AN INCHOATIVE CONJUNCTION IN HMONG:
EXTRA-SENTENTIAL TOPIC MARKER?

Marybeth Clark

0. INTRODUCTION

The White Hmong (Miao) of Laos\(^1\) has an intransitive verb to directional motion, los \(10\)\(^{11}\) meaning 'to come, return (in a homing sense)'. There is another los, probably derived from the intransitive verb, which occurs with a preceding sentence and a following sentence. Previously (Clark 1985 & 1982:9-11) I claimed that this los was another verb synchronically derived from the intransitive verb, was an inchoative verb meaning 'become, (and/or) happen that', and occurred in the structure S1_____[ S2 ], in which S2 was subordinate to the verb los. After further thought and investigation into the semantic and structural characteristics of this los, I have concluded that I was mistaken in the claim that it was a verb. I now believe it is a derived inchoative probably coordinate conjunction with the approximate meaning '(and) then/so, thus, therefore, yet, and it happens, and it turns out, with the result.' The sentence in 0.1 illustrates the use of the intransitive verb los and one use of inchoative conjunction los.

0.1  
\[ \text{Peb los txog tim no los tsis muaj cov Hmoob nyob ntauwm no}^2 \]

\(\text{we V : come to across this C : & then not have group Hmong stay place at this} \)
\(\text{We've come over here and there aren't any Hmong living here.} \)
\(\text{Los occurs as an interclausal conjunction in three patterns:} \)
\(\text{S1____S2, in which neither S is subordinate but the two propositions are semantically related by} \)
\(\text{los (e.g. 0.1);} \)
\(\text{S1____S2 = V [ +stative ], in which los introduces a stative verb which refers to the event of S1;} \)
\(\text{[ S1]____S2, in which the head (nuclear verb) of S1 is subordinate to the head of S2, S1 stating} \)
\(\text{a condition for the event of S2.} \)

In all these structures los has an inchoative function with respect to S2. By "inchoative function" is meant an indication of the commencement of actual or perceptual change, including such concepts as realization and consequence.

**English:**

- be - come
come off
go bad/off (of food)
go missing

**English-based pidgins:**

- vi - khadit (prefix out - go)

**Russian:**

- ho - jăna (be/become - go)

**Hindi:**

- tr'ă - thănn (return - become)

**Vietnamese:**

- thành - ra (become - go out)
- hòa - ra (become - go out)

- to become
to happen (successfully)
to become spoiled
to become missing, disappear
to become
to go out; appear, come out as
to become
to become, turn into
to become, eventualize
to change, to

The speculation that intersentential los is derived from the verb 'to come, return' is the fact of a common association of directional locomotion verbs such as 'come' and 'go' with inchoation. A few examples from other languages make the point:
However, the speculation regarding derivation is not central to the paper and will not be discussed further.

I will discuss these three patterns and give the reasons for believing intersetential los to be an inchoative conjunction which is more closely associated with the second sentence but appears to be a coordinating conjunction not a subordinating conjunction. Then I will illustrate the use of conjunction los as a topic marker for NP's and, finally, suggest the possibility that conjunction los marks topicalized or given clauses, the first sentence being the given clause.

1. **S1 and then happen S2**

Following are some examples of los occurring as a conjunction between two sentences. In coordinated sentences such as those in 0.1 and the examples in this section, both sentences are grammatically independent sentences. However, the sentence following los relies on the proposition of the sentence preceding los for its full import; i.e., the proposition of the second sentence follows from the proposition of the first sentence, expressing sometimes consequence (1.1-4) and sometimes a situation contrary to expectation (1.5-7).

1.1 Peb nyob deb deb neb lawm los peb nco txog neb kawg li. we stay far far you2 already THEN we remember to you2 much so

We're living very far from you so we miss you very much.

1.2 Wb muab tso rau koj muag los wb yeej tso siab lawm. we2 take put to you sell THEN we2 willing at ease already

We gave it to you to sell so/and we're happy (whatever you do).

1.3 Neb muab txia lawm tsib duas los tsis uac kas kav liam. you2 take cut already five dollar THEN not do how so be it

You're going to take out $5, well, it's no problem.

1.4 Meslis, kuv tsis paub sau ntawv Askiv, kuv sau tsis yog,

Mary I not know write paper English I write not (be)so

I los thov koj zam txim rau kuv kuv thiab. THEN request you yield pardon to I also

Mary, I don't know how to write in English so I make mistakes, so I ask you to please excuse me.

In 1.5-1.8, S2 contains anaphoric reference in the form of zero anaphora ([ø]) to one of the NP's in the first sentence. The sentences in 1.6 and 1.7 are from folk tales (Vang & Lewis 1984: 20 & 16).

1.5 Nws ua paj-ntaub los tsis muaj chaw muag Ø lawm. 3P do stitchery THEN not have place sell already

She does needlework and but there’s no place to sell it.

1.6 Nws xav coj mus puab rau luag lwv tus, los Ø pub tsis tau li. 3P want take go give to others next person THEN give not able so

She wanted to give away her wealth to other people, but she couldn't.

1.7 Nws tau tsaus-ntuaj los Ø tsaus ntev heev. 3P get dark sky THEN dark long time very

When it was night, it was night for a very long time.

Nws tau kaj -ntug los Ø kaj ntev heev. 3P get light sky THEN light long time very

When it was day, it was daytime for a very long time.

(Lit.: It became dark then it was dark... )
Of course it is common for both sentences to have anaphoric reference to preceding discourse, as in 1.8.

1.8 Koj xa Ø tuaj rau peb los peb txais tau Ø lawm nawb.

You send hither to we THEN we receive already sure

You sent it to us and we received it already.

In all the sentences 1.1 - 8 los seems clearly to be a conjunction conjoining two independent but associated sentences. The earlier argument for los being a verb was based on its inchoative nature and the parallel with existential verbs such as yog ‘be’ and muaj ‘have’ which may take embedded sentences instead of NP arguments.

Given that inchoation means commencement of change, including consequence, and if one accepts that conjunctions may also serve an inchoative function, the first argument for verbs is invalid. The sentences in 1.9 - 1.11 have English conjunctions which serve an inchoative function. Note that the and in the second sentence in 1.9 represents simple coordination not inchoation, and that both the second and third sentences in 1.9 are different semantically as well as grammatically from the first sentence. (This shows that there are at least two and’s in English, one for coordination only and one to express realization. See Stubbs 1983: 80 - 81 regarding the wide range of functions of and and other conjunctions common in conversational discourse.)

1.9 He came there and (it turned out/he found) she’d left already.
≠ He came there and she talked with him.
≠ When he came there, she’d left already.
1.10 My parents need some money so I’m going to send them some.
1.11 She’s going to Vientiane, therefore she’s studying Lao.

Probably most languages have such interclausal inchoative conjunctions.4 Here are examples in Vietnamese (1.12 - 13) and Thai (1.14), though the Thai sentence is a little unusual.5 Compare the Vietnamese sentence in 1.13 with the Hmong one in 1.5; the Vietnamese conjunction has approximately the meaning “and on the contrary, on the other hand” and is derived from the Vietnamese verb ‘to come’.

1.12 Một ngày sau tôi đến đó thì cô đã bỏ đi rồi.

one day after I reach there then Miss Past leave go already

The day after I came there and she had left already.

1.13 Chị ấy làm đồ thểu lại không có chỗ bán.
sister that do thing embroidery however not have place sell

She does embroidery but/and yet there’s no place to sell it.

1.14 Khâu thêu pha léw kô phụ-kháa may ráp.

3P weave cloth already and then merchant not receive

They did the weaving and/but the merchants didn’t buy it.

As for interclausal los being an existential verb, it must be admitted that this los may not be negated or questioned and may not take aspectual adverbs. Note the negation of existential yog in 1.4 above (with topicalized embedded sentence) and in 1.15 and the negation and questioning of existential muaj in 1.16 and 1.17. The sentences in 1.18 and 1.19, taken from 1.1 and 0.1 respectively, illustrate that tsis los ‘not happen’ and puas los ‘does it happen?’ are ungrammatical for interclausal los.

1.15 Wb hais lus Askiv tsis yog hais lus Hmoob.

we2 speak word English not be speak word Hmong

We spoke in English not (be the case that we spoke) in Hmong.
1.16 Tsis muaj leej twg noj kiaj.
not have person which eat at all
There isn’t anyone eating them.

1.17 Puas muaj leej twg noj lawm?
whether have person whichever eat already
Is there anyone (else) who wants to eat?

1.18 *Peb nyob debdeb neb lawm tsis los peb noo txog neb.
We’re living very far from you & it doesn’t happen that we miss you.

1.19 *Peb los txog tim no puas los tsis muaj cov Hmoob nyob ntawm no?
We’ve come over here & is it that there are no Hmong living here?

There seems to be no real justification for claiming that interclausal los is a verb. However, the question of subordination remains. Is los a subordinating conjunction?

Both sentences in the conjoined sentences of 1.1 - 1.8 are grammatical sentences and may therefore be considered to involve coordination rather than subordination. However, los is entirely associated with the second sentence and, as mentioned before, the second sentence depends on the proposition of the first sentence to be properly interpreted, i.e., it is pragmatically dependent on S1. Foley and Van Valin (1984 : 256ff.) and Olson (1981) have given the term cosubordination to clause linkages that do not involve embedding but are not altogether independent. It may be that the los sentences might be termed as one class of cosubordination in which the second sentence is loosely dependent in terms of syntax and more tightly dependent semantically on the first sentence.

Such a linkage is mediated by los and its properties are formulated in the lexical matrix of los.

The approach of some kind of dependence being involved seems even more appropriate when one examines the sentences in the following section.

2. S1 WITH THE RESULT S2
( = STATIVE )

The second “sentence” in this pattern is a sentence only in that it is a verb with optional verb modifiers, and in Hmong a Vp with no accompanying arguments may form a full sentence, especially in discourse. However, in these constructions the stative verb phrase is dependent on S1, being a tag comment on the proposition in S1 in that it is a description of state regarding that proposition or some element in it. Here los at once conjoins the stative sentence to S1 and separates it from S1, making explicit that the stative comment is not an integral part of S1.

2.1 Nws ua pajntaub qab qwj txiav los zoo nkauj.
3P do stickery snailshell cut THEN beautiful
She does snailshell applique and it’s beautiful.

2.2 Muaj luag tus muab lawm los puam chawj.
have others person take already THEN so be it
Somebody took it, well so too bad - that’s the way it is.

2.3 Neb tau muag wb cov pajntaub poob lawm los zoo kawg.
you2 get sell we2 group stickery gone already THEN good very
You sold our pieces of needlework already, well that’s very good.

The Vietnamese copula-like conjunction in 1.12 above can be used in the same way:

2.4 Chi ấy cung di voi chung toi thi vui lâm.
sister that also go with we(Exc) then happy very
She went with us too so it was a lot of fun.