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, non-pronominal 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