KEEPPING THINGS UP FRONT:  
ASPECTS OF INFORMATION PROCESSING  
IN MAL DISCOURSE STRUCTURE

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0. Introduction
Mal is a Mon-Khmer language spoken in Pua and Chiang Klang Districts of Nan Province, Thailand. It is also one of the many dialects spoken by the Tin tribal people who are located in this part of Thailand and across the border into Laos (Filbeck 1978). The number of Mal speakers probably does not exceed 6-7000 people but an accurate census is not available since the Thai government includes all Tin people, regardless of dialect, in a single census.

The purpose of this paper is to describe discourse-level phenomena found in the Mal language. Related phenomena occur in other Tin dialects, but it appears that only in Mal are they so extensively used. Since Mal is the most conservative of the Tin dialects, retaining more of Proto-Tin than other dialects (Filbeck 1978), we may presume that these phenomena were part of Proto-Tin as well. However, there is internal evidence showing that at least some of these discourse features are developments unique to Mal. For example, the emergence of a rising tone in Mal (Filbeck 1972) has evidently been used to signal at least one discourse feature in Mal. (See discussion in 3. below.)

The particular viewpoint taken here in describing these aspects of Mal discourse structure is information processing within a discourse. As a descriptive approach to language, information processing differs from the more traditional linguistic approach. The latter views language as composed of different hierarchies or systems, e.g. phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and discourse, each of which is then described as a more or less autonomous part, and when all the hierarchies or systems have been described separately for a particular language, the task of the linguist is considered to be complete.

While this 'divide and conquer' approach has been productive, it has also had its costs. Logically such hierarchies or systems appear to exist, and in the way that linguists say they exist. However, in terms of process, not everything that linguists claim to exist—or to exist in the way that they claim—plays a part in the main function of language, viz. communicating or transmitting meaning. Not everything is needed or used to process, i.e.

1. At this stage, information processing should not be confused with information theory. The latter is basically a form of statistical theory dealing with the number of alternatives available in a code and the results of choosing one such alternative. On the other hand, as will be seen in various parts of the following discussion, information processing does use a number of insights drawn from the more statistically oriented information theory.
encode and decode/interpret, meaning by means of language. At least, not everything is used at all times. In short, processing in language follows its own 'rules' which, though drawing upon the traditional categories of linguistics, describe language from a different perspective and with different goals in mind.

Information processing—viewed here in perhaps a narrower sense than that which is found in the literature—is a specialised part of the encoding/decoding aspect of language. On the one hand, there is content that is encoded in a text, whether written or oral, for transmission and decoding. Yet, content is not just encoded and decoded; it is also 'processed' in various ways by means of linguistic structure—more precisely, the categories used in linguistic description. The linguistic structure of a language, therefore, plays a 'mediating role' in the encoding, transmitting, and decoding, of meaning. In this view of linguistic structure, processing may be considered a part of the total semantic structure of language, or, to state it another way, meaning as transmitted by language is composed of content plus processing.²

Content is processed in two ways. First, it is distributed or mapped linearly along a syntactic code. For example, content may be 'tightly packed' into a few sentences (as a technical exposition), or it may be distributed over many sentences (as in popular exposition). Second, content may be processed globally as theme, prominence, topic, focus, old and new information, etc., in the course of a text or discourse. In either way, what is processed is additional information 'about' the content that is similarly encoded in the code. Moreover, just as the speaker processes content for additional information while encoding content, so the hearer processes the incoming code for both content and information in the act of decoding. That is, the hearer (or reader of a text) comes to certain judgements about the content he or she has received on the basis of the code, thus providing (additional) information 'about' the content.

For Mal, this paper discusses information processing in this second way only. More specifically, Mal employs various linguistic means to signal and/or differentiate – i.e. process – various types of information flowing globally through discourse. As will be seen in the following discussion, such processing forms a crucial dimension of the Mal language. A description of such, then, is necessary for a full linguistic description of Mal. Moreover, as a by-product, it is hoped that this paper will make a contribution to describing the nature of discourse phenomena in Mon-Khmer in general.³

Data for this paper are taken from both recorded texts that I have collected and from the recently completed translation of St. Mark's

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2. Or, in terms of information theory: content, plus information about content, constitutes the message of a text.

3. Some speak also of a pragmatic level of information processing (qv. Smith & Wilson 1979), where information is processed according to shared knowledge, assumptions, or beliefs, but not necessarily according to the characteristic of the linguistic code itself. This pragmatic aspect of information processing is also not discussed in this paper.
Gospel into Mal. Examples will also be taken from the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis, which is currently being translated into Mal. Illustrations from the latter two sources are especially revealing in that they show how productive discourse-level phenomena are in Mal. Greek, English and Thai obviously do not have the same type of formal means for dealing with such phenomena. Consequently, it was fascinating to observe the translator (translating from Thai into Mal in this case) determine from the context how best to structure the text formally according to Mal discourse structure.

1. A discourse characteristic
For this paper, a deductive approach, i.e. from the ‘top down’, to informational processing in Mal is assumed. That is, we begin by observing a general characteristic—a ‘flavour’—typical of Mal discourse, whether interpersonal communication or story-telling. When we have established what this discourse characteristic is, we will then illustrate how it is realised formally or linguistically in discourse.

In analysing the following data we can observe a general ‘theme’ operating throughout the discourse structure of Mal, namely, the theme of inclusivity vs. exclusivity, or ‘this/that-including-others’ vs. ‘this/that-excluding-others’. Of course, inclusivity dominates discourse activity in Mal; on the other hand, exclusivity can be forcefully and unambiguously marked with formal linguistic mechanisms. That it is so marked quite often gives Mal discourse a distinct character.

In this regard, then, we may classify exclusivity as the ‘marked’ process and inclusivity as the ‘unmarked’ process. Also, a text may be ‘more or less’ highly marked according to the number of marked processes it contains. Moreover, when considering the Mal language from a discourse perspective, we can observe that Mal is a comparatively ‘highly marked’, i.e. more complex, language with respect to the inclusive/exclusive processing of information. For, characteristically, this distinction is a real option in everyday speech, and it is an alternative that is chosen often enough in interpersonal communication as well as in other forms of discourse.

The communicative function of this inclusive/exclusive dichotomy in Mal is, as the title of this paper suggests to ‘keep things up front’, i.e. to keep track in a formal way of what is and is not important during the flow of discourse. It is a formal way of processing information, both for the speaker and hearer, in communication, whereby a piece of content is ‘kept up front’, or made prominent, in discourse. Conversely other pieces of content are ‘shuttled’ to the background but, should any of these need to be made prominent, it is possible to do so by ‘bringing it up front’, as it were, by formal linguistic means.

2. Pronouns: ‘we vs. they’
The dichotomy between inclusivity and exclusivity in Mal discourse is nowhere better observed than in the pronouns, which form a well-

163
developed system of exclusive–inclusive relations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Dual</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ən/ 'I'</td>
<td>/ia/ 'we (excl.)'</td>
<td>/ii/ 'we (excl.)'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/mah/ 'you'</td>
<td>/aa/ 'we (incl.)'</td>
<td>/ee/ 'we (incl.)'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/nam/ 'he, she'</td>
<td>/paa/ 'you'</td>
<td>/pee/ 'you'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>/paam/ 'they'</td>
<td>/ah/ 'they'</td>
</tr>
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The unmarked pronouns include the singular pronouns ('I, you, he, she') and the inclusive plural. These are used the most often in conversation and in recorded texts, while the marked pronouns—the duals and exclusives—occur more rarely in those environments. Indeed, the marked pronouns in Mal occur not just in one degree of markedness but two: marked and highly marked.

The marked pronouns are the dual and/or exclusive plurals, e.g. /ia/ 'we (dual excl.)', /paa/ 'you (dual)', /paam/ 'they (dual)' and /ii/ 'we (pl. excl.)'. These occur often enough in conversation and in texts to lend a flavour of exclusivity to Mal communication.

Only /aa/ 'we (dual incl.)' is a highly marked pronoun. It is classified here as an inclusive dual pronoun while /ia/ is classified as its exclusive counterpart. The reason for this is that /ia/ is used in third-party conversation where the listener is not included, i.e. is 'excluded' from the dual grouping. For example, in a recent conversation two young boys requested leave to go somewhere. One of the boys, who was the spokesman, used the pronoun /ia/ to include himself and the other boy while at the same time excluding me as the listener in the request. By contrast, the other pronoun, /aa/ 'we (dual incl.)', is used to include each partner of the dyad in the conversation. Consequently it is rarely used, being limited to conversations between two people who are alone together.

In the Mal story 'The Magic Trail' (which we shall refer to again in this paper), a husband and wife set out alone to seek a fortune. In the version I have recorded, the narrator relates the story using a great number of direct quotes, especially when the husband speaks to the wife. Since the couple are poor and own no livestock, they are seeking in the forest for animals which can be taken back and raised as domesticated stock in the village. One of the first creatures they find is a wild boar, at which the husband exclaims to his wife:

    oo, a₂ haₜ ac!

Oh, we-two are-rich already

He then instructs her to take the boar back to the village and pen it up. Whenever a different forest animal is found, the husband makes the same exclamation in addressing his wife, each time using the pronoun /aa/. The other dual pronoun, /ia/, is not the correct pronoun here as there is no third person whom the husband is addressing. Presumably, on