

# On the Use of *Dah* in Lai Chin Questions and the Operator Syntax of Functors

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**O. INTRODUCTION.** The following remarks are intended as bearing upon a general treatment of the syntax of questions and its extension to a larger class of quantificational functors within the framework of Minimalist and Bare Phrase Structure syntax (Chomsky 1993, 1994). They are motivated in the first instance by the problem of how to generalise an account of the element *dah* in the Lai, or Haka Chin language.

**1. THE PARTICLE *DAH*.** At the most elementary level of observation, *dah* is the mark of a *wh* question, and in this usage, it follows immediately the element (N), of its immediate scope. Thus

- (1) *zei khua dah a-si.*  
wh village DAH it-is  
What village is it?

But *dah* can also be used at the end of a sentence or, rather, clause, to mark it as a question. Thus

- (2) *an-dam rih lai dah*  
they-well stay will DAH  
[I am in doubt *whether*]they are well.

That this usage is best thus translated using 'whether' is clear from the fact that such sentences as (2) are in fact contractions, expandable as follows:

- (3) *an-dam rih lai maw, dam rih lai lo dah ka-thei lo.*  
they well stay will 'or else', well fut. not 'whether',  
I know not.  
I don't know if they are well or not.

Moreover, it is now particularly obvious that the *wh*-words taken without the element *dah*, i.e., not in the scope of the latter, function just as non-specific quantifiers, where it is also obvious that indeed *maw*, otherwise coming after a sentence to mark it as

a Y/N question, is best glossed generally as 'or other' / 'or else', as in (3).

- (4) *zei cauk maw ka-duh lai*<sup>1</sup>  
 what book or-other I want shall  
 I shall want some book or other.

Note, in this connection that there is another quite common contracted form of (3), now given as 2<sup>1</sup>

- (2<sup>1</sup>) *an-dam rih lai maw ka-thei lo*  
 they well stay will 'or otherwise' I don't know  
 I don't know *if* they are well.

**2. WH, Y/N, AND THE GENERALISED SYNTAX OF QUESTIONS: *DAH* AND *MAW*.** From this it is readily seen that, as in Thai (Siamese), the superficial marking of a sentence with a post sentential Y/N marker, here *maw*, is more exactly a contracted form of a sentence comparing two opposed values (positive, negative) of the same predicate, as follows:

- (5) *na-dam maw*  
 You well ?  
 Are you well?

- (5<sup>1</sup>) *na-dam maw, dam lo dah ka-thei lo.*  
 you well 'or-else' not well ? I don't know.

Indeed, even

- (5<sup>11</sup>) *na-dam maw dam lo dah*

can be used grammatically to express the same Y/N question, although it is excessively high-flown, pompous, and therefore something of a joke.

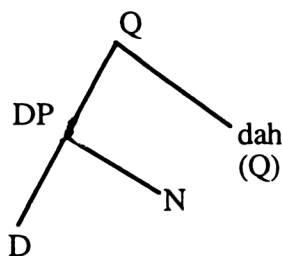
**3. *DAH* AS THE HEAD OF A Q-PHRASE.** This all leaves, one, of course, with but a solitary underlying Q, which is *dah*.. I shall not say just yet how, in a Bare Phrase Structure (Chomsky 1994), or even Minimalist (Chomsky 1993) syntax, it is attached to the category of its immediate scope, save that it is invariably on its immediate right edge. In spite of a passing remark by Chomsky (1994), I cannot see that we can get away easily with supposing that it is part of a discontinuous Determiner morpheme in Spec/NP, so placed in Morphology.

Two considerations militate against such a view: first, that it is not semantically an Operator-Quantifier (e.g., non-specific), of the *wh*-variety, and secondly, that it is hard to imagine how it might be part of any Specifier of a clause, either Spec/IP, or, in Bare Phrase Structure without any necessary equivalent to IP, Spec/VP, i.e., how it could possibly be construed as intimately related, morphologically, to the Subject NP.

Therefore, perhaps it might be, after all as I suggested in Lehman 1990, an Adjunct of the maximal X category whose scope it marks as questioned. The problem with this is that it is inconsistent with the branching structure of this language, a rigidly Head-right (V-final) language, and even more of a problem for R. Kayne's theory of UG as uniformly SVO (1993), as modified and extended in Chomsky 1994. I dare say that one might suggest that, in this language, adjuncts are generally placed where we see them by morphology, but this seems too much of an *ad hoc* solution. Alternatively, given Chomsky's (1994) severe constraints upon adjunction, we could imagine that these elements are rather Heads — heads, that is, of Operator phrases of a certain sort. This is plausible, it seems to me, in as much as they 'take' maximal XP as their scope and hence make sense as '*defining* what a given category is as a syntactic type.'

On this last view, which is clearly the only one I have reasonable confidence in, a *wh*-questioned NP, will look like (6):

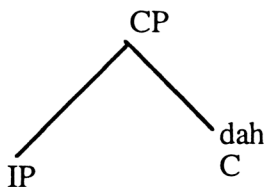
(6)



where Q projects, as does D, so that, DP<sup>2</sup> is Spec/Q. A questioned clause should then be a CP, with head C (=Q), so that we shall be, in the final analysis at least, obliged to reconstruct the notion of a complementiser as a special sort of

Operator that, however, is not (say, in the sense of Grimshaw 1994) a syntactic operator like *wh*, i.e., not in Spec/X; this operator in the present instance is our *Q*, but more generally it is a *functor* taking its Specifier into a new maximal X type (e.g., a new locution or utterance type, or, in the case of Nouns, a quantification over a class or set already quantified as a Determiner Phrase<sup>3</sup>), it has no discernible binding properties, say over variables or traces, and it never takes a complement. This assumption about questioned clauses may not be altogether arbitrary in view of the fact that they are, at least covertly as reconstructed as LF, always subordinate to main clauses (or functors of the kind mentioned above) signifying doubt or lack of knowledge (and, in some languages, including the ones here dealt with, this leads to a nice account of evidential ‘particles’ on simplex main clauses, with the evidentiaries being yet another of this species of functor<sup>4</sup>). It may be somewhat more arbitrary to suggest that the Spec/C here is an IP.

(7)



In any event, it seems that ‘S’ = Spec/CP in such constructions. Thus, consider (3), above, repeated here for convenience

(3) an dam rih lai maw, dam rih lai lo *dah* ka-thei lo.

This would arguably have the following Phrase Structure in (8):