Clitic Climbing in Lai

George Bedell
International Christian University

Our attention here will focus on Lai sentences like (1), in particular on the underlined portion, which may be rendered into English as (2).

(1) Na nu le na naule cu lengah an dir ko i, chonh an in duh.
(Mt. 12:47)

(2) Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak to you.

As argued in Bedell (1995), the words an and in in (1) mark agreement with the subject (your mother and brothers) and object (you) respectively. Specifically, in 'you' appears syntactically associated with the verb duh 'want' rather than with the verb chonh 'speak' in spite of marking agreement with the semantic object of the latter. This can perhaps be clarified by comparing (1) with (3) and (4).

(3) an in chonh 'they spoke to you'

(4) an in duh 'they love you'

The meaning of in in (1) is identical to that in (3), but its syntactic position is identical to that in (4).

We take the syntactic structure of (3) to be something like (iii):

(iii)

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XP
  NP (subject)   X'
    YP          an [ in [ chonh ]; ]
    NPk (object)  Y'
        VP ej
          NPk ei
            e
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The structure of (4) will differ only in having duh in the position of chonh. In (iii), following the principles of X' Theory, XP is equivalent to S representing a clause, but its head is taken to be an, the subject agreement marker. YP intervenes between the object position and X', and treats the object in parallel with the subject; its head is the object agreement marker in. The object position is anchored within VP by the empty NPk coindexed with it. In some analyses the subject is similarly anchored (the VP-internal subject hypothesis). Since we are concerned primarily with the
verb, these matters are left open. In some analyses, the verb complex

\[ \text{an [ in [ chonh ]i ]j} \]

is created by syntactically moving the verb \text{chonh} out of the VP up to join with \text{in} and then again to join with \text{an}. We prefer to reserve judgment as to whether actual movement is involved in such structures or not; what is important is the anchoring of the various components of the verb complex to the head \( Y \) and \( V \) positions.

The construction in (1) is impossible in English (*they want to you to speak), but it resembles Spanish (5).

(5) \quad \text{Tu madre y tus hermanos están afuera, y te quieren hablar.}

In (5), \text{te} 'you' appears syntactically associated with the verb \text{quieren} 'they want' rather than with the verb \text{hablar} 'to speak'. In languages like Spanish this construction is called 'clitic climbing' from the idea that the object clitic pronoun \text{te} moves up syntactically from with the phrase headed by \text{hablar} into that headed by \text{quieren}.

We take the structure of (1) to be something like (i).

(i)

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{XP} \\
\text{NP} \quad \text{X'} \\
\text{YP} \quad \text{an [ in [ duh ]i ]j} \\
\text{NP}_k \quad \text{Y'} \\
\text{VP} \quad \text{cj} \\
\text{NP}_k \quad \text{chonh} \\
\end{array} \]

As shown in (i), \text{chonh} is analyzed as a kind of infinitive construction where there is no place for agreement to be manifested. The empty \text{NP}_k here anchors no object position associated with \text{chonh}, but rather one associated with \text{duh}. An object pronoun can appear if contrasted, as in (6).

(6) \quad \text{nangmah cu chonh an in duh} \quad \text{'they want to speak to you'}

Spanish allows a variant in which no clitic climbing takes place, as in (8). Lai has no such variant; that is, it does not allow \text{in} to associate with the lower verb alone as in (7).

(7) \quad \text{*in chonh an duh}
(8) quieren hablarte

(i) as above already explains why (7) is not possible: there is no object agreement structure above the verb chonh. The question then naturally arises of how the syntax of Spanish differs from (i) so as to allow (8). The primary difference is that Spanish verbs do not show object agreement like Lai verbs, so that te in (5) or (8) is not an agreement marker like in in (1), but rather a pronoun, and the object of the verb hablar. What te and in share is then not their semantic status, but rather the property of being clitics: syntactically (and also phonologically) depending on the adjacent verb. The infinitive verb hablar in (5) or (8) is like chonh in having no agreement structure but this does not prevent it from having an overt object. The possibility of te climbing as in (5) is due to its clitic status, but there is no need for it to do so. If so, then it will be te that is co-indexed with the empty object of hablar in the structure of (5), whereas in is not so anchored in (i). We retain the term clitic climbing for (1) even though strictly speaking (i) precludes any actual movement of in in the same sense as te might have moved in (5).

Although (7) is ungrammatical in Lai, (9) represents a possible variant of (1); here both agreement markers appear to be associated with chonh rather than with duh. We take structure of (9) to be something like (ix).

(9) an in chonh duh

```
     XP
    /   \\
   NP  X'
   /   \\
 YP   [ [ chonh ]i duh ]j ]k
     /   \\
 NP  Y'
   /   \\
 VP   ek
     /   \\
 VP   ej
     /   \\
 NP  ei
  /   \\
 e
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That is, in (9) chonh is indeed the main verb, but duh serves as a kind of suffix within the verb complex. There is no analog to this construction like (10), since the stem of querer (to want) cannot serve as a verbal affix in Spanish.

(10) *querer te hablen

That the structure of (9) is indeed (ix) can be argued with reference to other possibilities in the Lai verb complex. (11) differs from (4) in that the second person object is plural rather than singular. Plurality is marked by hna after the finite verb.
(11) an in chonh hna  
> 'they spoke to you'

The plural object form corresponding to (1) is (12). If hna originates in the same head Y position in (i) as in, then the ungrammaticality of (13) has the same explanation as (7).

(12) chonh an in duh hna  
> 'they want to speak to you'

(13) *chonh hna an in duh

The plural object form corresponding to (9) is (14), and not the ungrammatical (15); (ix) accounts for this contrast, since duh attaches to chonh before hna does.

(14) an in chonh duh hna

(15) *an in chonh hna duh

(16) and its assumed structure (xvi) illustrate one Lai tense/aspect marker.

(16) an rak in chonh  
> 'they have spoken to you'

(xvi)

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XP
   NP (subject)  X'
       ZP  an [ rak [ in [ chonh ]i ]j ]k
         YP  ek
                NP (object)  Y'
                   VP  ej
                         NP ei
                                e
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The perfect marker rak does not belong to the Lai agreement system, but has its own syntactic status, represented in (xvi) as head of ZP, between YP and X'. (xvi) accounts for the position of rak in (16) following the subject agreement marker an but preceding the object agreement marker in.10 (17) corresponds to (1) with the addition of rak, and (19) to (9). But rak cannot be placed independently of the agreement markers, as in (18) or (20).

(17) chonh an rak in duh  
> 'they have wanted to speak to you'

(18) *rak chonh an in duh

(19) an rak in chonh duh