The Proper Syntax of Case and the Determiner Phrase (DP) in Lai Chin

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Lai Chin is an ergative language in the sense that a subject of a transitive verb is marked distinctively and the subject of an intransitive verb is marked in the same way as the object of a transitive verb; we may call the first ‘ergative case marking’, the second ‘absolutive case’. In the first, the determiner phrase (hereafter DP, namely, the nominal phrase that is bounded by a determiner and properly contains the noun phrase itself) features the element nih following the noun; in the second cu. Thus,

1. a. Kei cu ka-kal (I go/went)
   I ABS 1sg go
   ‘I go/went.’

   b. Keimah nih amah (cu) ka-hmuh (I see/saw him/her)
   I NIH he/she ABS 1sg see
   ‘I see/saw him/her.’

The basic syntax is, nevertheless, nominative-accusative with subject agreement, regardless of transitivity, as seen in (1) above. Ergativity is, however, not merely morphological; for, transitive verbs have a basic declarative stem form (Stem I) that is in general a derived phonological form whilst Stem I for intransitive verbs is the etymological phonological form (see Hyman and Van Bik (In press), Kathol and Van Bik 2001, Chit Hlaing 1996).

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1. This paper, in somewhat more technical form, was first presented at the Thirty Fifth International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics (ICSTLL XXXV), at Arizona State University, 7 November, 2002.
It has been customary when dealing with ergativity to call *nih* the ergative case marker and *cu* the absolutive case marker (cf. Hay-Neave 1948), although Bedell (2000) argued persuasively that *nih* in particular has to be a postposition. Bedell’s argument, however, was only indirectly syntactic and we want to present here a rigourous syntactic argument for Bedell’s otherwise correct conclusion. The evidence and thus the argument are remarkably simple, but the results may seem problematical until one see that they follow nicely in the line of some new but very significant developments in formal syntactic theory, as we shall show below.

We claim that ergativity, indeed case marking exists in the interaction between a postposition (of a postpositional phrase of the DP [Determiner Phrase – essentially the Noun Phrase]) and the determiner itself— where (Chit Hlaing 2000) the determiner (D) proper is the final element in a full nominal expression, as

2. \[ \text{DP}[\text{cu} \text{NP}[\text{ca-uk} \text{ cu}]] \]
   \hspace{1em} spec book D
   \hspace{1em} ‘this book’

and where case is marked on D (at the right edge of DP), as

3. \[ \text{cu PRO ca-ah cu} \text{ PRO ca-ah} \]
   \hspace{1em} spec pro P  D+OBL
   Therefore [lit. for that (one)]

[cun> cu + in, the basic form of the Oblique structural case\(^2\); *ca-ah* being a composite postposition, with *ah* itself being the generalised postposition of dative/goal/locative — ‘at’/‘to’]

very roughly,

\[ \text{in} : \text{duhsa-te}in \ ‘slowly’, where \text{in} \text{ marks the manner adverbial based on the derive noun ‘slowness’ (duh, ‘slow’ + sa—te) as oblique; cf.} \]

\[ \text{i. Halkha-} \text{in} \text{ ka-} \text{kal} \]
\[ \text{Hakha-‘ly’ (OBL) \text{I come perf.}} \]
\[ \text{‘I’ve come from Halkha’} \]
Thus,

4.  Hakha-ah ka-kal  
    Hakha-to 1sg go  
    'I go to Hakha.'

Now, let us look further at the ergative case. While it is true that in the default simplest form we can say, (1b) above, one can always put the ergative case in a more elaborate form, as

5.  keimah nih cu-um ka-hmuh  
    I see (him/her/it)  
    'I see/saw him/her.'

Here we notice that nih, which stands precisely in the position of such postpositions as ah, can in fact be followed by cu-, i.e., the determiner+ the oblique case marker! Moreover, we see from such examples likewise that cu_ is not after all to be taken as marking non-ergative DPs, even though the short or default forms of subjects, transitive and intransitive, respectively, make it seem so — which is how the matter is customarily stated in earlier literature on the Chin languages. That is, in full form an intransitive subject ends in cu; a transitive subject ending in cu-.

Now we can see how right Bedell was about nih etc. nih is indeed a postposition, and as such it 'govers' oblique case as marked on the determiner. Ergative, then, has an oblique caste, structurally, whilst the Absolutive morphological case is structurally nominative.
Two further points. First, Lai Chin, like so many Kuki-Chin, indeed Tibeto-Burman languages, has remarkably few postpositions. In fact it seems that there are only four or so of them: ah, nih, ca-ah,\(^3\) and he (with/together-with). Further distinctions often marked by different prepositions, as in English for instance, are, in these languages, made by putting one of the postpositions, especially ah, after a subordinated noun, as in such examples as

6. Inn chung(ah)
   house inside-LOC
   'Inside the house' (chung being a bound nominal, 'interior')

We mention this because one might (incorrectly) argue that, say, he is not a postposition, on the following grounds. Consider examples below:

7. a. Za Huat nih thil a-cawk
    Za Huat by thing(s) 3sg buy
    'Zahuat buys things'

    b. Za Huat i thil a-cawk-mi cu...
       ones
       'The things Zahuat buys'

    c. Van-ah va an-zuang
       Sky-LOC bird(s) 3pl fly
       'A bird flies into the sky'

    d. Van-i va a-zuang-mi cu ...
       'The bird that flies into the sky'

    e. Tlang-in lung a-ril

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3. It just may be that the ca of cagh (for) is itself not a postposition at all, or even part of one except morphologically/prosodically. It may be a dependent nominal of a kind mentioned in the body of the paper next above. I cannot pursue this matter here.