Meaning and Use of Thai lecw

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1. Introduction
1.1 Overview

If you look up the Thai word lecw in Mary Haas’ (1964) Thai-English dictionary you will find that it is a verb meaning “to be finished”, a serial verb meaning “already”, and a conjunction meaning “then, afterwards, later.” While lecw no longer occurs as the verb ‘finish’, at least not in my data and apparently not in most dialects of spoken Thai, it does occur in the serial verb and conjunction positions.

Researchers have variously proposed that lecw is a perfect, a perfective, a past tense, a conjunction, or an adverb. Schmidt (1992) compares lecw with the Mandarin Chinese morpheme “le”, which has two different aspects associated with its different sentential positions:

Diagram #1:
  \[
  S + \text{lecw (sentence-final)} \rightarrow \text{perfect} \\
  \text{lecw} + S \text{ (sentence-initial)} \rightarrow \text{perfective}
  \]

The purpose of this study is to examine lecw in each of its distributional, discourse and semantic contexts in order to identify the temporal and aspectual meanings associated with this morpheme. A basic meaning which accounts for the diverse uses of this word will be suggested.¹

Some researchers claim that sentence-final lecw is an adverb meaning “already” (Warotamasikkhadit 1972) which functions much like other temporal adverbials. Some claim that it is a perfect marker (Dahl 1985; Sareechareonsatit 1984; Thepkanjana 1986). Still others claim it provides a completive meaning or a perfective meaning (Boonyatispark 1983; Scovel
1970; Sindhvanandha 1970). Example 1 shows Schmidt’s (1992) so-called sentence-final ล่ะว from my data. 2

(1) S + ล่ะว:

The speaker is telling the Pear Story. She has just described the pear-picker who comes down to find one of his baskets missing. She quotes him:

1 S18: ฏา้ว takrâa háay pay ล่ะว นำย bay
       EXC basket hide go ล่ะว one CLS
       “Oh, one basket has disappeared!”

Example 2 below shows Schmidt’s (1992) sentence-intial ล่ะว which he claims is a perfective, while others claim it is a conjunction meaning “then, later”:

(2) ล่ะว + S:

1 Flo lian baŋsɛɛn dây pii นำย ล̀w k̀ài kàp study Bansaen able.to year one ล่ะว so return
    “I studied at Bangsaen for a year and then I returned,”

(.5)

2 Flo maa fàkŋaan thî nîi ล̀w k̀ài tham ŋaan ləǝyo come be.intern here ล่ะว so do work pass
    “came here as an intern, and started working.”

1.2 Research Questions

1.) How do Native Speakers actually interpret ล่ะว?
2.) What does ล่ะว really mean: is it a perfect, a perfective, a past tense, a sequential conjunction? And what is the relationship between these meanings?
3.) What does ล่ะว itself, as opposed to other elements in the context, contribute to the interpretation of speech?
4.) How does ล่ะว function in natural spoken discourse?
1.3 Tense and Aspect: Meanings and Categories

The meanings of tense, mood, and aspect markers in the languages of the world have been difficult to characterize, because they are abstract and subtle, making a difficult task for researchers trying to establish cross-linguistic categories. This has contributed to some of the difficulty categorizing \( \ell \varepsilon w \). But recent attempts to establish such cross-linguistic categories in broad samples of languages (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994; Dahl 1985) have provided new information which helps to explain \( \ell \varepsilon w \)'s case.

The "perfect" basically means that the situation being marked is prior to and relevant to the reference time. Reference time (RT) can be speech time, or any other time, and the ways in which situations may be relevant to the RT vary greatly from language to language (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994). Diagram #2 illustrates this meaning:

Diagram #2

situation

..................[\( \ell \varepsilon w \) ]

RT

The "perfective", on the other hand, marks a situation which is viewed as a bounded whole, and of which the speaker takes an external perspective (Comrie 1976). Diagram #3 illustrates this sense of boundedness:

Diagram #3

...

situation

2. The Study
2.1 Methods

In order to investigate this question, I examined a data base of Thai spoken discourse which consists of the monologic Pear Story narratives of 20 speakers, and one stranger-stranger conversation about the Northridge Earthquake, comprising a total of 2,873 clauses.
By dividing the data into intonation units (IU), \( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \)'s clausal positions were identified as the following: (1) “VP-final”: \( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \) occurs at or near the end of an IU; (2) “Inter-clausal”: \( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \) occurs at the beginning of an IU.

2.2 Results
2.2.1 Position and Frequency of \( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \)

To illustrate the frequency with which \( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \) occurs in each of these clausal positions, its distribution in the two data sets is shown in Figure 1:

**Figure 1: frequency \( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \) position:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VP-final</th>
<th>Inter-clausal</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pear Story:</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthquake 3:</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \) occurs in the verb-phrase final position only 75 times of a total 411 tokens, while it occurs in the inter-clausal position 336 times. VP-final \( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \) is much less frequent than inter-clausal \( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \). According to Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca’s study of the evolution of tense and aspect morphemes: “Since the more generalized a gram is, the wider its domain of applicability, we should expect that the more generalized a gram is, the higher its incidence of use” (1994: 19–20). They also hypothesize that this co-evolution is accompanied by phonological reduction as well. Based on this hypothesis, we should expect the more frequent inter-clausal \( \lambda_{\varepsilon w} \) to be more semantically general and phonologically reduced.

2.2.2 Aspect and Grounding

Much of the data examined in this study contains a rich sample of narratives, stories in which the events are told in the same order that they actually occurred. Such stories have two layers, termed foreground and background: the foreground provides the main storyline, while the background provides information necessary to the interpretation of that storyline. This