Relativization, Parataxis, and Underspecification in White Hmong

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Relative clauses in White Hmong (henceforth Hmong) are postnominal and are introduced by an invariant, nonpronominal marker *uas* which is obligatory or strongly preferred in some contexts, optional in others, and preferably not used in still others. All positions on the Keenan-Comrie NP Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan and Comrie 1977) can be relativized, and all positions can show either a gap or a resumptive pronoun (Mottin 1978). An example of relativization of a subject with *uas* is given in 1.

1. ...cov   nplooj tsawb   uas   seem...
    GRP   leaf   banana   that   left over

    'the banana leaves that are left over' (Lis 1986:9)

Example 2 illustrates relativization of an object of a preposition with *uas* and a resumptive pronoun.

2. tus   txiv neeg uas   kuv   pub   ib rab riam
    CLF   man   that   1SG   give 1 CLF knife
    rau   nws
    to   3SG

    'the man that I gave a knife to (him)'
    (Mottin 1978:139; my translation from the French)

Example 3 shows relativization of a direct object without *uas* introducing the clause:

3. ...nws yog ib neeg   nom tswv ntxub
    3SG   be   1   person   official   hate

    'S/he is a person that officials hate.' (Thao 1985:17)

Mottin states that in cases where no ambiguity would arise, the relative marker is often omitted, especially after

a classifier. In Riddle (1989a) I show that not only does *uas* serve to introduce relative clauses and mark them as subordinate, but also, depending on the context, often adds to the degree of specificity expressed by the clause.

In this paper I focus on restrictive relative clauses in which *uas* is optional. I show that omission of *uas* in certain cases can create surface syntactic ambiguity and suggest that this is symptomatic of a larger propensity for parataxis and underspecification in the syntax and morphology of Hmong in general.

I will first give a brief overview of what I consider to be some typical paratactic and underspecified phenomena in Hmong. (See Riddle 1990a,b and Riddle and Stahlke 1992 for further discussion.) Parataxis involves the juxtaposition of elements with no overt marker of subordination or coordination, which means that it underspecifies clause relations on the surface. In Hmong, parataxis of whole clauses is very common, and verb serialization is a major pattern of clause structure. In addition, adverbial clauses are often introduced not by subordinating conjunctions, but rather by NPs which have a paratactic relationship to the rest of the sentence. They may also take the form of an independent existential clause juxtaposed to the beginning of the clause expressing the main assertion, as in 4:

4. Muaj ib hnub Lwj Txheeb Ty Ching coj tau
   have 1 day general   Ty Ching led can
   ib pab   tub rog
   1 group soldier...

'One day General Ty Ching was able to lead a group of soldiers...' (Yang Dao 1987:9)

Reduplication of verbs for emphasis or augmentation is very common. This is paratactic in the sense that two instances of a verb are simply strung together. NPs are also often joined paratactically rather than by a conjunction, which sometimes results in an elaborate expression as in 5.

5. khwv   iab   khwv   daw
    toil   bitter   toil   salty

'arduous toil' (Johns and Strecker 1987:106)

Another form of parataxis occurs when a topic is juxtaposed to the beginning of a sentence. This may be a topic NP not coreferential with the subject, as in 6, a coreferential NP, as in the case of left dislocation in 7, or a whole clause, as in 8:

6. Tej   tus   npuas   hma   noj   tas   ib   ceg...
    GRP   CLF   pig   wolf   eat   finish   1   leg

'Some pigs, the wolf ate only a leg...'
(Fuller 1985:95)

7. Nkauj Ntsuab   thiab   Sis Nab   nkawd   khiav
    Nkauj Ntsuab   and   Sis Nab   3DUAL   run
    tau   ntau   hnub
    get   many   day

'Nkauj Ntsuab and Sis Nab, they ran for many days.' (Johnson 1981:24)

8. Nej   cog   nplej   mas   cog   sib
    2PL   plant   rice   TOP   plant   spaced far apart
    los   tuab
    or   thick

'Do you plant rice spaced far apart or close together?' (Whitelock 1982:86, with amended gloss and translation)

Another notable feature is that a single NP may appear as the surface argument of two items simultaneously, as in 9:

9. Nws   nyeem   ntawv   rau   kuv   niam   nloog
    s/he   read   book   to   my   mother   listen

'S/he's reading to my mother.' (Strecker and Vang 1986:14)

This is paratactic in the sense that what is important is the juxtaposition of the NP in a particular order relative to the other items, and it is an example of what I consider to be underspecification of surface constituent structure.

Finally, compounding is the major word formation strategy in Hmong. This is paratactic in that no element of a compound is morphologically dependent on or subordinate to another, in contrast to affixation. It is often unclear whether to analyze a string as a compound or a phrase. Ratliff (1991) shows that Hmong has a flexible syntax in which lexical items may be ambiguously specified as to word class in the lexicon and in which context may determine syntactic function. In particular, when a noun is semantically underspecified for a particular reference, a unit classifier may complete the meaning of the noun and itself serve as a noun in a noun-noun compound in addition to functioning as a classifier for counting and other purposes. Thus the unit classifier *tus* in 10 is used as part of a noun-noun compound to convey the meaning 'river,' but no additional classifier is needed in those contexts, such as counting, where a classifier is required, as in 11:

10. tus   dej
    CLF   water

    'river'

11. yim   tus   dej
    8   CLF   water

    '8 rivers'

Mottin states that when the relative marker *uas* is omitted, the relative clause is taken as an adjective phrase, adjectives being postnominal as well. Exactly what he means is unclear since his example, given in 12, has a verb plus direct object in the phrase.

12. Nws   qhia   xws li   tus   neeg   muaj   hwj chim
    3SG   teach   like   CLF   person   have   authority