LAI PSYCHO-COLLOCATION*

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INTRODUCTION

With the initial work of Matisoff, followed by studies like those of Jaisser 1990 and Oey 1990, it has become clear that "psycho-collocations" are an essential feature of many languages in Southeast Asia. According to Matisoff (1986:9), who coined the term, a "psycho-collocation" is defined as:

a polymorphemic expression referring as a whole to a mental process, quality, or state, one of whose constituents is a psycho-noun, i.e., a noun with explicit psychological reference (translatable by English words like HEART, MIND, SPIRIT, SOUL, TEMPER, NATURE, DISPOSITION, MOOD). The rest of the psycho-collocation contains morphemes (usually action verbs or adjectives) that complete the meaning.

What Matisoff proposes might be represented briefly as follows:

\[ \text{Psycho-noun} + \text{Psycho-mate} = \text{Psycho-collocation} \]

In the above equation, the "psycho-noun" could be 'heart', 'liver', or other body parts. Lai, also called Haka Chin, is one of the languages that has expressions using heart, liver, and other body parts for psycho-collocation; although in these Lai expressions action-verbs involving some body parts as well as some abstract nouns that are external to the body (e.g., 'enemy') can also fill the role of "psycho-noun." The "psycho-mate" is usually a verb or adjective.

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LAI SYNTAX

Before approaching Lai psycho-collocations, I would like to discuss some aspects of Lai syntax.

Lai is an SOV language. The first type of syntactic construction to note is how the marker ?a represents a third person subject of a sentence.¹ For example:

(1) nii-huŋ ?a raa
Ni Hu 3SG SUBJ come I (rat II)²
‘Ni Hu came.’

(2) tsoo-leŋ ?a rook
cow-vehicle 3SG SUBJ break down I (roo? II)
‘The cart broke down.’

(3) ka tsoo-leŋ ?a rook
1SG POSS cow-vehicle 3SG SUBJ break down I (roo? II)
‘My cart broke down.’

It is important to understand this type of syntax in order to understand the similar syntax involved in Lai psycho-collocation. For example:

(4) ka luŋ ?a rook
1SG POSS heart 3SG SUBJ break down I (roo? II)
‘I am disappointed’ (literally, ‘My heart broke down’)

Here, the third person marker ?a represents the subject ka luŋ.

When both the subject and the object are marked pronominally on the verb, the former precedes the latter. For example:

(5) na kan zuar
2SG SUBJ 1PL OBJ sell I (zo?r II)
‘You betrayed us. (lit., ‘You sold us’)’

¹ This marker is unspecified for gender. Here it is sometimes translated as ‘he/she’ and sometimes simply as ‘he’ for short.
² Most Lai verbs have two morphophonemically related forms, which occur in different syntactic environments. For ease of reference, each verb in the examples is followed by its variant in parentheses; i.e., if the verb in the example is Form I, the Form II alternant is provided in parentheses, and vice versa.
Lai psycho-collocation

(6) ka luŋ ?a rook
1SG POSS heart 3SG OBJ break down I (roo? II)
‘I am disappointed at him / her.’ (lit., ‘My heart broke down at him / her’)

(7) ka luŋ na rook
1SG POSS heart 2SG OBJ break down I (roo? II)
‘I am disappointed at you.’ (lit., ‘My heart broke down at you’)

(8) ka luŋ kan rook
1SG POSS liver 1PL OBJ break down I (roo? II)
‘I am disappointed at us’ (lit., ‘My heart broke down at us’)

Here, we need to note that when the third person marker ?a is involved, there can be two interpretations, one representing the subject and one the object. Sometimes, ?a can be interpreted either way depending on the context:

(9) ka luu ?a rii
1SG POSS head 3SG SUBJ drunk I (riit II)
‘I am confused.’ (lit., ‘My head is drunk’)

(10) ka luu ?a rii
1SG POSS head 3SG SUBJ drunk I (riit II)
‘He made me confused.’ (‘I am confused at him’, lit., ‘My head is drunk at him’)

I will provide an explanation when both interpretations are possible. However, at times only one interpretation is possible. For example:

(11) ka thluak ?a buu
1SG POSS brain 3SG SUBJ/*OBJ crowded I (buut II)
‘I am unintelligent.’ (lit., ‘My brain is [too] crowded [to absorb other things]’)

(12) ka zaŋ ?a faak
1SG POSS strength 3SG OBJ/*SUBJ painful I (fa? II)
‘I pity him.’ (lit., ‘My strength is painful [with] him’)

Another syntactic structure to be mentioned is a simple one involving the
verb ṃay ('have / possess'). For example:

(13)  tsoo-leen  ṃay
      cow-vehicle  3SG SUBJ  have I (ṁa?y II)  
      'He has a cart.'

(14)  tsoo-leen  kə  ṃay
      cow-vehicle  1SG SUBJ  have I (ṁa?y II)  
      'I have a cart.'

(15)  mit-paar  ṃay
      eye-flower  3SG SUBJ  have I (ṁa?y II)  
      'He is fickle (= a womanizer).’ (lit., 'He has eye-flower')

Having discussed these few general points, I will now proceed to my main topic. First, I will discuss the psycho-collocations that use body parts as their psycho-nouns. In order to emphasize how real body-part nouns are used in Lai psycho-collocation, my examples in this category will start with ‘head’ and proceed down the body. Secondly, I will treat those psycho-collocations that use Form II of body-action verbs as their psycho-nouns. Thirdly, I will discuss the psycho-collocations that have “extensive” (external) psycho-nouns. Fourthly, I will consider some psycho-collocations that are so lexicalized that the psycho-noun or the psycho-mate has no meaning anymore apart from the psycho-collocation. Fifthly, I will describe the psycho-collocations that use middle voice only. Finally, I will present some idioms that involve the use of psycho-collocations, and selectively attempt to explain their semantics.

I. PSYCHO-COLLOCATIONS WITH REAL BODY PARTS AS THE PSYCHO-NOUN

A. luu (‘head’)

(16)  kə  luu  ṃay  rii
      1SG POSS  head  3SG SUBJ  drunk I (riit II)  
      'I am confused.' (lit., ‘My head is drunk’)

(17)  kə  luu  ṃay  rii
      1SG POSS  head  3SG OBJ  drunk I (riit II)  
      'I am confused at him.’ (lit., ‘My head is drunk [with] him’)