

## 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:

*Psycho-noun* + *Psycho-mate* = *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.<sup>1</sup> For example:

- (1)    *nii-huu*    *?a*                    *raa*  
       Ni Hu      3SG SUBJ    come I (rat II)<sup>2</sup>  
       ‘Ni Hu came.’
- (2)    *tsoo-leen*    *?a*                    *rook*  
       cow-vehicle    3SG SUBJ    break down I (roo? II)  
       ‘The cart broke down.’
- (3)    *ka*                    *tsoo-leen*    *?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’)

<sup>1</sup> This marker is unspecified for gender. Here it is sometimes translated as ‘he/she’ and sometimes simply as ‘he’ for short.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

- (6)    ka            luŋ        ʔa            rook  
       1SG POSS    heart    3SG OBJ    break down I (rooʔ 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 (rooʔ 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 (rooʔ II)  
       'I am disappointed at us' (lit., 'My heart broke down at us')

Here, we need to note that when the third person marker ʔa is involved, there can be two interpretations, one representing the subject and one the object.

Sometimes, ʔa can be interpreted either way depending on the context:

- (9)    ka            luu        ʔa            ri  
       1SG POSS    head    3SG SUBJ    drunk I (riit II)  
       'I am confused.' (lit., 'My head is drunk')
- (10)   ka            luu        ʔa            ri  
       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    ʔa            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            zaan        ʔa            faak  
       1SG POSS    strength 3SG OBJ /\*SUBJ    painful I (faʔ II)  
       'I pity him.' (lit., 'My strength is painful [with] him')

Another syntactic structure to be mentioned is a simple one involving the

verb *ɲay* ('have / possess'). For example:

- (13)    *tsoo-leenɲ*        *ʔa*                    *ɲay*  
          cow-vehicle    3SG SUBJ        have I (*ɲaʔy* II)  
          'He has a cart.'
- (14)    *tsoo-leenɲ*        *ka*                    *ɲay*  
          cow-vehicle    1SG SUBJ        have I (*ɲaʔy* II)  
          'I have a cart.'
- (15)    *mit-paar*            *ʔa*                    *ɲay*  
          eye-flower      3SG SUBJ        have I (*ɲaʔy* 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)    *ka*                    *luu*            *ʔa*                    *rii*  
          1SG POSS    head        3SG SUBJ    drunk I (*riit* II)  
          'I am confused.' (lit., 'My head is drunk')
- (17)    *ka*                    *luu*            *ʔa*                    *rii*  
          1SG POSS    head        3SG OBJ    drunk I (*riit* II)  
          'I am confused at him.' (lit., 'My head is drunk [with] him')