Conjunctions as topicalizers
More on Southeast Asian languages

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0. Introduction

Ideas in Mainland Southeast Asia tend to be expressed in seemingly coordinate or sequential units, in a linear fashion rather than in clause-within-clause constructions. These units often occur serially, unmarked by subordinating prepositions or nouns or by conjunctions. Therefore, when conjunctions are used, they signal the likelihood that the speaker wishes to make some point about the relationship between the clauses or phrases involved with that conjunction. One type of conjunction is particularly interesting in that its meaning is nonrestrictive and inexplicit about the relationship being expressed. It is that type of conjunction that I will discuss here, specifically one conjunction in Vietnamese but also similar conjunctions in Hmong and Black Tai. Whether the type of conjoined structures discussed here is one of the many Southeast Asia areal patterns, a typological feature, or a general language pattern is still a question. I would hypothesize at this point that it is the latter but perhaps with particular areal characteristics related to the overall configurations of speech in the area, especially the running linear pattern of sentences mentioned above.

The Vietnamese conjunction thi, the Hmong conjunction los, and the Black Tai conjunction kò all seem to have meanings something like 'well, (and) then, (and) so, and it happens that, and it turns out that'. They always imply some degree of contrast or comparison with an actual or implied antecedent. That is, these conjunctions must be looked at in a discourse context.

I will claim here that the discourse function of these conjunctions is a topicalizing function, a kind of topicalization
process in which the conjunction highlights a usually contrastive aspect of the background discourse as a given for new information. Since the information in this given may not necessarily be old information, agreement regarding givenness may occur at the time of utterance; that is, the highlighted, or topicalized, element is assumed by the speaker to be received by the audience as marked given background to what follows, what follows frequently being contrary to expectation. Thus, this kind of conjunction explicitly marks phrases and clauses as givens and, at the same time, it introduces the following predecession as a new development in the antecedent discourse event or state of affairs. I will tentatively refer to such conjunctions as developmental or inchoative conjunctions to suggest that the conjunction introduces a new development with respect to an element topicalized by the conjunction.3

Except for some object noun phrases, such highlighted phrases and clauses cannot properly be called topics in what is generally understood as marked sentence topic, but I believe this setting out of a given for the focus of new information can safely be called a topicalizing process (cf Haiman 1978 regarding conditional clauses as topics). It has been suggested by Fritz Lehmann (personal communication) that the new information introduced by the conjunction is marked by the conjunction as an antitopic.

In the following sections I will describe the types of grammatical structures generally found with these conjunctions and illustrate the use of the conjunctions in Vietnamese, White Hmong, and Black Tai utterances.

1. Structures with topicalizing conjunctions

A variety of structures can utilize these topicalizing conjunctions. In the three languages shown here the conjunction may be preceded by noun or preposition phrases or by clauses and is followed by the main predication or full proposition. The following chart gives the most common environments, where the topicalized constituents may be inner case relation noun phrases (case relations inherent in the verb) [1A,B,C], time and other outer phrases [2], clauses which possibly are nominalized [3], subordinate clauses [4], and
independent clauses [5]. Subject noun phrases and subordinate clauses predominate. Also given are approximate English examples to help elucidate the respective constructions. I will loosely translate these conjunctions as meaning 'then' in most cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Given</th>
<th>Conj</th>
<th>New Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[1A]</td>
<td>NOUN Phrase (SUBJECT)</td>
<td>Rice soup</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[1B]</td>
<td>NOUN Phrase (SUBJECT)</td>
<td>Rice soup</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[1C]</td>
<td>NOUN Phrase (NON-SBJ)</td>
<td>The rice soup</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[2]</td>
<td>TIME Phrase</td>
<td>At lunchtime</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[3]</td>
<td>CLAUSE</td>
<td>Giving her rice</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[4]</td>
<td>CLAUSE (SUBORDINATE)</td>
<td>If she won't eat</td>
<td>then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[5]</td>
<td>CLAUSE</td>
<td>She won't eat</td>
<td>well,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, the Vietnamese sentence in (1a) is an example of structure [1A]. The first sentence is stated background; the subject noun phrase of the second sentence, which is intended to be contrasted with the stated background, is topicalized by thi to highlight that contrast with respect to the new information in the predication. The Hmong sentence in (1b) has two independent clauses linked by conjunction los (structure [5]). The first clause is stated background which has been topicalized by los to highlight it with respect to the unexpectedness of the new development revealed in the second
clause. That is, the presence of los implies more for these two clauses than simple coordination.

(1) a Tôi không biết ông Hai làm gì.
Viet I not know Mr. Hai do what
Cô Ba thì sẽ soạn tết.
Miss Ba then prepare festival
'I don't know what Mr. Hai is doing.
As for Miss Ba, she is preparing the festival.'
[Dyvik 1984:16]

b Péb los txog tìm no
Hmg we come reaching place-across this
los tsis muaj cov Hmoob nyob ntawm
then not have group Hmong stay place-at
no.
this
'We've come over here and there aren't any Hmong
living here.'

2. Elucidation of structures

Sentences from the three languages, for each of the different structures listed above, are given below.4 Vietnamese thì is used in many styles of the language, both formal and informal, spoken and written, in 18th century classical poetry and old folktales and proverbs, in modern fiction and songs, and in contemporary written discussion. Data from all these sources have been used in this study. Hmong and Black Tai, for all practical purposes, have been recorded only since the middle of this century, but the two conjunctions discussed are widely used in contemporary times.

2.1. Topicalized noun phrases

Noun phrases, particularly subject NPs, set off by these conjunctions are very common in Vietnamese and Black Tai. Hmong conjunction los much more frequently topicalizes clauses than it does noun phrases.5 Sentence (1a) above and sentences (2)-(5) have topicalized subject noun phrases (in