The ?au Usages in Thai
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Introduction

The word ?au, generally translated as 'take', occurs very frequently and consistently in colloquial speech in Thai and across different dialects of the Tai language family. However, its usage has never been explained clearly in current grammar books of Thai. This paper explores the semantic distinctions and the syntactic functions of ?au occurrences as a main verb, resultative verb, and coverb. The exceptional usages of ?au, such as in set phrases and idioms will not be included. The focus is on the coverb feature, with a brief comparison to bă in Chinese to demonstrate certain typological similarities as well as functional purposes of a coverb construction.1

Verbal Function

The closest synonym to the word ?au in Thai is yāt 'to obtain something and hold it in one’s possession'. Therefore, 'take hold of' and 'grasp' are close equivalents, although in actual usage the nuances in meaning of ?au vary a great deal. The meaning of ?au as the main verb of a sentence is 'to take' or 'to get', as in the English usage of 'take' in “I took three napkins” or 'get' in “I’ll get that book.” Examples are:2

1. ?au keːŋkài sì ?arøi kwàː keːŋnúá take chicken curry PAR delicious than beef curry Take the chicken curry. (It) is more delicious than beef curry.

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1 This paper is based in part on the author’s 1987 dissertation, “Tai Lue of Xishuangbanna in China’s Yunnan Province: Description and A Study of the OV Order in the ?au Construction.” However, the present paper is strictly based on Thai (Siamese) usage.

2 Abbreviations: ASP—Aspect; CL—Classifier; DIR—Directional; EMP—Emphatic marker; NEG—Negative; PAR—Particle; PT—Potential; Q—Question marker; REL—Relativizer; TM—Topic marker.
2. **khâu chūai tamrùat phró? yà:k cà ʔau ʔen ranwan**
   s/he help police because want PT get money reward
   S/He helps the police because s/he wants to get the reward.

In many cases, ʔau has the meaning 'to take/bring' depending on the additional motion verbs such as pai 'go', ma: 'come', khâu 'in', ʔɔ:k 'out', khùn 'up', log 'down' that indicate directionality (DR) of the sentence from the speaker's point of view. Examples are:

3. **chán mài dāi ʔau pà:kka: ma: ná**
   I NEG take/bring pen DR (toward) PAR
   (I'm telling you) I did not bring a pen (with me).

4. **fón cà tôk lé:u ná ʔau**
   rain will fall ASP PAR take/bring
   rôm pai si
   umbrella DR(away) PAR
   It's going to rain (soon); take the umbrella (with you).

5. **ʔau khanòm ʔɔ:k cà:k tau?òp ná yan**
   take/bring dessert DR (out) from oven Q
   Have you taken the dessert out of the oven yet?

6. **khâu ʔau hínʔɔ:n log ma:**
   s/he take/bring marble DR (down) DR (toward)
   cà:k phù:khâu
   from mountain
   S/He brought the marble down from the mountain.

In the Thai examples provided above, indication of directionality is crucial to the meaning of each sentence just as it would be in English sentences. The meanings of ʔau in these examples are closely bound with ma: 'toward', pai 'away', ʔɔ:k 'out', or log ma: 'down toward'. Without ma:, pai, and log ma: in examples 3, 4, and 6, respectively, ʔau would carry only the basic meaning of 'to take/get'. Example 3, for instance, would be chán mài dāi ʔau pà:kka: ná 'I didn't take the pen', which could imply 'I didn't steal the pen' or 'It is not the pen that I took'. (There may be some other possible interpretations as well.) These implications do not exist when ma: occurs. Some other indications of directionality, such as ʔɔ:k in example 5, give nuances in meaning. Without ʔɔ:k, the meaning of ʔau khanòm cà:k tau?òp is 'to take the dessert from the oven'. The focus would be only on where one gets the dessert, and not on the action of taking it out.
Another common usage of ?au has the meaning 'take/consider', for example:

7. rānɡ nî: cínthét yà:ɡrai ?au nê: māidāi
   story this fact how take/consider sure/certain NEG
   The facts about this story cannot be taken seriously.

8. ?au kháu pen phù:nam phák
   take/consider s/he be example political party
dì: māi
   good Q
   What do you think (if) we consider him/her to be the leader
   of the (political) party?

9. kháu ?au rānɡ ròtüt pen khô: kē: tua
   s/he take/consider story traffic jam be excuse
   S/He used the traffic jam as an excuse.

In example 7, ?au nê: 'seriously consider' is the comment on rānɡ nî: cínthét yà:ɡrai 'how true is this story', which is the topic of the sentence. The meaning of ?au 'to take/consider' also commonly occurs in an equational structure with the verb pen 'to be'. In examples 8 and 9 above, kháu and rānɡ ròt ṭüt are also objects of the verb ?au.

Other derived meanings are 'to take/want' or 'to consent', for example:

10. ?au cha: yen māi
    take/want cold tea Q
    Do you want cold tea?

11. māi ?au kradâ:t ṭæk rō:
    NEG take/want paper more Q
    Don’t you want more paper?

12. A. thā: thô: māi pai phō: chān
    if you NEG go father I
    māi hâi chān pai rō:k
    NEG allow I go PAR
    pai pen phuân kan nôi thô nâ:
    go be friend together little bit PAR PAR
    If you don’t go, my father will not let me go (either).
    Please be a friend; go with me.

B. ?au pai kô pai
    consent go EMP go
    All right, (I’ll) go.

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The forms ?au 'to take/want' as in examples 10, 11, and ?au 'to consent' as in example 12B above occur mostly in spoken language.

The meaning of ?au 'to marry' (literally 'take husband/wife') is also widely used in the Tai dialects. This usage is, however, considered vulgar in modern Thai since it renders the sexual connotation of 'to sleep with'. Perhaps also for this reason, ?au usage is sometimes avoided in formal speech in modern Thai.

**Resultative Verb Compound**

Besides functioning as a main verb, ?au also occurs as a resultative verb in a verb compound (RVC). In this usage the first verb of the RVC denotes the activity while ?au, which occurs after the verb, indicates the result of the activity, for example:

    watercress TM do delicious truly
    This vegetable is truly (cooked) delicious(ly).

    B.  mài mî: ?arai rô:k phàt ?au
    NEG anything PAR stir-fry RVC
    Nothing much (to it). (I just) stir-fried it.

14.  chán dau ?au wàâ rôt khâu sîa
    I guess RVC that car s/he break down
    I am guessing that his/her car (must have) broken down.

15.  khît ?au lêŋ sî wà: yàŋ nǎi dî:
    you think RVC oneself PAR that kind which good
    You decide (yourself) which one is better.

    want know vocab difficult open dictionary
    du: ?au sî
    see RVC PAR
    (If you) want to learn difficult words, look in the dictionary.

Example 13B demonstrates how the activity is carried out. In this case it is by stir-frying the vegetables. In example 14 dau ?au indicates that, by guessing, the speaker came to a conclusion that “someone’s car must have broken down.” The RVC ?au in examples 15 and 16 khît ?au and du: ?au also carries a similar meaning of 'by'.

The meaning of RVC ?au can also indicate the result of an activity in terms of completion/achievement, for example: