

TENSE AND ASPECT IN LAI CHIN*

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

1.1. *Lai Chin*

This paper presents a description of the aspectual system of the Tibeto-Burman language Lai Chin (or Lai).¹ The aspectual system of Lai is very rich and complex, and a complete investigation of Lai aspect is far beyond the scope of this paper, whose goal is merely to provide a general descriptive overview and to examine the semantic and morphosyntactic properties of the aspectual particles. Aspectual distinctions in Lai are mainly represented by a few pre- and post-verbal particles and adverbs with aspectual or combined temporal and aspectual meaning. There seems to be no evidence for a morphological category of aspect in Lai, contrary to the organization of many aspectual systems, as, for example, Slavic languages or, to a lesser extent, English. This is not surprising, since Lai has exclusively verb agreement morphology and is otherwise an isolating or almost isolating language.

1.2. *Aspect: Some theoretical assumptions*

This paper is more concerned with the description of Lai aspect than with making theoretical claims about it. As an organizing basis for the description of the aspectual system of Lai, I use Comrie's (1976) classification of aspectual oppositions (Figure 1) with some modifications as suggested in Sweetser (1995). I do not define continuity in terms of progressive vs. nonprogressive, even though I discuss progressives and continuatives in Lai.

As aspectual systems are usually very idiosyncratic in different languages, I will be using Comrie's classification only as a typological guideline. I will also

* I thank the language consultant Kenneth Van-Bik, who provided all the Lai data for this paper and also suggested some illuminating interpretations of the data. All the misinterpretations are, unfortunately, my own.

¹ Lai is spoken in the Chin Hills of Northwestern Burma, mostly in the town of Haka, which has approximately 25,000 residents, and the surrounding area. Around Haka and Thantlaang, Lai Chin is used as a lingua franca and spoken as a second language by the speakers of many related dialects. Lai is also spoken in Mizoram State of India and in some areas of Bangladesh.

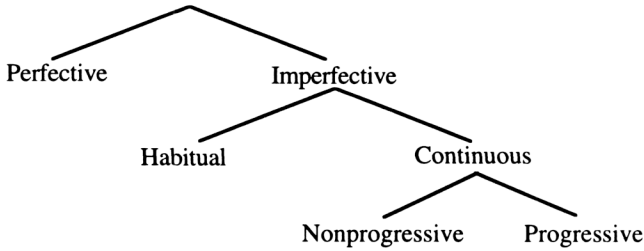


Figure 1. Classification of aspectual oppositions (Comrie 1976).

draw extensively from Smith's (1997) Situation Aspect theory which allows a consistent treatment of the properties of the otherwise controversial aspectual particle *rak*.

2.0. TENSE AND ASPECT PARTICLES

Lai Chin has a number of pre- and post-verbal particles and adverbs which have temporal or aspectual meaning separately or when combined together. The meaning and usage of the aspectual particles and aspect-conveying adverbs will be described in the following sections. Table 1 presents these aspectual particles.

3.0. SIMPLE TENSES

Every language has means of expressing present, past, and future relative to the moment of speech or the situation described as the present moment, but not all languages overtly distinguish these three tenses. In Lai, there is no overt present tense marker (which is a very common feature cross-linguistically). Future is always marked with a post-verbal particle *laay* (example [1]), and the simple past can in some cases be expressed using the pre-verbal particle *rak* (example [2]), which is always optional in such contexts and does not have to be present in a sentence which contains any reference to the time frame of the situation. If any contextual information about tense or explicit time reference (e.g., 'yesterday', 'last year', 'three weeks ago', 'a long time ago') is present in a sentence, *rak* can always be omitted, since the information given by such time expressions is sufficient to indicate the past nature of the event.

- (1) ka-law ka-thlo?-laay
 my-field 1SG-plow-FUT
 'I will plow my field.'

- (2) ka-law ka-(rak)-thlo?
 my-field 1SG-PAST-plow
 'I plowed my field.'

Pre-verbal:

rak	perfective
von	immediate action (in close proximity, immediately reachable)
hung	directional (may be used as aspectual)

Post-verbal:

laay	future / irrealis	
tsang	perfective / completive	(cf. <i>tsang</i> 'happen; become')
di?	completive / exhaustive	(cf. <i>di?</i> 'to finish')
be?	immanent	(cf. <i>be?</i> 'to stick')
bal	experiential	
toon	habitual	
liaw	progressive	
lengmang	continuous	
zungzaal	continuous	
tsua?ma?	iterative	
peng	continuative	
leen	continuative (with great effort)	
seek	continuous effort in vain	
hoy	repeated regretative	
taa	durative	
tshom	action for the moment / immediately	
tso?l	to V immediately	
duak	same as <i>tso?l</i>	
deeng	to be about to V	
deengmaang	to be about to V	
hnik	to be about to V (more immediate than <i>deengmaang</i>)	
ka?n	prioritive	
kaa	the beginning point of V-ing	
tsew	just (supposed to happen earlier, long overdue)	
thaan	again	
ri?	still	

Table 1. Aspectual particles.

The fact that *rak* is optional in example (2), which without *rak* could mean either 'I plow my field' or 'I plowed my field', suggests that the tense opposition in Lai is future vs. non-future; this makes Lai an example of an asymmetrical closed system in the Prague school sense. The Prague school linguists distinguished two types of asymmetrical systems, 'privative' and 'subordinative' (Smith 1997). Since the particle *laay* is required to signal future tense, and the absence of it denotes non-future, the tense system in Lai can be classified as 'privative', as opposed to a 'subordinative' system in which an element can give information about a particular property while its absence means compatibility with any property, including the one denoted by the element in question (Jakobson 1932).

4.0. PAST / PERFECTIVE: *rak*

4.1. Origin

There are several pre-verbal particles in Lai which occupy the slot between the subject and the verb. The particles *rak*, *va*, *hey*, *vung*, *hung*, and *rung*² indicate the *direction* of motion, while *von* signals the *immediateness* of motion as in examples (3) and (4). It can also be used in its grammaticalized temporal meaning 'only', without any explicit mention of the direction of motion (example [5]).

² The particles *va*, *hey* and *von* express different levels of proximity. *Von* can be called proximal, *hey* is medial, and *va* is distal; cf. examples (a)-(c):

- (a) ?a von tho?ng ?ii . . .
'He suddenly hit and . . .'
(b) ?a hey tho?ng ?ii . . .
'He reached and hit . . .'
(c) ?a va tho?ng ?ii . . .
'He went there and hit . . .'

The particles *vung*, *hung* and *rung* are used almost interchangeably by contemporary speakers. In the case of *vung* (example [d]), the speaker is away both from the actor and the place the actor is moving towards. According to my language consultant, *vung* used to mean some kind of upward movement, and *hung* used to indicate downward movement, but this distinction has been lost in the speech of his generation, and now the direction is not always vertical and these two particles are interchangeable.

- (d) ?a vung kaay
3SG towards climb up
'He climbed up.'

Hung expresses motion towards the speaker, as *rak* does, and it emphasizes the destination, while *rung* either emphasizes the starting point of the motion or is neutral in this respect.

- (e) pa tshiang kan sin ?a? ?a hung tum
god 2PL LOC 3SG towards come down
'God came down to us.'
(f) pa tshiang kan sin ?a? ?a rung tum
god 2PL LOC 3SG towards come down
'God came down to us.'