Tsuu Khaa Tii Hla?:
DEIXIS, DEMONSTRATIVES AND DISCOURSE PARTICLES IN LAI CHIN·

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an investigation of the use of a class of deictic particles in Lai Chin. The particles tsuu, khaa, hii, and khii have a wide variety of uses; they can be appended to nouns, phrases and clauses as discourse particles with various meanings; they also function as demonstratives, and occur in a number of fixed expressions with an adverbial function. The full range of uses and meanings of these particles is a vast and often-vexing topic, and I make no pretense of even approaching a complete description here. Rather, I will provide an overview of certain basic contexts in which the particles are used, and from this show the constancies and variances in their meaning as I understand them at present.¹

‘X-D’ CONSTRUCTIONS

Mizo, a language closely related to Lai, is said to have six demonstratives, four of which appear cognate with the particles in question here (Chhangte 1989:135).² These are shown in example (1):

(1) hèl 'this, near speaker' sòd 'yonder, visible'
khii 'that, upwards' cùù 'that, not visible'
khbù 'that, downwards' khàà 'that, near addressee'

¹ *Tsuu khaa tii hla?, literally 'Don't say tsuu or khaa!', is a set expression in Lai meaning 'Don't argue!' or 'No back-talk!' .
² Though Chhangte refers solely to 'demonstratives', I use 'particles' or 'deictic particles' as general cover terms, restricting the term 'demonstratives' to those instances in which the particles have precisely that function. Chhangte's article mentions this topic only in passing, glossing the Mizo 'demonstratives' as above. No indication is given that their use is any more complicated than this. I have not investigated the matter further. Throughout this paper I will also use 'D' as an abbreviation for 'demonstrative', 'deictic particle' and/or 'discourse particle', as the case may be.
Lai apparently lacks such particles for ‘that upwards/downwards’, and Lai khii will be shown to have taken on the role of Mizo sôô. Though the meanings of these particles in Lai extend far beyond the glosses given for Mizo, taking these concrete, spatial meanings as a starting point (to speak of Gesamtpdeutungen or invariants would perhaps be overstating the case) can be useful in comprehending the particles’ further range of uses.

The spatial meanings given above are most transparent in Lai when the particles are added sentence-finally. Note that sentence-finally the particles appear with short vowels and final glottal stops, perhaps as a result of their exclamatory usage here. The examples in (2a)-(2e) display this for all four particles:

(2a) ?eek naa la?m laay hi?
dung 2SG-RFL tread on FUT D-near speaker
‘You are going to tread in dung (here).’

(2b) ?eek naa la?m laay kha?
dung 2SG-RFL tread on FUT D-near addressee
‘You are going to tread in dung (over there where you are).’

(2c) ?eek naa la?m laay tsu?
dung 2SG-RFL tread on FUT D-not visible
‘You are going to tread in dung (I suspect, though I cannot see it).’

(2d) *?eek naa la?m laay khi?
dung 2SG-RFL tread on FUT D-yonder (away from speaker and addressee)

(2e) ?eek ?aa la?m laay khi?
dung 3SG-RFL tread on fut D-yonder
‘He is going to tread in dung (over there where he is).’

Examples (2a)-(2c) are to be construed as warnings from the speaker, who is aware of the danger, to the listener, who is not. In (2a), the use of proximal hii fixes the location of the putative treading at a point directly in front of the speaker and listener. The utterance is most likely accompanied by an indicating gesture. Using khaa, (2b) assumes that the speaker and listener are somewhat farther apart. The speaker sees the dung in front of the listener, who does not yet see it. This could also be accompanied by pointing. For (2c) to be well-
formed, my consultant envisioned a context in which neither speaker nor
listener sees the dung. It is perhaps dark, and the speaker, perhaps by virtue of
having passed the spot in daylight, knows the location of the dung, and
suspects that the listener will tread in it. The ill-formedness of (2d) with *khii* is
interesting. Appended to the entire sentence, the particle locates not the dung
itself, but rather the setting of the whole scene. The sentence with *khaa* is well-
formed, meaning that the scene is unfolding over by the listener, away from the
speaker. *khii*, however, places the speaker and listener together, and the scene
at a distance from them both. The listener cannot thus be a participant in the
event. Changing the pronoun to third person as in (2e), however, makes the
utterance well-formed again: A third party is seen about to tread in the dung
‘over there’, away from both speaker and listener.

Another such example is given in (3):

(3)  ?a  zuan  tsan  laay  khi?
     3SG  fly  perf  fut  D-yonder

‘Look! It is about to fly!’ (said pointing to a bird sitting on a branch
at some distance from speaker and listener, about to take to the air)

Examples (4a)-(4c) show further instances of the use of deictic particles to
locate an unfolding scenario.

(4a)  ka  vok  ?an  fiar  khi?
     1SG  pig  3SG  steal  D-yonder

‘Look! They are stealing my pig over there!’

(4b)  ka  vok  ?an  fiar  tsu?
     1SG  pig  3SG  steal  D-there, not visible

‘They are stealing my pig!’ (noises from the sty alert the
speaker to the unseen theft)

(4c)  ka  vok  ?an  fiar  hi?
     1SG  pig  3SG  steal  D-here

‘Help! They are stealing my pig here!’ (makes sense only if
the speaker is tied up or otherwise incapacitated, watching
the theft)

Interestingly, my consultant was not happy with the use of *khaa*, ‘over by
you’, in this instance. Apparently, the utterance seemed nonsensical, since if
the theft was indeed ‘over by the listener’, the listener should have noticed it
and helped out, unless he or she was either an accessory to the crime, a very bad neighbor, or tremendously unobservant. Although I suspect that a context could be found, my consultant offered instead the following:

(5) na faa lee ni? ka vok ?a? fiar kha?
2SG child PL ERG 1SG pig 3SG steal D-near listener

‘Your kids stole my pig!’ (complaining to the father of the perpetrators)

The reason for this usage is not entirely clear. As discussed later in this paper, *khaa* is frequently used to give a past-tense reading to a sentence. It is possible that this is the case here. We will also see, however, that the deictic particles can also be used to render non-spatial extensions of the spatial meanings described above. In this case, the use of the ‘over by you’ particle could be seen to set not the event itself, but rather blame or responsibility for the event ‘over by’ the father of the pilfering children. In this case *khaa* can be taken to mean ‘relevant to you’. Fuller discussion of such instances follows below, but another example of abstracted use of sentence-final Ds is shown in example (6):

(6) ka kal tsaa? laay hi?
1SG go PERF FUT D-here

‘I am going to leave now.’ (*hii* here gives us not a proximal spatial reading, but a proximal temporal reading)

**Postnominal Usage**

Placed after a noun, deictic particles occur in two forms. Their precise relation to that noun will be discussed in greater detail below. For now, it is just necessary to note that, following a noun in the absolutive case, the particles take the forms *hii, khii, tsuu* and *khaa*; while placed after nouns in other cases (i.e., locative or ergative), they take the forms *hin, khin, tsun* and *khan*. In this position the particles have a wide variety of uses. Perhaps simplest are *hii* and *khii*. Here, as above, these particles show spatial meanings:

(7a) ?uy tsaw hii ni zaan ?a? ka hmu?
dog D yesterday LOC 1SG see (Form 2)³

‘I saw the dog which is here in front of me yesterday.’

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³ Lai verbs generally have two principal parts, indicated here as “Form 1” and “Form 2”. Their distribution is complex and beyond the scope of this paper. They are discussed in several other papers in this and the previous issue.