

## THE MIDDLE VOICE IN LAI\*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the middle voice in Lai, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Chin Hills of Burma.<sup>1</sup> Lai has reflexive and middle markers that are identical. According to Kemmer (1993), identical marking for the reflexive and middle seems to be the most common arrangement among the various types of middle-marking languages, including Guuge Yimidhrr, Changana, Pangwa, German, and French.

In this paper, I will follow the classifications of Kemmer (1992, 1993) to show the semantic range of middle use in Lai. Although middle voice has a wide range of functions in languages, one semantic generalization is that “the action or state affects the subject of the verb or his interests” (Lyons 1969:373), and the uses of middle markers in Lai seem to fit with Lyons’ generalization. This should be expected, since Lai’s middle marking originates from the reflexive marker, and the function of the reflexive is to mark ‘self’. In addition to the semantics of the middle voice in Lai, I examine its syntax, focusing on the following two points: (1) interaction between Lai’s two verb stem forms and the middle marking; and (2) comparisons of middle sentences and their non-middle counterparts.

### 2. LAI CLAUSE STRUCTURE

Before examining the middle voice in Lai, we need some basic information on Lai clause structure. Lai is an ergative language, and, in general, the subjects of transitives are marked with *ni?*, the ergative marker, while the subjects of intransitives and the objects of transitives are unmarked, or followed with the topic marker *khaa*, as in the following examples:

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<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the language of my consultant is Haka Lai.

- (1)    *nii-huu*        (*khaa*)        *?a-dam*  
       *Ni Hu*        TOP        3SG-heal 1  
       'Ni Hu is fine.'
- (2)    *nii-huu*        *ni?*        *tsew-man*        (*khaa*)        *?a-da?m*  
       *Ni Hu*        ERG        *Ceu Mang*        TOP        3SG-heal 2  
       'Ni Hu healed Ceu Mang.'

As in the above examples, if a verb stem has a transitive-intransitive alternation, the intransitive clause takes verb Form 1, and the transitive clause takes verb Form 2.<sup>2</sup> Note that a satisfactory explanation for the interaction between verb forms, nominal marking and clause types involves a complex interplay of factors. For example, transitive clauses can be non-ergative, when the clause is a question and/or subordinate. Compare examples (3) and (4). Also, intransitive clauses, such as example (5), can take verb Form 2 when the clause is a question and/or subordinate, as in example (6).

- (3)    *fa-tsaŋ*        *?an-suk*  
       rice        3PL-pound 2  
       'They pounded the rice.'
- (4)    *fa-tsaŋ*        *?an-suu*        *moo*  
       rice        3PL-pound 1        Q  
       'Do they pound rice?'
- (5)    *?a-?in*        *?a-thiaŋ*  
       3SG-house        3SG-clean 1  
       'His house is clean.'
- (6)    *?an-?in*        *?a-thian*        *tsa-?a?*        *?an-ŋan-?a-dam*  
       3PL-house        3SG-clean 2        since        3PL-be healthy 1  
       'Since their house is clean, they are healthy.'

To make the following discussions clearer, I will disregard these form alternations and treat only non-interrogative main clauses.

<sup>2</sup> They are indicated by numerals in interlinear glosses (e.g., 'pound 1'); if the stem is invariant, this is indicated by "inv."

### 3. MIDDLE SITUATION TYPES

Kemmer (1992, 1993) has done a typological study of middle voice to show the relationships among different middle uses as well as the difference between middle uses and other related situation types, such as reflexives and passives. The following is her list of situation types in which middle markers may appear (Kemmer 1993). In these situation types, middle voice indicates that the subject is both the 'initiator' (controller or conceived source of action) and the 'endpoint' (affected participant) of the action. Based on this list, I have tried to find the semantic range of middle usage in Lai.

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#### *Middle Situation Types*

1. *Reflexive situation*
  2. *Emphatic domain* (e.g., 'I did it myself')
  3. *Reciprocal domain*
    - (a) *Prototypical reciprocal*
    - (b) *Naturally reciprocal event* (e.g., 'wrestle', 'struggle', 'meet')
  4. *(Middle) passive* (e.g., 'lights are lit')
  5. *Impersonal* (e.g., 'They say that . . .', 'One doesn't do that')
  6. *Facilitative* (e.g., 'This chapter reads easily')
  7. *Body action middle*
    - (a) *Grooming* (e.g., 'bathe', 'shave', 'wash')
    - (b) *Nontranslational motion* (e.g., 'twist', 'turn', 'bend')
    - (c) *Change in body posture* (e.g., 'sit down', 'stand up', 'lie down')
    - (d) *Other body actions* (e.g., 'scratch', 'sneeze', 'cough')
    - (e) *Translational motion: motion with reference to a path* (e.g., 'go', 'fly', 'swim')
    - (f) *Positional*: (e.g., 'be lying', 'be sitting', 'be standing')
  8. *Cognition middle: Mental event*
    - (a) *Emotion middle* (e.g., 'be glad', 'love', 'hope')
    - (b) *Cognition middle* (e.g., 'know', 'suppose', 'think')
    - (c) *Perception middle* (e.g., 'see', 'hear', 'touch')
  9. *Spontaneous event*
    - (a) *Associated with animate beings* (e.g., 'be born', 'grow', 'die')
    - (b) *Associated with inanimate beings* (e.g., 'erupt', 'burst', 'open')
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Table 1. Types of middle use (Kemmer 1993).

All the Lai verbs of grooming that I have examined so far take middle marking when they are performed on oneself, as do many other verbs of body action. Among mental event verbs, some of the verbs of emotion take middle marking, while verbs of cognition and perception do not. However, in Lai, there are two other sets of mental event verbs that may be marked with the middle. I call one set ‘emotive evaluation’ verbs. They designate evaluations that involve the evaluator’s emotion to a large degree. The other I call ‘self-affecting mental/emotive action’ verbs. They designate mental actions that affect the self and that can also be thought of as emotion verbs. As for ‘spontaneous event’ verbs, some take middle marking, but many do not. Note that Type 2 (Emphatic) does not require middle marking in Lai, and that Types 4 (Middle passive), 5 (Impersonal), and 6 (Facilitative) do not seem to exist in Lai.

My data also include cases of ‘middle voice derivation’, where middle marking creates a different meaning of a verb (e.g., ‘compete’ > ‘try’). In addition, there is an interesting use of middle marking together with causative marking. Sentences with both markings mean either ‘X let Y do something to X’ or ‘X actually does something to Y or pretends to do something to Y as a pretext in order to mislead somebody’. What seems to be common to all uses of Lai middle voice, however, is that the initiator and endpoint are the same or at least very hard to distinguish. In the following sections, the syntax and semantics of different middle situation types will be discussed.

## 4. REFLEXIVES

### 4.1. *Direct reflexives*

Lai verbs take the subject and object markers listed in Table 2 below in the order of *subject* + *object* + *V*, as the following examples indicate.

- (7) ka-thoʔŋ

1SG-hit 2

‘I hit him.’

- (8) nan-kan-thoʔŋ

2PL-1PL-hit 2

‘You guys hit us.’

- (9) tsew-man      niʔ      thil      ʔa-baʔ

Ceu Mang      ERG      clothes      3SG-hang 2

‘Ceu Mang has hung up his clothes.’