ASPECTS OF INTER-CLAUSAL RELATIONS IN KHMU

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0. Introduction

This paper attempts to investigate certain mechanisms involved in the manifestation of inter-clausal relations in Khmu, and will discuss the Khmu that is spoken in Huuyen village, Chiengkhong district, Chiengrai province, Thailand. This variety is also found widely spoken in the Park Bang area of northern Laos.

Khmu is a Mon-Khmer language spoken by a group of hill tribesmen found primarily in northern Laos, northern Thailand—especially the area along the Thai-Lao border—northern Vietnam and southern China. They are believed to have previously occupied a larger area than at present, their arrival to this area predating that of Thai speakers and other more recent hill tribes such as Miao, Yao, Lisu, Karen, and others.

A. General syntactic structure

Words in Khmu are mainly monosyllabic, though disyllabic words are still numerous. It is possible that Khmu once had a very complex system of affixation even though nowadays many affixes are found only in fossilised form and have often lost their meanings.

In text materials, although most of the items can obviously be defined as belonging to the natural word classes such as noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, demonstrative, etc., there are a number of ‘syntactic’ particles that do not seem to have meaning by themselves but do have certain functional meanings. They have a possible word shape, Cv(C), but they are never stressed. A number of them occur before the main verb. Many seem to be semantically related to the verb morpheme while in other cases they are related to the whole clause or even to a higher level. Without a knowledge of functional meanings of the particles (PT) it is almost impossible to understand the subtlety of the expressions and thus to follow a conversation, story, or talk thoroughly, even though the meanings of all the major words are clearly known. In order to give a clearer view of this curious syntactic feature which may lead to the understanding of inter-clausal syntax in Khmu, an overview will be given here, including a discussion of the verb phrase.

1. I am grateful to my Khmu friends who patiently gave me the data discussed here and for David Thomas' comments and suggestions.
2. Further information on Khmu structure (phonology and syntax) can be found in Suwilai Premsrirat (1987c). Detailed information on phonology (different dialects) and morphology will also be found in Smalley (1961) and Svanesson (1983).
The normal word order in Khmu is SVO. In case of emphasis the OSV order is very common. Examples of normal clause patterns are:

Intransitive clause
- k5:n jam
  child cry
  ‘The child is crying.’

Transitive clause
- nô: paŋ mah
  they eat rice
  ‘They are having a meal.’

Bi-transitive clause
- ūoŋ ?uan maŋ joŋ teŋ kmü:l
  I give parents take money
  ‘I gave my parents some money.’

Semi-transitive clause
- jaŋ jat ta kaŋ
  grandmother stay at home
  ‘My grandmother is at home.’

Equative clause
- ūoŋ mōŋ k5:rù:
  I am teacher
  ‘I am a teacher.’

Existive clause
  ta kaŋ ūŋ h5:iō, ūŋ sōŋ, ūŋ siiŋ
  at home have hen, have dog, have pig
  ‘There are hens, dogs and pigs at home.’

Quotative clause
  joŋ pra:k law jōh bō lō?
  father say before say go well well leaving
  ‘My father wished them a safe trip.’

Modifiers (Mod.) in a noun phrase normally follow the head noun (HN).

HN + Mod.

sōŋ hiŋ pra:r (to:) kam nām kōnæ:j
  dog black two (class.*) which big that
  ‘those two big black dogs’

However, it is noticeable that the reversed orders of clause pattern, (O)VS, and of noun phrase, Mod. + HN, have also been found in text materials.

(1) lam māh lam má:r
  delicious rice delicious salt
  ‘Have a good life.’

3. * refers to the clear tense register of this Khmu variety, whereas the breathy lax register is unmarked.
* = classifier (Ed.).
(2) pu$h kmå?  
fall rain (n.)
'It is raining.'

The Khmu verb phrase normally consists of one or more main verbs (MV) and their modifiers (auxiliaries and preverbal adverbs) occurring mainly in the pre-verbal positions. The pre-verbal modifiers (preV) can be classified into 5 categories according to their positional occurrences away from the main verb.

preV 5 preV 4 preV 3 preV 2 preV 1 MV

PreV 1 indicates state of existence like /piö$/ 'able', /jat/ 'to have been happening, still', /hô:c/ 'already', /cù?/ 'want to', /?ik/ 'not want to', /kɔ:j/ 'slowly, gradually', /lak/ 'completely', /p$h:n/ 'never,' etc.
PreV 2 indicates negative meaning like /pê/ 'not', /plô?/ 'not any more'.
PreV 3 indicates intention, determination and future action like /ce/ 'will'.
PreV 4 indicates tense and aspect like /hâ/ 'already (past action)', /nô:ô/ 'still, will'.
Some of the pre-verbals of category 1 and category 2 like /piö/, /hô:c/, /lak/, and /plô?/ may sometimes be shifted to the post-verbal position.

Examples of verb phrases containing preV 1, 2, 3, and 4 functioning in the clause are

na: p$h:n ?iak pu:c
she never drink wine
'She has never drunk wine.'

(3) snô: hâ rô:t
they (two) already arrive
'They have come.'

(4) ?o? pê piö jôh ta jù?
I not able go to forest
'I did not have a chance to go to the forest.'

I still will go take money before
'I still have to go to take the money first.'

(6) nô: hâ ce plô? piö? ?ôh ja:ô ki:
they already will not any more able do like this
'They will not be able to act like this any more.'
PreV 5 indicates modality such as the actor’s volition, obligation, necessity or ability in doing something. Since it involves a relationship between a causer which may be stated or unstated and the actor and the action it is more like a clause rank notion than a phrase one. In Khmu it contributes a good deal to the inter-clausal relationship. This category includes /tan/, /le/, /cen/, mák/, /kaj/ and /tha/. These will be dealt with in detail in the next section. Examples of Khmu utterances with various pre-verbal particles including the category 5 pre-verbs are

1. **prop lōh las ?i? mák pē pīn joh**
   
   dress body quickly we afraid not able go
   
   ‘Dress quickly otherwise we will not be able to go.’

2. **nāj ?a? law ce pē joh ?a? tan ha ce**
   
   a moment ago I say will not go I certainly already will
   
   pē joh je? joh ?a? le joh
   
   2 MV MV 5 MV
   
   not go you go I therefore go
   
   ‘I said that I would not go so I should not go. But you will go so I will too.’

   
   you go before I certainly will still go
   
   ‘You go first and I will follow you.’

It should be noted here that the preV 3 /ce/ which indicates the future and the speaker’s intention and determination can also function at the inter-clausal level (as will be seen in the next section) whereas the preV 5 /tan/ which also indicates the speaker’s determination or obligation (though in a higher degree) can be manifested at the clause level.

**B. Inter-clausal Relations**

In the context of speech, a semantic sentence represents a minimum speech act consisting of one or more predications (semantic clauses). A structural sentence is therefore composed of at least one main independent clause with or without subordinate clauses and occurs with a distinct illocutionary force (mood) which may be a statement, question or command. In Khmu, two clauses or series of clauses whose meanings are related are structurally joined by various devices. The formal linguistic devices used may be conjunctions, pre-verbal particles, and reversed word

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4. Since these pre-verbal particles do not have any content meaning, the explanation here is presented without giving the meaning of each item. However, in the following examples the approximate meaning of each item has been attempted.

5. The category 4 pre-verbs can appear after the category 3 in certain cases.

   It is noticeable that consciously and off context the co-occurrence between the category 4 pre-verbs /hā/ and /nō:j/ and the category 3 pre-verb /ce/ is considered as ‘possible’ but ‘not quite right’. The /ce/ seems to be the main item.