Passives and Clefts in Lai

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Consider the following Lai sentences.

(1) Biak Thawng nih Par Zing a hnamh.
    BT kissed PZ.

(2) Par Zing cu Biak Thawng nih hnamh a si.
    PZ was kissed by BT.

(3) Par Zing cu Biak Thawng nih a hnamhmi a si.
    PZ was (the one) who BT kissed.

All three sentences may refer to the same event: an interaction between the two Lai individuals Biak Thawng (a young man) and Par Zing (a young woman). Example (1) is a simple transitive active sentence, as indicated by the English gloss. Example (2) we take to be a passive sentence, and example (3) a cleft sentence, again as indicated by the English glosses.²

The Lai sentences (2) and (3) are superficially rather similar, more so than their corresponding glosses are in English. They differ only in whether the third person singular subject agreement marker a and the subordinating marker -mi appear with the verb hnamh 'kiss'.³ If they appear as in (3), hnamh is understood actively and belongs to a relative clause functioning as the predicate nominal of the copula si 'be'; if they do not as in (2), hnamh is understood passively and functions as a complement to the passive auxiliary si 'be'. As in English, the same verb functions both as copula and passive auxiliary.

However, the apparent similarity between (2) and (3) is deceptive; it is not difficult to see that they must have quite different syntactic structures. As in English, it is possible to supply an overt head noun for the relative clause in the cleft sentence; no such noun may appear in the passive, which contains no relative clause. (4) is a grammatical Lai sentence, but (5) is not.
(4) Par Zing cu Biak Thawng nih a hnamhmi ngaknu a si.
PZ was the girl who BT kissed.

(5) *Par Zing cu Biak Thawng nih hnamh ngaknu a si.

As in English, the cleft sentence may be inverted exchanging the subject and predicate nominal; this is impossible in a passive, which contains no predicate nominal. (6) is a grammatical Lai sentence, but not (7).

(6) Biak Thawng nih a hnamhmi cu Par Zing a si.
The one who BT kissed was PZ.
It was PZ who BT kissed.

(7) *Biak Thawng nih hnamh cu Par Zing a si.

Again as in English, a cleft sentence may be constructed focussing the subject rather than the object of a transitive verb, but no passive analog is possible. (8) and (9) are grammatical Lai sentences, but not (10) or (11). Notice that in this case the subordinating marker is -tu rather than -mi.

(8) Biak Thawng cu Par Zing a hnamtu a si.
BT was (the one) who kissed PZ.

(9) Par Zing a hnamtu cu Biak Thawng a si.
The one who kissed PZ was BT.
It was BT who kissed PZ.

(10) *Biak Thawng cu Par Zing hnam a si.

(11) *Par Zing hnam cu Biak Thawng a si.

The Lai verb meaning 'kiss' may be used intransitively as a reciprocal verb, as in (12).

(12) Biak Thawng le Par Zing (pakhat le pakhat) an i hnam.
BT and PZ kissed (each other).

The subject of an intransitive verb may be focussed in a cleft sentence, but no analogous passives are possible. (13) and (14) are grammatical Lai sentences, but not (15) or (16). Here, even though a subject is focussed, the subordinating marker is not -tu but -mi.4
(13) Biak Thawng le Par Zing cu aa hnammi an si.
    BT and PZ were (the ones) who kissed.

(14) Aa hnammi cu Biak Thawng le Par Zing an si.
    The ones who kissed were BT and PZ.
    It was BT and PZ who kissed.

(15) *Biak Thawng le Par Zing cu hnam an si.

(16) *Hnam cu Biak Thawng le Par Zing an si.

In a cleft sentence, the two verbs may be negated independently, with the same difference in meaning as in English; in a passive sentence negation may appear only with the finite verb si. (18) is a grammatical Lai sentence, but (20) is not.

(17) Par Zing cu Biak Thawng nih a hnamhmi cu a si lo.
    PZ was not (the one) who BT kissed.

(18) Par Zing cu Biak Thawng nih a hnamh lomi a si.
    PZ was (the one) who BT didn’t kiss.

(19) Par Zing cu Biak Thawng nih hnamh a si lo.
    PZ was not kissed by BT.

(20) *Par Zing cu Biak Thawng nih hnamh lo a si.

We propose syntactic structures like (ii) and (iii) for sentences (2) and (3), in order to account for the contrasts observed in examples (4) through (20).

(ii)

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       XP
        △
       NPi    X'

       △
      PZ cu    VP

       △
      NP    VP

       △
     BT nih    NPi

     hnamh
     e
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In (iii), the index \( i \) represents the coreference between the phrase Biak Thawng nih a hnamhmi and the (empty) object of hnamh; this is a typical relative clause construction, with an empty head noun position. The structure of (4) is identical except that this position is filled by the noun ngaknu. The phrase Par Zing cu is the subject of the entire sentence, while the phrase Biak Thawng nih is the subject of the relative clause. In (ii), on the other hand, the phrase Biak Thawng nih hnamh is not a referring phrase (NP) at all, and has no head noun position. Par Zing cu is the subject of this sentence also, but Biak Thawng nih is not a syntactic subject, though semantically it has the same relation to hnamh in both (2) and (3). In (iii) -mi is analyzed as a complementizer syntactically parallel to English that, which can appear in place of the relative pronoun who in the English glosses for the Lai examples.

\(3'\) Par Zing was the one that Biak Thawng kissed.

There is no doubt a historical relation between this -mi and the noun mi 'person, human being' but sentences like (4) show that the two are distinct; the complementizer -mi is used whether or not the reference of the phrase it heads is human.

In sentences like (3) and (4), si is the Lai copula, just as