PRAGMATIC INFLUENCE ON PRONOUNS IN LAI (HAKHA) CHIN, WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO FOCUS AND CONTRAST

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0 Introduction
Grice’s (1975) maxim of quantity says that people generally follow the rule of “say no more than you must” This maxim seems to provide a possible explanation on the ellipsis of some particles or phrases in many of pro-drop or Free Empty Category languages. This interface between pragmatics and syntax is obviously shown in the relation between pragmatics and argument structure (on the relationship between the verb and its argument, Goldberg, forthcoming) in Lai, a language spoken in Myanmar. In this paper I will attempt to describe the pragmatic influence on the choice of pronouns in Lai.

First I will briefly describe the morphology of argument structure, describing the agreement system of the verb phrase that plays a vital role in the argument structure of Lai sentences. Then I will describe the distribution of pronouns in general. I will discuss the constraint on argument ellipsis in the third section, where I will make my claim that all pronouns in Lai are either focal or contrastive, or, arguments in Lai are overtly expressed solely for what is conventionally called ‘focus’. Nevertheless, I will treat focus and contrast rather as different pragmatic notions having opposite polarity, as opposed to Schwarzschild (1999). In the later sections of the paper, I will focus on the contrast between focus and contrast.

Not much research has been done on this language. George Bedell (1996) described the agreement systems of Lai, which was a major breakthrough, as the pronominal agreements, with which Lai is rich, were thought to be pronouns before that time. Bedell, however, was not focussing on the other part of argument structure, and that is, the reason pronoun ellipsis was not explained. A few researchers, such as Melnik and K. Van Bik (of UCB), and F. Lehman have been working on the morpho-syntax of this language, but none of these scholars has worked on this topic so far. This work is intended to provide an insight into the argument structure of Lai as well as Burmese, which has similar phenomena of argument ellipsis (but not verbal agreements). But I will not discuss the Burmese case here.

1 Language Information
Lai (often known as Hakha Chin) is a Tibeto-Burman, spoken in Chin State, Myanmar (formerly Burma). It has been categorized as an ergative-absolutive language where the direct object takes an empty case marking element. Basically the language has a word order of SOV; but the word order is very flexible. It can be OSV, or the VP alone. Some scholars, F.K. Lehman for example characterize it as an Free Empty Category language while others might prefer to say it is a pro- drop language. Pitch and stress do not effect the logical semantics interpretation of an utterance.

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2 Lai Agreement
Lai has a paradigm of pronominal agreement on the verb stem, which are clitics functioning to recover the ‘phi-features’ of the arguments of the verb (Bedell, 1996).

Table 1: Pronominal agreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>sg</td>
<td>ka-</td>
<td>na-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>pl</td>
<td>kan-</td>
<td>nan-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object</td>
<td>sg</td>
<td>ka-</td>
<td>in-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object</td>
<td>pl</td>
<td>kan-</td>
<td>in..V..hna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These pronominal agreements are also possessive when prefixed to nominal expressions.

The basic word order SOV is maintained in the morphology of the VP, but the syntax of the arguments is controlled by discourse structure. The VP can represent the whole sentence as long as the arguments are recoverable, and the pronominal agreements are correctly affixed to the verb stem.

Lai VPs have the basic structure: subj-arg > (obj-arg>). V (> subj-arg). For example:

(1) a ka zoh
3sS 1sO look
She/He/It looks at me.

(2) ka zoh hna
1sS look 3pO
I look at them.

(3) kan in zoh
1pS 2O look
We look at you.

There is no pronoun in the examples above, but the pronominal agreements are what stand for the arguments in their absence. This is the strategy to minimize the amount of utterance to conform to Grice’s maxim of quantity. Pronouns are required only when need arises to focus on an argument.

3 Lai Pronouns
Lai pronouns are mainly applicable to human or personified subjects and objects. The chance of having pronouns diminishes with the inanimacy of the entity. In reciprocals, pronouns are used for everything—human or non-human. Lai pronouns can be divided into two main categories, based on their pragmatic roles—focus pronouns and contrast pronouns.
Table 2: Focus and contrast pronouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sg</th>
<th>Pl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Person</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>keimah</td>
<td>kanmah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>kei</td>
<td>kannih</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sg</th>
<th>Pl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Person</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>nangmah</td>
<td>nannmah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>nang</td>
<td>nannih</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sg</th>
<th>Pl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Person</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>amah</td>
<td>amah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>anih</td>
<td>annih</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Distribution of Pronouns in Lai
Pronouns occur overtly only as focused NPs and otherwise, in general, their features are recoverable\(^1\). Generally, the pronouns can occupy either the subject or object position with some constraints on the type of the pronouns. The choice of the pronoun is, however, constrained by the discourse structure. Thus the pronoun can occur:

1. As agent in transitive sentences, having ergative case marked by postposition *nih*. The focus is on the agent.

   (4) **anmah nih an hal**
   they erg 3pS ask
   THEY asked him/her/it.

2. As patient in transitive sentences, having absolutive case when the focus is on the patient.

   (5) **keimah an ka hal**
   I 3pS 1sO ask
   They asked ME.

It is less common that two pronouns overtly occur in the same clause. It is sometimes claimed that languages tend to avoid more than one “new” argument per clause (Goldberg, *forthcoming*, citing Dubois 1987). However the occurrence of two pronouns is not uncommon, as the language allow two focused elements in the same clause.

(6) **Nannmah nih amah hal u.**
2pS erg 3sO ask IMP(ervative)
YOU ask HIM.
3. As subject in the intransitive clause, having absolutive case when the focus is on the subject NP.

(7) Keimah ka kal lai.
I 1sS go will
I will go.

4. Focus pronouns occur as reciprocal NPs (contrast pronouns cannot).

(8) Keimah le keimah ka i hal.
I and I 1sS RECIPR ask
I ask myself.

(9) Anmah le anmah an i al.
They and they 3pS RECIPR debate
They are arguing with one another/themselves.

5. Pronouns occur as possessive markers before the nouns when they are focused.

(10) Nangmah kedan maw keimah kedan?
YOUR shoes or MY shoes?
As against unfocused

(10’’) na kedan maw ka kedan

5 Argument Omission
It has long been known that subjects are more likely to be omitted (Goldberg forthcoming, citing Bloom 1970; Chomsky 1982, Hyams 1986; Jaeggli and Hyams 1988; Uziel-Karl and Berman 2000), since subjects are supposed to be topical in most cases. In Lai, however, the objects are, on such grounds possibly just as topical; any of the two or arguments, if present, can occupy the topic position that is in most cases, by default, that of the subject of the sentence. Present or absent, they are essentially represented by their agreement clitics, and it is these that take fixed order, subject always being first. The claim that subjects are more likely to be omitted is therefore weakened by evidence shown by Lai. This is possibly because either/any of the arguments can be topicalized depending on the discourse structure. This is possibly a compensation for a passive construction that is very rare in the language. I will not go further on this point. Thus a simple transitive sentence (11), where the agent is topicalized, is also uttered as (12), where patient is topicalized, depending on the speaker’s choice of topic.

(11) ui nih me an dawi hna
dog erg goat 3pS chase 3pO
The dogs chase the goats.