NEGATION IN LAI

George Bedell
International Christian University

<gdbedell@yahoo.com>

In this discussion, we want to determine the syntactic position of the Lai[1] negative particles *lo* and *hlah*. In English, the negative particle *not* follows the finite verb.

(1)   *We do not know.* (21:27)
(2)   *I do not know you.* (25:12)[2]

In sentences like these, the finite verb is *do*, an auxiliary with no obvious meaning; if *not* is removed, this auxiliary disappears, and the verb following *not* becomes the finite verb.[3]

(3)   *we know*
(4)   *I know you*

In the corresponding yes/no questions, the finite verb appears preceding the subject; in this case *do* remains even if *not* is removed.

(5)   *do we not know?*
(6)   *do we know?*
(7)   *do I not know you?*
(8)   *do I know you?*

If the finite verb is *be* or *have*, or if it is a modal auxiliary such as *will*, then the removal of *not* has no further effect on the sentence.

(9)   *He is not here;* (28: 6)
(10)   *you will not see me again,* (23:39)
(11)   *he is here*
(12)   *you will see me again*

---

[1] Lai is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Chin(-Naga) group, spoken primarily in Central Chin State, Myanmar.

[2] The examples accompanied by chapter and verse citations are taken from the text of the Gospel according to Matthew, in the Revised Standard Version for English and *Lai Baibal Thiang* (1978) for Lai.

[3] English has a more colloquial style in which negation appears as a suffix *-n't* on the finite verb:
(1')   *we don't know*
(2')   *I don't know you*
(9')   *he isn't here*
(10')   *you won't see me again*
This style is generally avoided in the RSV. The arguments in this paper are preserved in both styles of English negation.
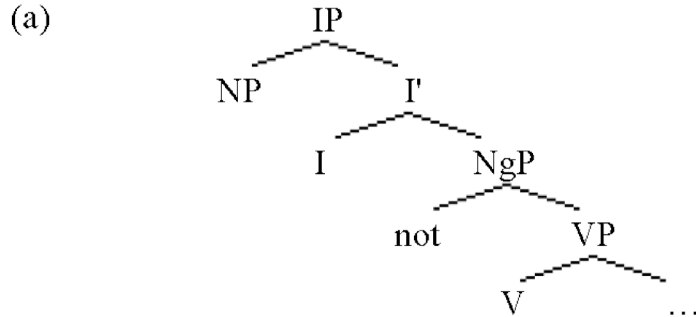
(13)   *is he not here?*
(14)   *is he here?*
(15)   *will you not see me again?*
(16)   *will you see me again?*

These facts concerning the English negative particle *not* lead to the conclusion that the syntactic structure of an English negative sentence is as in (a).

(a)

```
                     IP
                  ╱      ╲
              NP           I'
                        ╱      ╲
                      I         NgP
                            ╱        ╲
                          not         VP
                                    ╱     ╲
                                  V         …
```

The position of the finite verb is labelled I, an abbreviation of 'inflection'. In sentences like (1) and (2), the verb *know* appears in the V position. The English suffixes *-s*, marking agreement in the present tense with a third person singular subject, and *-d*, marking the past tense, originate in I; if they are adjacent to the V position, as in (3) or (4), then they appear as inflections of the verb: *knows* or *knew*; but if the sentence is negative or a yes/no question this is blocked and *do* appears to support the suffix. Examples like (1) and (2) show that there is a similar inflection in the other forms of the present tense, which has no phonological shape. *Be* and *have* may appear either in I or in V, but they take priority over *do* in the I position. Modals like *will* appear only in I, and they do not co-occur with the inflectional suffixes. *Not* appears in the Ng position, as head of NgP (negative phrase).

Sentences (17) and (18) are Lai versions of English (1) and (2). Lai is a head-final language as opposed to head-initial English, and the word order of Lai is generally the mirror image of that in English. One exception is the subject, which precedes the finite verb in both languages.

(17)   *Kan hngal lo,* (21:27)
(18)   *Kan hngal hrimhrim hna lo,* (25:12)

The Lai negative particle *lo* is typically located at the end of a clause, following the finite verb. No verb in the same clause can follow it. Various particles can come between the finite verb and *lo*. In (17) the finite verb is *kan hngal* 'we know', directly followed by *lo*. In (18), the verb is followed by the adverbial *hrimhrim* 'certainly' and *hna*, the object plural marker, which both precede *lo*. If *lo* is removed, these examples appear as (19) and (20).

(19)   *kan hngalh*
(20)   *kan hngalh hrimhrim hna*

The form of the verb *hngal* 'know' changes to *hngalh*; this change however has nothing to

do with the finiteness of the verb.[4] In (17) as well as (19), *kan* is the first person plural subject agreement marker attached either to *hngal* or to *hngalh*. In (18) as well as (20), *kan* is a combination of the first person singular subject agreement marker *ka* with the second person object agreement marker *in*; *hna* after the verb indicates that the second person object is plural, and really is part of the finite verb.[5] In neither example is the subject or object overtly present.

The Lai sentences (21) and (22) are likewise versions of English (9) and (10).

(21)   *Amah cu hika ah hin a um ti lo,* (28: 6)
(22)   *na ka hmu hrimhrim ti lai lo,* (23:39)

Lai does not treat the verb *um* 'be (location or existence)' in (21) differently from any other verb, and its future particle *lai* 'will' in (22) follows the finite verb but precedes the negative particle *lo*. Another adverbial particle illustrated in both sentences is *ti* 'any longer'. *Amah cu* 'he/she' in (21) is an overt subject preceding the finite verb, which might be omitted. It is paired with *a*, the third person singular subject agreement particle, part of the finite verb *a um* 'he is'. In (22) *na* marks agreement with a second person singular subject and *ka* with a first person singular object. If *lo* is removed from (21) or (22), the result will be as in (23) or (24).

(23)   *hika ah hin a um*
(24)   *na ka hmuh hrimhrim lai*

The verb *um* in (21) and (23) does not show variation depending on the presence of *lo*, but in (22) and (24), there is variation between *hmu* and *hmuh* 'see' parallel to that seen in (15) and (16) versus (17) and (18). There is no difference in the Lai verb in yes/no questions either, as shown in (25) to (28) corresponding to English (5), (6), (13) and (14). The Lai yes/no question particle *maw* follows the negative *lo*.

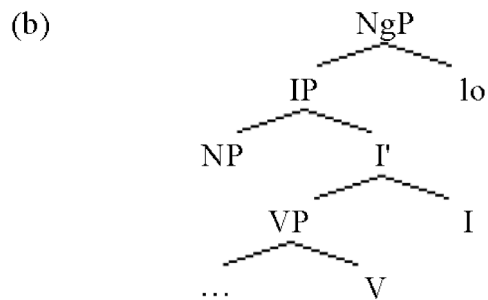(25)   *kan hngal lo maw?*
(26)   *kan hngal maw?*
(27)   *hika ah a um lo maw?*
(28)   *hika ah a um maw?*

These facts lead to the conclusion that the syntactic position of *lo* in a Lai sentence is different from that of *not* in an English sentence, as can be seen by comparing (b) with (a) above.
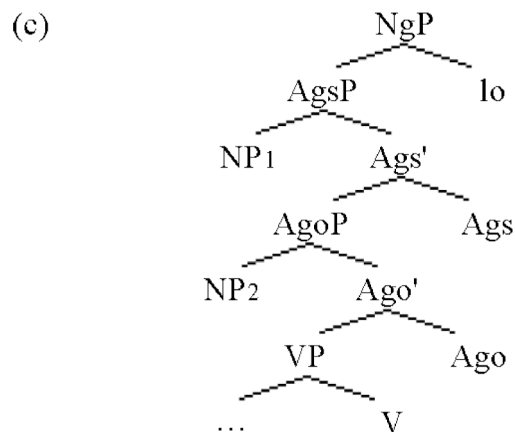
---

[4] In the literature about this stem variation, *hngal* is called the 'stem I form' and *hngalh* the 'stem II form'. In Lai , stem II appears if the sentence is transitive and affirmative, stem I if it is transitive and negative. For a general discussion, see Kathol and Vanbik (1999).

[5] See Bedell (1995) for a discussion of the agreement system of Lai.

(b)

```
                        NgP
                      /      \
                    IP         lo
                  /    \
               NP        I'
                       /    \
                     VP        I
                   /    \
                 …        V
```

In English, *not* is located beneath IP and above VP, thus accounting for its typical position within the sentence, following the finite verb. In Lai, *lo* is located above IP, thus accounting for its typical position at the end of the sentence, following the finite verb. The location of *not* in English, together with the inversion of the subject and finite verb in yes/no questions, provides crucial evidence that the I and V positions are distinct. In Lai, where negation (*lo*) does not intervene between I and V, and in which a yes/no question is marked by a particle (*maw*) rather than by inversion, negative sentences and yes/no questions do not offer evidence in favor of a distinction between I and V.

Nevertheless, the subject agreement particles of Lai (*ka*, *na*, *a*, and *kan* illustrated in (16), (22), (21) and (15)) constitute a kind of inflection, and we will assume that they behave syntactically like the English inflectional suffixes; that is, they belong to a category like I located above VP and below NgP. In Lai tense is distinct from subject agreement, so that this category might be labeled Ags rather than I. Since Lai has object agreement in addition to subject agreement we assume further that object agreement (*ka* in (22) and *-n ... hna* in (21)) belong to a distinct category Ago, located above VP but below subject agreement. That is, a more complete Lai structure will be as in (c).

(c)

```
                        NgP
                      /      \
                  AgsP          lo
                 /     \
             NP1        Ags'
                      /     \
                  AgoP        Ags
                /      \
           NP2          Ago'
                      /     \
                   VP         Ago
                 /    \
               …        V
```

Here NP1 is the subject position and NP2 the object position. In English the finite verb is composed of V with an I suffix; in Lai the finite verb is composed of V with particles both preceding and following.

In addition to its basic sentence negative particle *not*, English has a number of other types of words which incorporate negation. For example, it has negative pronouns like *no one* or *nothing*, which occur in the same syntactic positions as other pronouns.