Agreement in Lai

George Bedell
International Christian University

Lai verbs are typically accompanied by particles selected from a rather large inventory, constituting a 'verb complex'. Among these are pronominal particles like a in sentence (3).

(1) Ka kal. 'I go/went'
(2) Na kal. 'you go/went'
(3) A kal. 'he/she/it goes/went'
(4) Kan kal. 'we go/went'
(5) Nan kal. 'you go/went'
(6) An kal. 'they go/went'

The use of a is obligatory in this example, and indicates that the subject is third person singular. The same verb may be used without any such particle, as in the singular imperative (7) or in an infinitive construction as in (8).

(7) Kal. 'go'
(8) Kal a duh. 'he/she/it wants/wanted to go'

(1) through (6) illustrate a set of such particles which distinguish person (first, second or third) and number (singular or plural) of subjects. The plural particles kan, nan and an might be analyzed as the singular ka, na and a followed by a plural suffix -n.

The verb kal 'go' is intransitive; with a transitive verb such as hmuh 'see' particles are also used to indicate the person and number of an object.

(9) Kan hmuh. 'I see/saw you'
(10) Ka hmuh. 'I see/saw him/her/it'
(11) Na ka hmuh. 'you see/saw me'
(12) Na hmuh. 'you see/saw him/her/it'
(13) A ka hmuh. 'he/she/it sees/saw me'
(14) An hmuh. 'he/she/it sees/saw you'
(15) A hmuh. 'he/she/it sees/saw him/her/it'
(16) Kan in hmuh. 'we see/saw you'
(17) Kan hmuh. 'we see/saw him/her/it'
(18) Nan ka hmuh. 'you see/saw me'
(19) Nan hmuh. 'you see/saw him/her/it'
(20) An ka hmuh. 'they see/saw me'
(21) An in hmuh. 'they see/saw you'
(22) An hmuh. 'they see/saw him/her/it'

There is no third person particle for an object; thus (10), (12), (15), (17), (19) and (22) are morphologically identical to (1) to (6) respectively. The existence of an object in the former case must be inferred from the meaning of hmuh. A first person object is indicated by the same particle ka as a first person subject; an object particle is invariably accompanied by a preceding subject particle. Finally, a second person object is indicated by kan or an in (9) and (14), together with a third or first person singular subject. This might be analysed as a second person object suffix -n identical with the subject plural. But with a plural subject as in (16) and (21) a second person object is indicated by a particle in distinct from the second person subject na.

Just as singularity of a subject particle is indicated by the absence of any indication of plurality, so the objects in (9) to (22) above are singular. Plurality of an object is indicated as in (23) through (36).

(23) Kan hmuh hna. 'I see/saw you'
(24) Ka hmuh hna. 'I see/saw them'
(25) Na kan hmuh. 'you see/saw us'
(26) Na hmuh hna. 'you see/saw them'
(27) A kan hmuh. 'he/she/it sees/saw us'
(28) An hmuh hna. 'he/she/it sees/saw you'
(29) A hmuh hna. 'he/she/it sees/saw them'
(30) Kan in hmuh hna. 'we/saw you'
(31) Kan hmuh hna. 'we see/saw them'
(32) Nan kan hmuh. 'you see/saw us'
(33) Nan hmuh hna. 'you see/saw them'
(34) An kan hmuh. 'they see/saw me'
(35) An in hmuh hna. 'they see/saw you'
(36) An hmuh hna. 'they see/saw them'

A first person plural object is indicated in the same way as a first
person plural subject, using kan rather than ka. But a second or third person plural object is indicated by a distinct particle hna which follows the verb.

The basic system of Lai pronominal particles is as shown in (1) to (6) and (9) through (36). In principle, they indicate the person and number of both subject and object, but there are a few general restrictions. If subject and object are both first person or both second person, the object particles illustrated in (9) through (36) may not be used. There is a distinct mechanism for indicating reflexivity; (37) and (38) illustrate one possibility.

(37) Keimah le keimah kaa hmu. 'I see/saw myself'
(38) Amah le amah aa hmu. 'he/she/it sees/saw him/her/itself'

Note that (38) is distinct in meaning from (15); in the former the subject and object are the same third person singular entity, but in the latter they are different entities. This construction shows a long vowel in singular subject pronominal particles.\(^5\) There is also a reciprocal construction as illustrated in (39).

(39) Pakhat le pakhat an i hmu. 'they see/saw each other'

In (39) i may be analyzed as an additional object particle.\(^6\) Lai has verbs which take more than one object, but only one of them may have its person and number indicated by particles. In most cases, a human indirect object takes precedence over an inanimate direct object for this purpose.

The agreement pattern in imperatives differs somewhat from other sentences, as already noted.\(^7\)

(40) Kal ning. 'let me go'
(41) Kal. 'go' = (7)
(42) Kal seh. 'may he/she/it go'
(43) Kal u sih. 'let us go'
(44) Kal u. 'go'\(^8\)
(45) Kal hna seh. 'may they go'

Although such sentences have subjects, the subject person agreement particles ka, na, a, kan, nan and an do not appear. Plurality of a first or second person subject subject is shown by u after the verb as in (43) and (44), but by hna for a third person subject as in (45). Imperatives with first or third person subjects
are indicated by the mood particles ning, sih or seh.

Transitive verbs follow the analogous pattern, with the person and number of an object indicated as in ordinary declarative sentences.

(46) In zoh ning. 'let me look at you'
(47) Zoh ning. 'let me look at him/her/it'

(48) Ka zoh. 'look at me'
(49) Zoh. 'look at him/her/it' (or 'look')

(50) Ka zoh seh. 'may he/she look at me'
(51) In zoh seh. 'may he/she look at you'
(52) Zoh seh. 'may he/she look at him/her/it'

(53) In zoh u sih. 'let us look at you'
(54) Zoh u sih. 'let us look at him/her/it'

(55) Ka zoh u. 'look at me'
(56) Zoh u. 'look at him/her/it'

(57) Ka zoh hna seh. 'may they look at me'
(58) In zoh hna seh. 'may they look at you'
(59) Zoh hna seh. 'may they look at him/her/it'

(60) In zoh hna ning. 'let me look at you'
(61) Zoh hna ning. 'let me look at them'

(62) Kan zoh. 'look at us'
(63) Zoh hna. 'look at them'

(64) Kan zoh seh. 'may he/she look at us'
(65) In zoh hna seh. 'may he/she look at you'
(66) Zoh hna seh. 'may he/she look at them'

(67) In zoh hna u sih. 'let us look at you'
(68) Zoh hna u sih. 'let us look at them'

(69) Kan zoh u. 'look at us'
(70) Zoh hna u. 'look at them'

(71) Kan zoh hna seh. 'may they look at us'
(72) In zoh hna seh. 'may they look at you'
(73) Zoh hna seh. 'may they look at them'