

## Clitic Climbing in Lai'

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Our attention here will focus on Lai sentences like (1), in particular on the underlined portion, which may be rendered into English as (2).

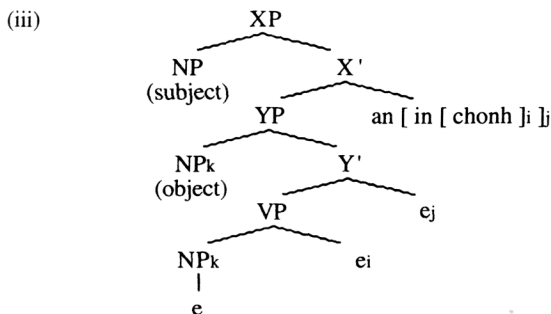
- (1) Na nu le na naule cu lengah an dir ko i, chonh an in duh.  
(Mt. 12:47)<sup>2</sup>
- (2) Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak to you.

As argued in Bedell (1995), the words an and in in (1) mark agreement with the subject (your mother and brothers) and object (you) respectively. Specifically, in 'you' appears syntactically associated with the verb duh 'want' rather than with the verb chonh 'speak' in spite of marking agreement with the semantic object of the latter. This can perhaps be clarified by comparing (1) with (3) and (4).

- (3) an in chonh 'they spoke to you'
- (4) an in duh 'they love you'

The meaning of in in (1) is identical to that in (3), but its syntactic position is identical to that in (4).

We take the syntactic structure of (3) to be something like (iii):



The structure of (4) will differ only in having duh in the position of chonh. In (iii), following the principles of X' Theory,<sup>3</sup> XP is equivalent to S representing a clause, but its head is taken to be an, the subject agreement marker. YP intervenes between the object position and X', and treats the object in parallel with the subject; its head is the object agreement marker in. The object position is anchored within VP by the empty NPk coindexed with it. In some analyses the subject is similarly anchored (the VP-internal subject hypothesis). Since we are concerned primarily with the

verb, these matters are left open. In some analyses, the verb complex

an [ in [ chonh ]i ]j

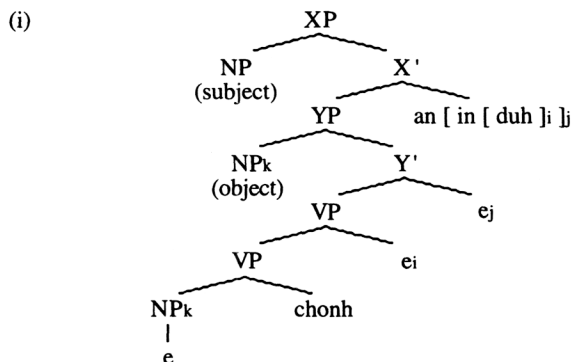
is created by syntactically moving the verb chonh out of the VP up to join with in and then again to join with an. We prefer to reserve judgment as to whether actual movement is involved in such structures or not; what is important is the anchoring of the various components of the verb complex to the head Y and V positions.

The construction in (1) is impossible in English (\*they want to you to speak), but it resembles Spanish (5).

(5) Tu madre y tus hermanos están afuera, y te quieren hablar.

In (5), te 'you' appears syntactically associated with the verb quieren 'they want' rather than with the verb hablar 'to speak'. In languages like Spanish this construction is called 'clitic climbing' from the idea that the object clitic pronoun te moves up syntactically from with the phrase headed by hablar into that headed by quieren.

We take the structure of (1) to be something like (i).



As shown in (i), chonh is analyzed as a kind of infinitive construction where there is no place for agreement to be manifested. The empty NPk here anchors no object position associated with chonh, but rather one associated with duh. An object pronoun can appear if contrasted, as in (6).<sup>5</sup>

(6) nangmah cu chonh an in duh 'they want to speak to you'

Spanish allows a variant in which no clitic climbing takes place, as in (8). Lai has no such variant; that is, it does not allow in to associate with the lower verb alone as in (7).

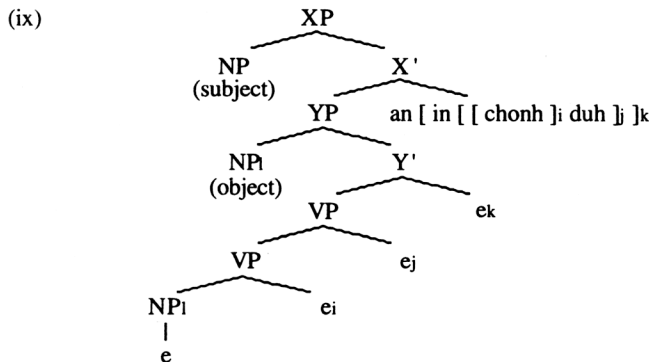
(7) \*in chonh an duh

## (8) quieren hablarte

(i) as above already explains why (7) is not possible: there is no object agreement structure above the verb chonh. The question then naturally arises of how the syntax of Spanish differs from (i) so as to allow (8). The primary difference is that Spanish verbs do not show object agreement like Lai verbs, so that te in (5) or (8) is not an agreement marker like in in (1), but rather a pronoun, and the object of the verb hablar. What te and in share is then not their semantic status, but rather the property of being clitics: syntactically (and also phonologically) depending on the adjacent verb. The infinitive verb hablar in (5) or (8) is like chonh in having no agreement structure but this does not prevent it from having an overt object. The possibility of te climbing as in (5) is due to its clitic status, but there is no need for it to do so. If so, then it will be te that is co-indexed with the empty object of hablar in the structure of (5), whereas in is not so anchored in (i).<sup>6</sup> We retain the term clitic climbing for (1) even though strictly speaking (i) precludes any actual movement of in in the same sense as te might have moved in (5).

Although (7) is ungrammatical in Lai, (9) represents a possible variant of (1); here both agreement markers appear to be associated with chonh rather than with duh. We take structure of (9) to be something like (ix).

## (9) an in chonh duh



That is, in (9) chonh is indeed the main verb, but duh serves as a kind of suffix within the verb complex. There is no analog to this construction like (10), since the stem of querer (to want) cannot serve as a verbal affix in Spanish.<sup>7</sup>

## (10) \*querer te hablen

That the structure of (9) is indeed (ix) can be argued with reference to other possibilities in the Lai verb complex.<sup>8</sup> (11) differs from (4) in that the second person object is plural rather than singular. Plurality is marked by hna after the finite verb.

- (11) an in chonh hna 'they spoke to you'

The plural object form corresponding to (1) is (12). If hna originates in the same head Y position in (i) as in, then the ungrammaticality of (13) has the same explanation as (7).

- (12) chonh an in duh hna 'they want to speak to you'

- (13) \*chonh hna an in duh

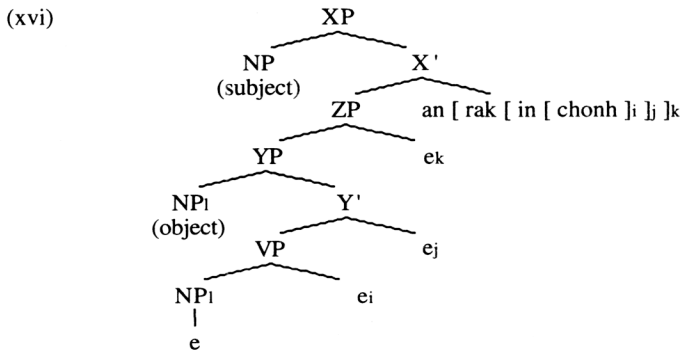
The plural object form corresponding to (9) is (14), and not the ungrammatical (15); (ix) accounts for this contrast, since duh attaches to chonh before hna does.

- (14) an in chonh duh hna

- (15) \*an in chonh hna duh

(16) and its assumed structure (xvi) illustrate one Lai tense/aspect marker.

- (16) an rak in chonh 'they have spoken to you'



The perfect marker rak does not belong to the Lai agreement system, but has its own syntactic status, represented in (xvi) as head of ZP, between YP and X'. (xvi) accounts for the position of rak in (16) following the subject agreement marker an but preceding the object agreement marker in.<sup>10</sup> (17) corresponds to (1) with the addition of rak, and (19) to (9). But rak cannot be placed independently of the agreement markers, as in (18) or (20).

- (17) chonh an rak in duh 'they have wanted to speak to you'

- (18) \*rak chonh an in duh

- (19) an rak in chonh duh

- (20) \*an in chonh rak duh

(18) is ungrammatical for the same reason as (7) and (13): the infinitive chonh lacks the necessary syntactic position. (20) is ungrammatical for the same reason as (15): because duh is suffixed to chonh before rak is attached. This reinforces the appropriateness of (xvi), since rak semantically modifies duh (or perhaps the combination chonh duh) rather than chonh.

A second Lai tense/aspect marker is the future lai, as illustrated in (21).

- (21) an in chonh lai 'they will speak to you'

The structure of (21) is parallel to (xvi), with lai anchored to the head Z position. The difference is that lai, like the number agreement marker hna, follows the verb it is associated with rather than preceding it. (22) is the future corresponding to (1) and (24) the future corresponding to (9).

- (22) chonh an in duh lai 'they will want to speak to you'

- (23) \*chonh lai an in duh

- (24) an in chonh duh lai

- (25) \*an in chonh lai duh

(23) is ungrammatical in parallel with (7), (13) and (18); (25) is parallel with (15) and (20) in showing that chonh is not an independent verb in (9). Finally, (26) to (28) provide further evidence for the positioning of object agreement (YP) beneath tense/aspect (ZP).

- (26) an in chonh hna lai

- (27) chonh an in duh hna lai

- (28) an in chonh duh hna lai

Lai has other verbs than duh which occur in a clitic climbing construction like (i); zalh 'try' is illustrated in (29). However, duh appears to be the only Lai verb which may also occur in a suffixed construction like (ix).

- (29) chonh an in zalh 'they tried to speak to you'

- (30) \*an in chonh zalh

(30) is ungrammatical because zalh cannot suffix to other verbs. Lai also has other suffixes than duh which form complex verbs; the causative -ter is illustrated in (32). However, duh appears to be the only Lai suffix which may also occur as an independent verb.

- (31) \*chonh an in ter

(32) an in chonhter 'they made/let you speak to him'<sup>11</sup>

(31) is ungrammatical because there is no verb ter.

A final point about the syntactic variation between (1) and (9) concerns the morphology of Lai verbs.<sup>12</sup> (33) and (34) illustrate the same variation; in (33) the finite verb is duh and kal (go) is an infinitive, but in (34) the finite verb is the suffixed kal duh. Here kal is an intransitive verb, so there is no overt object agreement or clitic climbing.

(33) kal ka duh 'I want to go'

(34) ka kal duh

In (35) and (36), the verb meaning 'come' differs in form in the two constructions; rat serves as the infinitive form, but ra appears when duh is suffixed.

(35) rat ka duh 'I want to come'

(36) ka ra duh

A difference at times appears with the verb chonh as well, as in (37) and (38).

(37) chonh ka duh 'I want to speak to him/her'

(38) ka chon duh

The form ra as in (36) is found in declarative as well as imperative clauses; rat as in (37) appears in various subordinate structures, and in suffixed forms like ratpi 'bring along (a person)' or ratnak 'coming'. The distribution of chon in (38) versus chonh in (37) is quite different, the former being confined to imperative clauses and the suffixed duh construction if both subject and object are singular. This morphological variation is too complex to pursue here;<sup>13</sup> beyond providing general support for the syntactic distinctness of (1) versus (9), it appears neither to provide support nor pose problems for the analysis we propose.

We have argued that in clitic climbing constructions such as (1), the lower verb (chonh here) is in a kind of infinitive form, which accounts for its inability to agree with its semantic object as in (7).

(1) chonh an in duh

(7) \*in chonh an duh

In this construction the subject of chonh is understood to be identical to the subject of duh. If the two subjects are not the same, then the infinitive construction is not possible. One alternative is illustrated in (39), in which there is a full finite clause complement to duh.

(39) na ka chonh ah an duh 'they want you to speak to me'

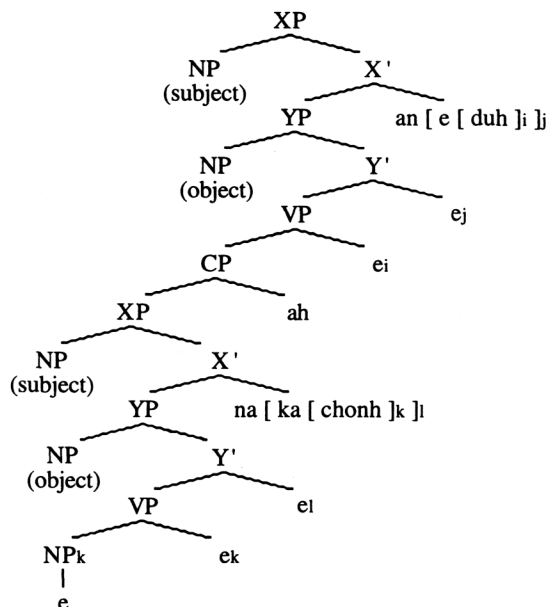
In (a) chonh agrees with both subject and object, just as in (40);<sup>14</sup> it is even possible to use some tense/aspect markers, as in (41).<sup>15</sup>

(40) na ka chonh 'you spoke to me'

(41) na rak ka chonh ah an duh

Thus the syntactic structure of (39) should be something like (xxxix).

(xxxix)



There is a second construction expressing approximately the meaning of (39). (42) is related to (43) as (39) is to (40); that is, the verb duh may also take an imperative complement.

(42) (rak) ka chon seh ti an in duh

(43) (rak) ka chon seh 'let him/her speak to me'

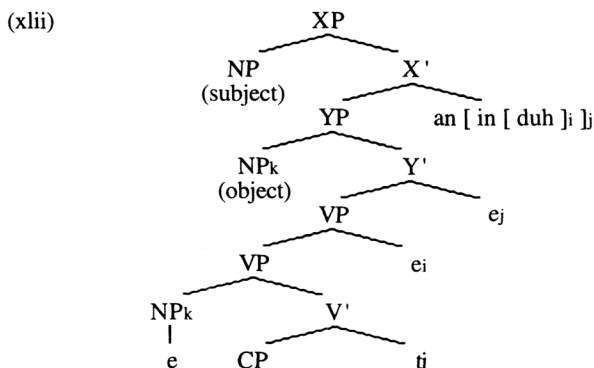
In (42) the underlined in shows that the subject of the imperative complement is second person; without it, the meaning would be 'they want him/her to speak to me'.<sup>16</sup> There are at least two curious points about this construction. One is that the complement is understood to have a second person subject, but the third person mood marker seh appears. The second is that the underlined in looks like the in of the clitic climbing construction (1), but it agrees with the subject rather than with the object of chon/h. To anchor the object position of duh (as we did to the object of chonh in (i))

to the subject of chonh in (xxxix) would violate well established locality principles in almost any current version of syntactic theory.<sup>17</sup>

A possible key to the analysis this construction is the quotative particle ti, which seems related to the verb ti 'say' in examples like (44).

- (44)            an in ti                            'they said to you'

If ti retains the ability to take an (indirect) object in (42), then perhaps it is that object which interprets in rather than anything lower down. In this analysis, the relevant portion of the structure of (42) would look something like (xlii).<sup>18</sup>



An argument that ti is indeed involved appears in (45) to (48).

- (45)            (rak) chon hna law ti ka duh    'I want you to speak to them'
- (46)            (rak) chon hna law ti kan duh
- (47)            (rak) chon hna law ka duh
- (48)            \*(rak) chon hna law kan duh

Unlike seh in (42), law in these examples does not require the presence of ti. If ti appears then object agreement is possible with duh, as in (46) (though not required as (45) shows; the example is unambiguous). If ti does not appear, however, neither can object agreement; only (47) and not (48) is grammatical.

This approach faces at least two difficulties. One is that the quotative particle ti does not retain all the characteristics of a verb; it cannot for example have duh suffixed to it, as in (49).

- (49)            \*(rak) ka chon seh an in ti duh

The other is that when an overt independent pronoun appears, it is marked as if it



were a subject (within CP in (xlii)) and not an object (the empty NP<sub>k</sub> in (xlii)).<sup>19</sup>

(50) nangmah nih (rak) ka chon seh ti an in duh

(51) \*nangmah cu (rak) ka chon seh ti an in duh

Particularly the second fact is problematic, since the object position which apparently cannot be filled appears to be a necessary component of the object agreement structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Lai is spoken in and around the town of Hakha, present administrative capital of Chin State, Myanmar. It is often called (Hakha) Chin in linguistic literature. I am grateful to Rev. Samuel Ngun Ling for teaching me what I know about Lai, and to F. K. Lehman for various helpful comments and suggestions. This is the preliminary version of a paper prepared for presentation at Pan-Asiatic Linguistics: the Fourth International Symposium on Language and Linguistics, to be held in Bangkok, January 8-10, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> This example is taken from the Lai Bible (1978). In giving other examples I have followed the (slightly archaic) Biblical usage of agreement particles described in Bedell (1995). Nothing of importance depends on this stylistic choice.

<sup>3</sup> X' (X-bar) Theory was originally introduced in Chomsky (1970). It is described in most current textbooks of generative grammar, though very recently alternative, less structured versions are being promoted. The analysis of INFL into subject agreement (here X), tense and object agreement (here Y) appears in Chomsky (1991).

<sup>4</sup> The Spanish verb querer, like Lai duh, has the meaning 'love' with physical overtones, when used as a transitive verb with a human object.

<sup>5</sup> Spanish has a parallel usage involving a non-clitic pronoun under contrast. Compare (a) with (5). In (a), a ti corresponds to nangmah cu in (6). This is also possible with the variant given in (8); cf. (b):

- (a)                      te quieren hablar a ti  
(b)                      quieren hablarte a ti

<sup>6</sup> In some analyses of Spanish object clitics, they are in fact taken to be agreement markers, particularly in dialects which permit them to appear with overt non-pronoun objects (so-called 'clitic doubling'); under such an analysis, it would be necessary to assume that Spanish infinitives differ from Lai in retaining object agreement structure. See Hendrick (1995) for a recent review of clitic constructions and references to the literature.

<sup>7</sup> In this example, the subjunctive mood has been used in hables, by analogy with (e) below.

<sup>8</sup> If this analysis is correct, it would be reasonable to write chonhduh as a single word on the analogy of other complex predicates like chonhter in example (32) below. But even these are sometimes written e. g. chonh ter.

<sup>9</sup> Z corresponds to tense in the system of Chomsky (1991). Cf. footnote 3. Perhaps an empty Z position should be included in structures like (iii), (i) and (ix).

<sup>10</sup> Lehman (1995) argues that the position of rak is to be attributed to its status as a directional auxiliary verb, and that it cannot be a 'modal or aspectual particle' because such particles are (like lai) post-verbal. Whatever the appeal of his analysis in a historical/comparative context, ours seems simpler and more consistent with Lai syntax. Although some of the other items he cites (e. g. rung, hung and yung) are directional and transparently related to verbs of motion, we would treat them as tense/aspect particles (which head ZP) as well.

<sup>11</sup> As is typical in causative constructions, the object of the causative verb chonhter corresponds to the subject rather than the object of chonh. The object of chonh may be explicit in the sentence, but no agreement marking is possible, given the restriction to agreement with at most one object.

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to F. K. Lehman for calling examples like (35) and (36) to my attention.

<sup>13</sup> See Lehman (1982) for discussion.

<sup>14</sup> This is quite different from English, in which an infinitive can be accompanied by an overt subject as in (c), but it resembles Spanish, in which the complement clause in (e) is finite, though in the subjunctive mood. Lai and Spanish both resemble the (semi-grammatical) English (d).

- (c) they want you to speak to me
- (d) ?they want that you speak to me
- (e) quieren que me hables

The Lai word ah, often a locative or directional postposition, functions in (39) as a complementizer parallel to English that or Spanish que.

<sup>15</sup> Its use in examples like (42) and (43) provides support for the observation in Lehman (1995) that ra is a perfect marker; here ra emphasizes the completion of the communication which is requested. It is less easily reconciled with his further claim that ra functions to directionalize realis events toward the past in 'an aspectual state space', since here we are dealing with future, irrealis events.

<sup>16</sup> A Biblical example of this construction is (f).

- (f) Pathian nih tuah hna seh ti an duhmi hna kha (Rom 2:18)  
'the things which God wants you to do'

It is clear from the singular overt clause subject Pathian nih 'God' that an marks second person object agreement as well as third person subject agreement.

<sup>17</sup> Thus no construction like (g) or (h) is possible in Spanish as a variant of (e).

- (g) \*te quieren que hablarme
- (h) \*me quieren que hables

Such examples have a status similar to Lai (i) or (j) if intended as equivalent to (39).

- (i) \*ka chonh ah an in duh
- (j) \*na chonh ah an ka duh

<sup>18</sup> The most obvious alternative would be to analyze ti as a complementizer (the head position of CP) in (xxxix). Cf. footnote 14.

<sup>19</sup> (50) and (51) are to be compared with (6). The nominal particles nih and cu probably are not case markers in the syntactic sense (they are not obligatory), but they serve to distinguish between subjects/agents and other NPs.