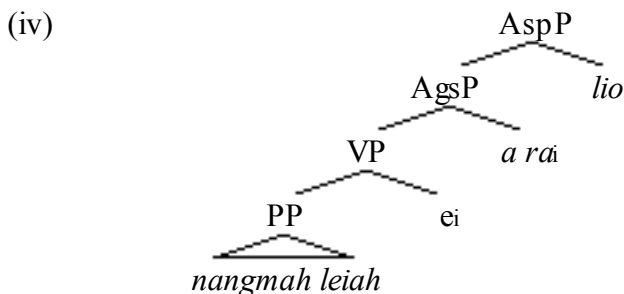
(63) *A thaizing ah khuapi lei i an kir thran lioah* (s21:18)
'while they were returning to the city in the morning'

Lio occasionally occurs together with *rak* as in (64), but there are no examples of it with *lai* or *cang*.

(64) *a rian a rak truan liote ah* (24:46)
'just doing his job'

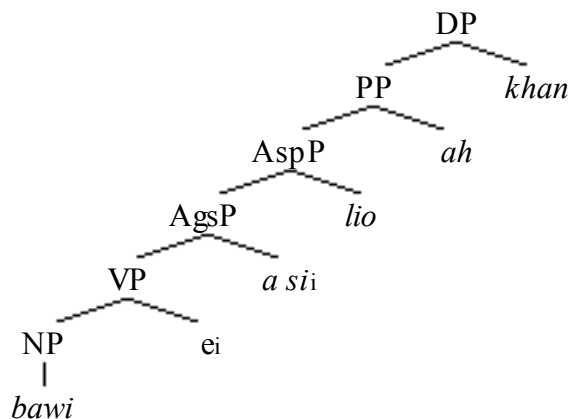
The meaning of *lio* is that the action or state indicated by the verb is in progress or ongoing. See the discussion in Peterson 2003 and the references cited there. Its failure to co-occur with *cang* may reflect not only semantic clash, but that both belong to the same category of aspect particle (Asp).

Structures 4. We might assume then that the structure of a sentence like (4) is as in (iv).

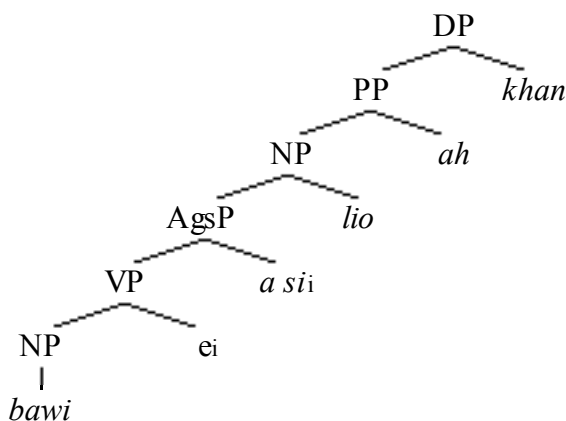


If so, then (59) will have a structure something like (lix). The typical occurrence of *lio* with *ah*, often followed by a deictic such as *khan*, however suggests an alternative analysis in which *lio* is taken to be a relational noun referring to a period of time. In that case the structure of (59) will be as in (lix'). See Bedell 2010 for a discussion of relational nouns in Lai.

(lix)



(lix')



This would have some advantages: *lio* may occur in abbreviated deictic phrases like (65), like many relational nouns, but quite unlike particles such as *lai*, *rak* or *cang*. Also, there are a few examples like (66) where *lio* follows the number agreement *hna*, unlike the usual order as in (61).

(65) *Cu lioah cun*, (9:20)
'during that (time)'

(66) *Jesuh nih mizapi kha a tlunter hna lioah khan*, (14:22)
'while Jesus sent the crowds away'

The analysis in (lix') could not account for examples like (4), (60) or (61). Possibly the syntactic status of *lio* is fluid and both are available.

Other peculiarities of *lio* include cases like (67), where *ah* seems to be suppressed, and cases like (68) where *mi* seems to be missing.

(67) *Herod bawi lio*, (s2: 1)
'while Herod was king'

- (68) *hnuktlai lio bawhte hna* (21:16)
'nursing infants'

Note also that *ah* in examples like (69) and (70) is distinct from *ah* in (59), (61) to (64) and (66).

- (69) *Rawl ei lai ah an kut an i trawl lo,* (s15: 2)
'they don't wash their hands when they are going to eat'
- (70) *profet hna thi chuah ah khan kan i tel hnga lo,* (s23:30)
'we would not have joined in shedding the blood of the prophets'

Here *ah* creates something like an English gerundive; the clause is nominalized as shown by the absence of agreement particles. Except for the possible nominal status of *lio*, the clauses in the previous examples are not nominalized.

Conclusion. In this discussion we have investigated the syntactic properties of some tense and aspect particles in Lai. A number of other particles which accompany Lai verbs have been mentioned. Lai is characterized by 'verb complexes' consisting of a verb preceded and/or followed by a number of particles. An issue of interest here is whether this is ultimately a morphological or a syntactic phenomenon. Peterson (2003) takes it to be morphological, though without giving an extensive argument. In favor of that approach are the strict order relations of the various particles with the verb and with each other. In favor of the syntactic approach is the absence of phonological complexity or alternation at boundaries between particles and the verb or other particles. Our analysis suggests that perhaps it is mixed, with the preverbal particles, including *rak*, being morphological and the postverbal particles, including *lai*, *cang* and *lio*, being syntactic.

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