FOUR-WORD PHRASES IN LAO DISCOURSE: yuu^{4} dii^{2} mii^{3} hɛɛŋ^{3}

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In his 1975 article, "Rhyme, Reduplication, etc. in Lao," G. Edward Roffe presented and discussed an extensive collection of polysyllabic phrases in Lao which may occur either in oral or written discourse. Using material from Roffe's article and some of his field notes, as well as material from my own field work, I focus on the types of four-word phrases that occur in the Lao data and discuss aspects of the patterns found in them. Such knowledge of four-word phrases and related patterns is seen as significant in developing a deeper understanding of Lao discourse and poetics.

1 Introduction

In this article I focus on four-word phrases in Lao in which each word in the phrase can function independently in some way, but when woven into a phrase produces a meaning which is different from or more intense than smaller sections of the phrase.[1] From my perspective, such four-word phrases are basic components of the discourse structure and poetics of many Tai languages, certainly so in Lao. These phrases occur with high frequency in oral language and are also found in written language. In Lao, they are found not only in everyday speech, written short stories, folk tales and epics, but also in newspapers and magazine articles. The modern short story writer and the traditional *mohlam* singer make use of these phrases because they are a basic part of the language. This weaving of words into four-word phrases is a process which is evident in most Tai languages; I believe all or nearly all of them use these phrases as intellectual building blocks, expressing old concepts with set four-word phrases and creating ways to reflect new ideas using the productive four-word phrases. Not only four-word, but five-word and six-word phrases fill similar positions in many of these languages. In this paper, I focus specifically on the four-word phrases.

2 Four-Word Phrases in Lao

For Lao, the first discussion of four-word phrases in the English literature appears to be in the 1975 article, "Rhyme, Reduplication, etc. in Lao," by G. Edward Roffe. In that article, he presented and discussed an extensive collection of polysyllabic phrases in Lao which may occur either in oral or written discourse

In his article, Roffe presented four major categories of four-word expressions: Fixed expressions, adaptation of foreign terms, reduplication, and rhyming. The fixed expressions he refers to show a "semantic relationship" of the individual words but do not involve reduplication or rhyme. The criteria for a phrase to be considered a "fixed expression" appear to be that the four words are frequently found in a specific order in a phrase with a general meaning related to the meanings of the individual words. An example of a fixed expression is:

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sap^{4}	sin^{1}	ŋən^{3}	thɔɔŋ^{3}
treasure	wealth	silver	gold

with the meaning given by Roffe as 'riches.'[2]

The adaptation of foreign terms is a rather small category and includes some repetition. An example of such an item is:

mii^{3} nit^{4} mii^{3} nat^{4} from the French 'minister'; the phrase means 'cabinet minister.'

Roffe's third category of four-word phrases, reduplication, is very common and has many variations. Such phrases may contain combinations which include nonsense syllables in part of the phrase or uncommonly used expressions. For Roffe, reduplication may be of exact words or similar sounds. This form has many productive patterns.

The fourth category, rhyming, is a pattern which is quite frequent and also very productive. Usually in this pattern, syllables two and three of the four-word phrase rhyme.

In his paper, Roffe notes that "the basic structure of these expressions is a polysyllabic phrase with an equal number of syllables on either side of an imaginary vertical dividing line" (285). In the data on which my paper is based, I have chosen to focus my attention on the four-word phrases.

3 The Data

In this section, I will present some of the patterns and examples of four-word phrases from field notes and connected discourse in Lao; these are from the beginning stages of my current project on indigenous aspects of Lao grammar. Eventually I hope to be able to tell more about the use, distribution and frequency of occurrence of four-word phrases in Lao. First, we will look primarily at some of the variations and similarities we find with the Lao patterns; then, we will discuss briefly similar patterns found in a few other Tai languages. Finally, we will comment on what appear to be similar patterns in Vietnamese, Khmer and Hmong.

Examples of four-word phrases from G. Edward Roffe's field notes were collected.[3] Hundreds of such phrases occur in his material. From a continuous section of 2,100 lexical entries, 100 items were four-word phrases. I limited the selection of phrases to those having only four words, and I have categorized them in a somewhat different manner that did Roffe. Of these 100 four-word phrases, I found that 70 had a repetition pattern, 22 had a rhyming pattern and 8 involved semantic linking. The 70 phrases involving repetition can be further divided into five types.

1. First of all, there are those phrases in which words 1 and 3 are exactly the same and words 2 and 4 share a **clear semantic** link. Of the 70, 34 phrases fell into this category. For example: *khii^{5} loŋ^{1} khii^{5} lɨɨm^{3}* 'absent-minded'.

2. Secondly, there are those phrases in which words 1 and 3 are exactly the same and 2 and 4 share a **vague semantic** link. Of the 70 phrases having repetition, 13 were of this type.

3. In this group, **repetition with compounds**, words 1 and 3 are again the same while 2 and 4 are words that are often used as a compound, but in the phrase are separated by the repeated words. There are 17 of these phrases.
4. In the next group, **repetition with opposites**, 1 and 3 are exactly the same, but 2 and 4 are opposites in meaning or opposed in meaning in some way. There are five such phrases.
5. Just one example was found of this final type of repetition, **double reduplication**. In this case words 1 and 2 are the same and represent one compound meaning 'different' while words 3 and 4 are the same and represent another compound meaning 'various.' Roffe glosses this phrase as 'all sorts of things.'

The following table illustrates the types of repetition found in the 100 entries from Roffe's field notes. In the first four types, words 1 and 3 are identical. In the fifth type, 1 and 2 are the same word and 3 and 4 are the same word.

Table 1: *Types of repetition in Lao four-word phrases*

1.	0	0	0	0	
	1	2*cs*	3	4*cs*	(where *cs* stands for *close semantic link*)
2.	0	0	0	0	
	1	2*vs*	3	4*vs*	(where *vs* stands for *vague semantic link*)
3.	0	0	0	0	
	1	2*c*	3	4c	(where *c* stands for an element of a *compound*)
4.	0	0	0	0	
	1	2*op*	3	4*op*	(where *op* stands for an *opposing* meaning)
5.	0	0	0	0	
	1	1*r*	2	2*r*	(where *r* stands for a *reduplicated* word)

In the next table, examples are presented of each type of repetition found among those hundred phrases. All of the examples in the table below are from Roffe's field data.

Table 2: *Examples of repetition in Lao four-word phrases*

1. Repetition with Close Semantic Link

thuun^{3}	hua^{1}	thuun^{3}	kaw^{6}	
lift up	head	lift up	head	'adore'
0	0	0	0	
1	2cs	3	4cs	(close semantic link)

2. Repetition with Vague Semantic Link

taam^{2}	mii^{3}	taam^{2}	kəət	
as	have	as	born	'according to one's means'
0	0	0	0	
1	2vs	3	4vs	(vague semantic link)

3. Repetition with a (Split) Compound

pen^{2}	thaa^{4}	pen^{2}	thaaŋ^{3}	
be	manner	be	way	'(in the) accepted manner'
0	0	0	0	
1	2c	3	4c	(elements of a compound)

thaa^{4} thaaŋ^{3} = 'manner, character'

4. Repetition with Opposites

kuay^{4}	hua^{1}	kuay^{4}	haaŋ^{1}	
put	head	put	tail	'alternate'
crosswise		crosswise		(head to feet, as lying down)
0	0	0	0	
1	2op	3	4op	(opposing elements)

5. Double Reduplication

taaŋ^{4} taaŋ^{4}		naa^{3} naa^{3}		
different		various		'all sorts of things'
0	0	0	0	
1	1r	2	2r	(r stands for a reduplicated word)

The following table illustrates the types of internal rhyme found in the four-word phrases from Roffe's data. As I noted earlier, 22 of the 100 four-word phrases in his data showed a rhyming pattern. In 19 of these phrases standard internal rhyme, in which words two and three rhyme, was found. Three phrases were found to have variant rhyme. In two of these phrases, words two and four rhymed; one phrase had rhymes between words one and three.

Table3: *Internal rhyme in Lao four-word phrases*

1. *Standard internal rhyme two-three rhyme*

0	0	0	0	
1	2*ry*	3*ry*	4	(*ry* stands for a *rhyming* word)
viak^{6}	baan^{6}	kaan^{2}	hɨan^{3}	
work	house; village	work	house	'domestic affairs'
thon^{3}	khom^{1}	ʔom^{2}	vaan^{1}	
endure	bitter	keep in mouth	sweet	'take the bitter with the sweet'