AREAL GRAMMATICALIZATION OF POSTVERBAL 'ACQUIRE' IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

N. J. Enfield
Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen

This paper addresses an intriguing problem in the synchrony and diachrony of mainland Southeast Asian languages, namely the widespread use of a verb meaning 'acquire' ('come to have') as a postverbal resultative and/or modal of 'potential' or 'achievement'. Some examples are Khmer baan, Thai dāaj, Vietnamese duọc, Hmong tau, among many others (see Matisoff 1991:418-427, Enfield 2001a, 2002). I have examined in detail the polyfunctionality of the Lao verb dâj 'acquire, come to have', and have established five distinct main meanings, summarized as follows (see Enfield 2002: Chapter 3 for details):

![Diagram of meanings]

Figure 1. Five meanings of the Lao polyfunctional item dâj.

This paper focusses on the three meanings which can appear in postverbal (or V2) position, and investigates the relationship between these, both in synchrony and diachrony:

![Diagram of three meanings]

Figure 2. Three postverbal meanings of Lao dâj.

My account for the Lao data follows a logic which, I argue, is valid for the many languages of mainland Southeast
Asia which also display this ‘acquire’/‘can’ pattern. Behind this areally consistent grammatical polyfunctionality is a complex process of semantic change. And a proper account must adopt as the basic unit of analysis not a metaphorical ‘entity’ called ‘the language’, but real utterances in real time, real usage events (Croft 2000, Iwasaki 2000). A genuine explanation of change requires a plausible and non-metaphorical view of the process, one which recognizes that living, breathing individuals participate directly in effecting the relevant changes, at ‘ground level’.

To describe and account for the development of post-verbal functions of the Lao verb dâj I follow a ‘semantic-pragmatic’ model of meaning change which puts Gricean inference at the heart of the process (Evans and Wilkins 2000, Enfield 2002; cf. Sweetser 1990, Wilkins 1996). First, it is necessary to assume a clear distinction between semantics (‘encoded’, ‘non-defeasible’) and pragmatics (‘inferred’, ‘defeasible’). Fixed meanings of linguistic signs are enriched by pragmatic interpretation, involving inferences based on contextual and background information (Grice 1975, Levinson 2000). Semantic change begins when speakers’ use of a word x (meaning ‘x’) starts to give rise regularly to a pragmatically enriched interpretation ‘y’. Then ‘bridging contexts’ emerge—these are contexts in which an interpretation of x as merely implicating ‘y’ (on the basis of ‘x’) or as actually meaning ‘y’ (as distinct from ‘x’) become functionally equivalent, neutralizing any communicative consequences of two speakers’ differing in their interpretation of the respective contribution of encoded semantic content and contingent pragmatic enrichment (Evans and Wilkins 2000:550). Eventually, speakers regard the erstwhile enriched interpretation as a fixed and context-independent meaning, with the result that x becomes polysemous, and people use it with distinct meanings ‘x’ and ‘y’. Then the earlier meaning ‘x’ is free, over time, to fade away or to persist in its own right.

I assume that the original ‘source’ meaning of the range of modern meanings of Lao dâj (and the corresponding element in other languages investigated) is ‘come to have’ (otherwise glossed as ‘acquire’, ‘obtain’, ‘get’). The basic argu-
ment is that speakers’ use of a verb dâj ‘come to have’ in V2 resultative position has provided the context for an implicature ‘succeed’, which eventually no longer requires contextual support and becomes a distinct meaning for dâj; next, speakers’ use of dâj ‘succeed’ in V2 position gives rise in certain contexts to an implicature ‘can’, which eventually no longer requires contextual support, leading to ‘can’ as a distinct meaning for postverbal dâj. To date, neither the ‘come to have’ nor the ‘succeed’ meanings for dâj have disappeared from the language, which means that three distinct meanings for V2 dâj now co-exist (with the ‘come to have’ and ‘succeed’ meanings also available as main verbs):

![Diagram](image)

Figure 3. From V2 ‘come to have’ to ‘succeed’ to ‘can’

A key role in this chain of events is played by a feature of resultative constructions in the languages of mainland Southeast Asia, namely an ambiguity between ‘realis’ and ‘potential’ readings of V1-V2 resultative expressions. I argue that the languages of mainland Southeast Asia have been collectively ‘poised’, in terms of their typological structure, to realize the same process of semantic and grammatical change.

This paper is structured as follows. In section 1, I concentrate on Lao dâj, establishing the distinct meanings it has in postverbal position and then providing arguments for how the proposed developments could have occurred. In section 2, I provide data from four other languages of mainland Southeast Asia, related to Lao not genetically but areally—Khmer, Kmhmu Cwang, Hmong, and Vietnamese—and show that the same arguments can be used with respect to those languages also. I then provide supporting evidence of a different kind with data from Pacoh, a Mon-Khmer language of Laos and Vietnam which has not developed a ‘can’ meaning for the ‘ac-
quire’ word. The paper concludes with some remarks on the nature of language change and its appropriate mode of description, as well as the role of a language’s ‘typological poise’ in facilitating certain changes.

1. Case study: Postverbal functions of Lao dâj

1.1 In synchrony: three meanings of postverbal dâj

Postverbal dâj can have three distinct meanings, the first two of which are not inherently postverbal, but are main verbs appearing in V2 slot of a V1-V2 resultative construction.

First, dâj may mean ‘come to have (something)’ (or more precisely, if ‘x dâj y’, then ‘something happens, and because of this x has y’):³

(1)  tēe  bō  dâj  ngôn
Laō  but  neg  come.to.have  money
‘But (we) didn’t get any money (for the work).’ (268.11)

The second relevant main verb meaning of dâj is ‘succeed’ (or more precisely, if ‘x dâj’, then ‘p happens, because x did something wanting p to happen’). This ‘succeed, prevail’ meaning for intransitive dâj is interpreted as ‘win’ in sporting contexts. In the following example, the speaker is discussing a Lao word phēe, which means ‘defeat, be victorious’, but which in neighbouring Thai, and increasingly in young people’s Lao, means ‘lose, be defeated’, leading to a confusion often remarked upon by Lao speakers. In clarifying the meaning of phēe intended in the context (i.e. ‘win’, ‘be victorious’), the speaker uses intransitive dâj as a gloss:

(2)  khān  phēe  han  sīa  —  sanā’  cang
Laō  if  “phēe”  tpc.pcl  be.lost  “sanā”  thus
mēen  dâj
be  succeed
‘(In Thai) if (you say) “phēe”, that’s ‘to lose’—“sanā” is ‘to win’. ’ (84.1)