RELATIVE CLAUSES IN LAI CHIN, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO VERB STEM ALTERNATION AND THE EXTENSION OF CONTROL THEORY*

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0. INTRODUCTION

I shall begin with some fairly comprehensive examples of the way relative clauses are constructed in the Lai (Haka) Chin language, a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Chin branch, spoken in the Central part of the Chin State, in the mountains on the West of Burma (Myanmar). It will be seen, inter alia, that two things need to be accounted for. On the one hand, one wants a proper account of the relative clause construction, where the language gives no evidence of overt movement, especially wh-movement, but where, none the less, the clause is introduced by a noun phrase with a wh-determiner. On the other hand, when such a construction relativises on the subject of a transitive clause, it will be noticed that the form of the verb stem changes, and this, too, wants a systematic and coherent account.

I shall first offer a treatment of the latter question, chiefly by way of a proposed analysis of the Lai Chin system of verb stem alternation as a foundation. I shall then attend to the former question, claiming, as an extension of previous work (Lehman 1986) that in relative clauses the wh-element serves

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* This paper was originally presented to the 29th ICSTLL at Leiden in October, 1996. It represents part of a long term project on the syntax of Lai Chin, which I have been engaged in for some time. I am indebted for discussion on many points here to my colleagues in this project, Professor George Bedell, Kenneth Van Bik, and Pu Lian Uk. None of these three is responsible for, or even necessarily in agreement with, the present analysis. In addition, I acknowledge gratefully the contribution to this analysis of my colleague Dr. M. Lalitha of Delhi University, who worked with me and Lian Uk intensively for a month during the Christmas holidays of 1995-96, with regard both to Lai Chin and her own speciality of its close relative Mizo (Lushai). I have somewhat simplified the typography by writing the singular person agreement clitics (ka-, na-, a-) prefixed to verb stems with the vowel “a”. Phonetically the vowel is in fact [ə], but this is because inherent clitic forms ending in the vowel /a/ are reduced to the neutral schwa because of the essentially iambic nature of Chin (and most Tibeto-Burman) foot structure.

1 The central observation in this connection is the fact that this is a Free Empty Category language, where any noun phrase argument, whether or not ‘licensed’ by agreement, may be freely represented by a null pro with non-specific/‘arbitrary’ reference.
as a Control theoretic operator, passing specification of an otherwise non-specific NP within the clause itself, to the head noun phrase of the construction. This will require me to clarify and generalise the hitherto somewhat opaque notion of a logico-syntactic operator. I shall throughout be assuming, in a general way, the theoretical framework of current, that is Minimalist generative syntax. However, for present purposes the distinction between 'standard' Government and Binding theory (Chomsky 1981, 1986) and Minimalist syntax (Chomsky 1995), which I ultimately intend here and which I have used elsewhere (e.g., Lehman 1996a, b), will not prove particularly important in my treatment of the matter in hand, especially because it remains unclear how Control is to be encompassed in Minimalist syntax, as Chomsky himself says (1995). In particular I shall make little if any explicit reference to the internal categorial constituency of a clause here, and whatever I need to say about the constituency of the relative construction, with a noun as its head, will be equally compatible with either framework. For the record, however, I append herewith, without further comment, the strictly Minimalist syntactic analysis of the noun phrase (Determiner phrase, in fact) that I argue for in detail in another paper (Lehman 1996b),

![Diagram](image)

These five books, which ...

with *hi* the proximal deictic determiner, NP the complement of the determiner, *pa-nga* a numeral expression consisting of a cliticised numeral classifier and a cardinal number, and the rightmost element (copying the determiner in many such cases) serving amongst other things as a morphological base for case marking; the relative clause is arguably the complement, possibly the specifier of N, but nothing depends upon which it might be, and current Minimalist
syntax is undecided on the matter; the quantifier phrase and the second *hi* are specifiers of D.  

**1. THE SURFACE PATTERN OF LAI RELATIVE CLAUSES.**

The following three examples provide a fairly comprehensive view of the relative clause in Lai. I have chosen to use a ditransitive verb in the relative clauses illustrated here, chiefly because of the light that this can shed on the facts of verb stem alternation involved.

(2) $$\left[ \left[ \emptyset_0 \ \emptyset_0 \ \emptyset_{i0} / \text{amah-ah ka-peek}\right]_{TP/IP} \ X/\text{zei } \ mi]_{CP} \ ca-uk]_{NP/DP} \ \text{him-to} \ 1SG-\text{give} \ \WH \ \text{one} \ \text{book} \right.$$  

'**The book I gave to him.'**

(3) $$\left[ \left[ \emptyset_0 \ ca-uk_{do} \ \emptyset_{i0} \ \text{ka-peek} \right] \ X/\text{zei } (\text{mi})] \ \text{mi-pa}\right] \ \text{book} \ 1SG-\text{give} \ \WH \ \text{one} \ \text{man}$$  

'**The man to whom I gave the book.'**

(4) $$\left[ \left[ \emptyset_0 \ \emptyset / \ ca-uk_{do} \ \emptyset_{i0} \ \text{a-ka- pee} \right] \ X/\text{zei } (\text{mi})] \ \text{mi-pa}\right] \ \text{book} \ \text{give(Stem II)}$$  

'**The man who gave it/the book to me.'**

Here $\emptyset$ stands for the aforementioned "pro arb" (technically $\text{pro}_{iv,j}$, for non-specific reference—cf. Lehman 1985). I assume that 'X', alternating freely with *zei* (wh-) is in the spec of CP, the head, C, being *mi*, which quite commonly in Lai means 'one' (non-specific pronoun), though elsewhere it also means 'person' (see Bedell 1996), as indeed in *mipa* 'man' (lit. 'person-male'). The exact status of 'X' is questionable; given that *mi* is already non-specific, it is just possible that 'X' merely stands for an unfilled spec of CP, in which case *zei* is somewhat redundant as a specifier also indicating non-specificity (certainly the use of *zei* in this construction is distinctly a rather formal, elaborate usage). Nevertheless, this possibility has to be discounted because, as I shall try to show, the specifier of C in this construction has got to be filled with some kind of operator, in order that specification of one of the interior clause's non-specific pro elements may be assured through having its index set in identity with that of the head noun phrase of the relative construction. I therefore assume, ex hypothesi, that 'X' stands for a so-called empty operator,

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2 See Lehman (1996b) on the fact, not very peculiar as it turns out, that the head, D, of the functional phrase category DP is on the left whilst that of the substantive NP is on its right.

3 Post-vocalic -h in the orthography symbolizes /?-h/; combinations of sonorant-plus-h in final position stand for glottalized sonorants (e.g. "velh" /ve?l/) initially [?] occurs automatically in syllables with no other prevocalic consonant, though this is not indicated in the orthography. [Ed.]
corresponding exactly to the overt element zei with which it alternates (see now Chomsky 1995: 151-152). It remains particularly murky how complementiser, C, and its specifier zei are to be categorised in view of the fact that zei is basically a wh-determiner (Lehman 1995) and mi is a nominal element. Here I take the view that they are indeed, in this construction, specifier and head, respectively, of CP, even though, otherwise, zei is the head of DP, with the NP, containing, N, as its complement. This is an aspect of a perfectly general problem, namely, that complementisers tend to be borrowed from other lexical categories, such as prepositions (English for), demonstratives (English that), nouns (Thai thii ‘place’) and so on. Of greater moment is the obvious question whether the zei represents wh-movement from the coreferent to ‘book’ in the interior clause. I am assuming out of hand that it does not. My reasons are as follows.

First and foremost, there is simply no evidence in general for overt movement in this language. I need not deal with feature-movement at LF in this paper. Furthermore, wh-movement here is especially unlikely in view of the fact that the interior coreferent is often an empty, inherently non-specific nominal, not requiring to be embedded under a redundant wh-determiner phrase. In addition, as already noted above, the complementiser mi inherently “selects” as a possible specifier a non-specific quantifier. While it is possible to suppose that this amounts to evidence that it can “attract” wh/zei by way of overt movement, this is counterindicated in view of the fact that ‘pro’ is simply unable to take an overt determiner in any way.

Having laid the foregoing out by way of initial examples and their preliminary syntactic construal, let me pay attention now to the peculiar fact that (4) requires the use of the Second Stem of the verb, peek/pee ‘to give’. In order to pursue this line of attack, I must lay out in some detail the basic facts about Lai Chin verb stem alternation.

2. THE VERB STEM SYSTEM OF LAI

By “Stem I”, I shall mean the form of a verb that appears in plain, tensed/finite declarative clauses. The rule is simple. For any intransitive verb, adjectives included, this verb stem is used for everything except gerundives and nominalisations (V+naak). For transitive verbs (mono- or ditransitive), only negatives take a different stem (my Stem II). The apparent explanation eluded me for some forty years.

Every intransitive verb in this language is an unaccusative; and, in gerundives and nominalised contexts, the subject does not “raise” syntactically to external Argument position (i.e., doesn’t have any Specifier of INFL/TNS to