Number Marking in Lai Chin and its Theoretical Consequences

F. K. Lehman, with A. Ceu Hlun
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

0. Introduction. It is commonly said of many languages such as those of Southeast Asia, not least Tibeto-Burman languages, that their nouns are 'unmarked', or at least not obligatorily marked for number, and this has become a commonplace about such languages. Unfortunately, this is at best inexplicit and at worst misleading. It s certainly not true of lexical nominals; pronouns, for instance, are invariably marked for number as well as for person. So, what is the correct description of nouns (proper and common) with regard to number (not just with regard to its 'marking')?

We want to show here that certain facts about Lai Chin, a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Naga branch in far Western Myanmar (Burma), suggest the correct solution, and that these facts are mirrored and supported by similar facts about, for instance, Burmese. In fact we shall argue that nouns are in fact labels for only the semantic features, i.e., what is commonly given as the set of necessary-and-sufficient conditions that any entity should be seen to instantiate (see Lehman 1985, Keller and Lehman 1991), i.e., an Intensional Description (hereafter ID). As such it *is neither singular nor plural* and the question of its being marked for number is beside the point. Pronouns, on the other hand, are not unique to any ID and in fact inherently point to sets or elements of sets associated with any such ID and, as such, are inherently distinguished as to number; for, in particular, it is the sets and their elements into which quantification (including ordinary enumeration) applies (Lehman 1985). We shall therefore argue on specific evidence from Lai Chin and secondarily Burmese that the noun phrase (technically — cf. Lehman in press — determiner phrase / DP) in such languages invariably contains both an ID and a pronominal element referring to the associated set[1]. In these typically free empty category (FEC) languages either may be phonologically null; more particularly this is the default (non focal, non contrastive) condition of all pronominals. In any case, it is the pronominal element (for which we shall use the greek letter ε, the usual symbol for en element/member of a set) to which any quantifier, including ordinary numbers apply. We shall therefore end up claiming that all such languages, where

the lexical noun names *only* an ID rather than the pair {ID,S), will almost of necessity be languages where enumeration (and often as in Tai, other sorts of logical quantifiers such as demonstratives and even relative clauses — both being quantifiers because they partition sets) is associated with so-called numeral classifiers; so that if a language has classifiers it will not mark nouns lexically as either singular or plural, although the converse fails — some non-'classifier' languages mark nouns only optionally for number (Quechua, for example[2]). This having been said, let us proceed to the facts of Lai Chin.

Number marking and agreement. Here are some examples of plural nouns in Lai

(1) Cauk khoika'h dah na-chiah *hna*
Book where-at ? 2sg put 3pl-obj
Where did you put the books?

(1') Cauk khoika'h dah *an*-um
Book where-at ? 3pl stay
Where are the books?

Where preverbal agreement clitics are subject agreement unless otherwise marked. It will be noticed that the plurality of the noun, 'book', whether subject or object, is marked (in fact obligatorily) in agreement if 'book' is a subject or an object (if a verb is ditransitive, then non-subject agreement is with the indirect object). Notice too that these agreement clitics (e.g., Bedell 1996) are not themselves, for instance, resumptive pronouns or parts of any noun/demonstrative phrase, as we can see from an answer to (1)

(2) Keimah-nih khin-ah ka-chiah *hna*I
I 'erg' there-at 1sg put 3pl obj
I put them there.

But this requires a rather extensive digression having to do with *hna* and other postverbal agreement affixes, without which I cannot usefully proceed farther.

In general, in colloquial Lai, every (finite) verb is prefixed with a subject agreement clitic; if a verb be transitive, then it will also have an object agreement clitic. The latter follows the former (for full paradigms[3], see Lehman 1990) with the following qualifications. The third person object as only a

null representation, and if it be plural, the plurality is indicated by postverbal *hna* as above (2). However, it will be seen that *hna* is in itself simply a bare plurality marker of agreement, not in itself bearing any features of person. This is best shown by looking more systematically into other post-verbal markers of aspects of person-and-number ('phi-features' in current formal grammar terminology).

These occur in two sorts of contexts: (a) poetical speech, and (b) 'imperative' clauses. As for (a), as Delancey (1988) has set forth clearly, historically there have been both pre- and postverbal systems of agreement affixes. Mizo (Lushai) preserves a major reflex of these in that the ordinary second-person object marker is postverbal *-ce*. Tedim (Northern) Chin uses both systems in different stylistic registers (Henderson 1965). But Lai uses postverbal agreement affixes in finite clauses only in poetical language. Thus where in colloquial sage one would say

(3) ka-that
1sg kill
I killed [it/him/her]

One finds in poetical usage

(4) Mawra that si-ing e, Mual Beo, Mual Beo
[a large bird] kill is-1sg !, Mual Beo
It's I, Mual Beo, that have killed the Mawra!

with first person singular agreement affix *-ing*. Now, this we may compare with, say,

(5) Mawra that si-(*hna*)-using, kanmah, kanmah
It's we, we, who've killed the Mawra!

Where postverbal *-using* indicates a first person plural subject (agreeing with *kanmah*, the pronoun 'we'), ambiguously either dual or plural, whereas with preceding *-hna* it is explicitly plural (greater than two persons). Or, we can have

(6) Mawra that si-(*hna*)*uce*
It's you-all who killed the Mawra

Where, once again, *-hna* indicates a plurality greater than merely two. And *-uce* indicates second person (the *-ce* surely cognate

with the Mizo ordinary second person object agreement affix aforementioned).

We can, moreover, further analyse *-using* in (5), which is composed of the *-ing* affix of first person subject agreement in (4) preceded by *-usi*, which is found independently, as in certain imperatives (b)

(7) kal cang (*hna*)*usi*
go perf. let's
let's go now!

And once again, without *-hna* the second person is ambiguously dual or plural, but definitely plural with *-hna*. Furthermore, the *-u* is itself an independent affix indicating, essentially, [+ speech act participant], and plurality/duality. This is easily seen because *usi* is really a first person plural *inclusive*, whilst *-uce* as in (6) is *exclusive*,[4] save that it is virtually impossible to use it in an imperative utterance; after all, how can one say 'let's go!' without including the addressee?

In fact, the postverbal affix *-u* itself can be used in imperatives where it seems to refer, like *-uce* to simply second person plural (or dual, of course).

(8) Nan rawl atu ei u
Your food now eat
Eat your food now! (Hay-Neave nd: 69)

(8') kal u law, kan hmuh lai
go U cond.2pl see fut.
If we/you were to go, we'd see[5]

But in actuality the suffixed *-u* means simply [+dual, αplural, = speech-act participant], and we may suppose that *-uce* , as in (6) is not used because it would be redundant it being virtually impossible to issue and order to a set of persons without effectually *ex*cluding oneself.

We therefore end up with the following analysis of postverbal affixes of agreement

(9)

u [+ participant, αspeaker - sg]

usi [+ participant, + speaker, α non-participant, - sg]
using [+participant, +speaker, -nonparticipant, -sg]