

Agreement in Lai¹

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Lai verbs are typically accompanied by particles selected from a rather large inventory, constituting a 'verb complex'. Among these are pronominal particles like a in sentence (3).

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|-----|----------|------------------------------------|
| (1) | Ka kal. | 'I go/went' |
| (2) | Na kal. | 'you go/went' |
| (3) | A kal. | 'he/she/it goes/went' ² |
| (4) | Kan kal. | 'we go/went' |
| (5) | Nan kal. | 'you go/went' |
| (6) | An kal. | 'they go/went' |

The use of a is obligatory in this example, and indicates that the subject is third person singular. The same verb may be used without any such particle, as in the singular imperative (7) or in an infinitive construction as in (8).

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|-----|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| (7) | Kal. | 'go' |
| (8) | Kal a duh. ³ | 'he/she/it wants/wanted to go' |

(1) through (6) illustrate a set of such particles which distinguish person (first, second or third) and number (singular or plural) of subjects. The plural particles kan, nan and an might be analyzed as the singular ka, na and a followed by a plural suffix -n.

The verb kal 'go' is intransitive; with a transitive verb such as hmuh 'see' particles are also used to indicate the person and number of an object.

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|------|--------------|---------------------------------|
| (9) | Kan hmuh. | 'I see/saw you' |
| (10) | Ka hmuh. | 'I see/saw him/her/it' |
| (11) | Na ka hmuh. | 'you see/saw me' |
| (12) | Na hmuh. | 'you see/saw him/her/it' |
| (13) | A ka hmuh. | 'he/she/it sees/saw me' |
| (14) | An hmuh. | 'he/she/it sees/saw you' |
| (15) | A hmuh. | 'he/she/it sees/saw him/her/it' |
| (16) | Kan in hmuh. | 'we see/saw you' |
| (17) | Kan hmuh. | 'we see/saw him/her/it' |

(18)	Nan ka hmuh.	'you see/saw me'
(19)	Nan hmuh.	'you see/saw him/her/it'
(20)	An ka hmuh.	'they see/saw me'
(21)	An in hmuh.	'they see/saw you'
(22)	An hmuh.	'they see/saw him/her/it'

There is no third person particle for an object; thus (10), (12), (15), (17), (19) and (22) are morphologically identical to (1) to (6) respectively. The existence of an object in the former case must be inferred from the meaning of hmuh. A first person object is indicated by the same particle ka as a first person subject; an object particle is invariably accompanied by a preceding subject particle. Finally, a second person object is indicated by kan or an in (9) and (14), together with a third or first person singular subject. This might be analysed as a second person object suffix -n identical with the subject plural. But with a plural subject as in (16) and (21) a second person object is indicated by a particle in distinct from the second person subject na.

Just as singularity of a subject particle is indicated by the absence of any indication of plurality, so the objects in (9) to (22) above are singular. Plurality of an object is indicated as in (23) through (36).

(23)	Kan hmuh hna.	'I see/saw you' ⁴
(24)	Ka hmuh hna.	'I see/saw them'
(25)	Na kan hmuh.	'you see/saw us'
(26)	Na hmuh hna.	'you see/saw them'
(27)	A kan hmuh.	'he/she/it sees/saw us'
(28)	An hmuh hna.	'he/she/it sees/saw you'
(29)	A hmuh hna.	'he/she/it sees/saw them'
(30)	Kan in hmuh hna.	'we/saw you'
(31)	Kan hmuh hna.	'we see/saw them'
(32)	Nan kan hmuh.	'you see/saw us'
(33)	Nan hmuh hna.	'you see/saw them'
(34)	An kan hmuh.	'they see/saw me'
(35)	An in hmuh hna.	'they see/saw you'
(36)	An hmuh hna.	'they see/saw them'

A first person plural object is indicated in the same way as a first

are indicated by the mood particles ning, sih or seh.

Transitive verbs follow the analogous pattern, with the person and number of an object indicated as in ordinary declarative sentences.

(46)	In zoh ning.	'let me look at you'
(47)	Zoh ning.	'let me look at him/her/it'
(48)	Ka zoh.	'look at me'
(49)	Zoh.	'look at him/her/it' (or 'look')
(50)	Ka zoh seh.	'may he/she look at me'
(51)	In zoh seh.	'may he/she look at you'
(52)	Zoh seh.	'may he/she look at him/her/it'
(53)	In zoh u sih.	'let us look at you'
(54)	Zoh u sih.	'let us look at him/her/it'
(55)	Ka zoh u.	'look at me'
(56)	Zoh u.	'look at him/her/it'
(57)	Ka zoh hna seh.	'may they look at me'
(58)	In zoh hna seh.	'may they look at you'
(59)	Zoh hna seh.	'may they look at him/her/it'
(60)	In zoh hna ning.	'let me look at you'
(61)	Zoh hna ning.	'let me look at them'
(62)	Kan zoh.	'look at us'
(63)	Zoh hna.	'look at them'
(64)	Kan zoh seh.	'may he/she look at us'
(65)	In zoh hna seh.	'may he/she look at you'
(66)	Zoh hna seh.	'may he/she look at them'
(67)	In zoh hna u sih.	'let us look at you'
(68)	Zoh hna u sih.	'let us look at them'
(69)	Kan zoh u.	'look at us'
(70)	Zoh hna u.	'look at them'
(71)	Kan zoh hna seh.	'may they look at us'
(72)	In zoh hna seh.	'may they look at you'
(73)	Zoh hna seh.	'may they look at them'

Plurality of a first or second person subject is shown by u and of a third person subject by hna. Although hna and u may both appear as in (68) and (70), only one hna is possible which may show plurality of the subject, the object, or both with a third person subject as in (59), (66) or (73).

The primary claim to be defended in the present discussion is that the system of pronominal particles in Lai should be regarded as a system of agreement marking between the verb (or verb complex) and its subject and object. First of all, it is clear that these particles are not independent pronouns, since there are other Lai words which have this function. The basic Lai pronouns seem to be kei and nang in (74); the third person or plural forms consist of a pronominal particle combined with nih.

(74)	kei	'I/me'	kannih	'we/us'
	nang	'you'	nannih	'you'
	anih	'he/him/she/her/it'	annih	'they/them'

A second set of pronouns have kei and nang combined with an element mah, which alone means 'self'. Third person and plural pronouns consist of mah replacing nih, as in (75).

(75)	keimah	'I/me'	kanmah	'we/us'
	nangmah	'you'	nanmah	'you'
	amah	'he/him/she/her/it'	anmah	'they/them'

Some examples of Lai pronouns are as follows, where both pronouns and pronominal particles have been underlined.

(76)	<u>Nang</u> Maw <u>Kei</u>	'You or I' (title of story)	LC3 27 ⁹
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(77)	<u>kei</u> zong <u>amah</u> cu <u>ka</u> va bia ve lai	
	'I too will go worship him'	Mt 2: 8

(78)	<u>nang</u> zong mi dang cung i thratlonak <u>na</u> tuah ahcun	
	'if you too do evil to another person'	LC3 28

(79)	<u>keimah</u> pei <u>nangmah</u> nih tipil pek awk <u>ka</u> si cu,	
	<u>ka</u> sin i <u>nangmah</u> lehtuk <u>na</u> rat	Mt 3: 14
	'I must be baptised by you, and instead you come to me'	

(80)	<u>annih</u> nih <u>an</u> kut in <u>an</u> <u>in</u> domh lai	
	'they will hold you in their hands'	Mt 4: 6

(81)	<u>kei</u> nih cun hitihin <u>ka</u> ti	'I say this'	Mt 5: 32
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(82) nannih cu thla nan cam tikah 'when you pray' Mt 6: 6

Pronominal particles are located within the verb complex¹⁰ and are not found in ordinary noun phrase positions; the distribution of pronouns is precisely the reverse. Thus pronouns must be used in (76); *na maw ka would be quite unintelligible. Similarly, only pronouns may be accompanied by noun phrase particles such as zong 'too' in (77) and (78), nih in (79) and (80) or cu in (77) and (82); *ka zong or *a cu would be impossible.¹¹

Noun phrases in Lai, including subject and objects, may be variously ordered, subject to pragmatic factors, though the verb complex is generally in final position. Pronouns share this property of noun phrases, though there is no direct illustration in the preceding examples. Particles in the Lai verb complex, on the other hand, are rigidly ordered with respect both to the verb and to each other. As illustrated in (9) through (36), a subject particle followed by an object particle (if any) always precede the verb, while number particles follow the verb, in the order shown in (67) and (70) if two are present. The number particles u and hna always precede the mood particles ning, sih or seh. There are a few particles, including the aspect particle rak, which (if they appear) come between a distinct subject and object particle; compare (83) and (84) with (11) and (16).

(83) Na rak ka hmuh. 'you have seen me'

(84) Kan rak in hmuh. 'we have seen you'

Such a particle blocks the marking of a second person object as a suffixed -n; compare (85) with (9).

(85) Ka rak in hmuh. 'I have seen you'

When a pronoun is used as the subject or object of a verb, it is normally paired with the corresponding pronominal particle. Thus in the above examples, we have:

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|------|-------------------------|------|
| (86) | kei ... ka va bia | (77) |
| | nang ... na tuah | (78) |
| | keimah ... ka si | (79) |
| | nangmah ... na rat | (79) |
| | annih ... an in domh | (80) |
| | kei ... ka ti | (81) |
| | nannih ... thla nan cam | (82) |

Pronouns not paired with pronominal particles are either not serving as subject or object of a verb, like nang and kei in (76); third person singular objects with no overt corresponding particle, like amah in (77); or in a kind of infinitive construction, like (the first) nangmah in (79).¹² On the other hand, most pronominal particles, for example all those in (1) to (6) and (9) through (36), are not paired with corresponding pronouns. Pronouns appear primarily when there is semantic contrast affecting their reference, or where the meaning would not be clear without them. All the pronouns in (76) to (82) are contrasted in their original context.

Third person pronominal particles also appear obligatorily paired with ordinary noun phrase subjects.

- (87) Samuel a kal. 'Samuel goes/went' cf. (3)
 (88) Rawl a eimi ngakchia hna cu an kal.
 'the children who are/were eating go/went'

In certain cases this pairing extends to other persons and to objects as well.

- (89) Lai miphun hi pakhat le khat kan rak i dawt J1 11
 'we Lai people used to love one another'
 (90) Pathian nih minung a kan ser tikah J1 (editorial)
 'when God made us humans'

Kan in (89) and (90) implies that the noun phrases Lai miphun 'Lai people' and minung 'human' are first person plural. In terms of function it seems clear that Lai pronominal particles constitute primarily marks of agreement (in person and number) between a verb and its subject or object. The standard Spanish forms in (91) are thus to be compared with Lai (1) to (6). The Spanish subject pronouns (in parentheses) correspond to Lai pronouns as given in (74) and (75), while the Spanish subject verb agreement suffixes (underlined) correspond to the Lai subject pronominal particles a, ka, na, an, kan and nan.¹³

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|------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| (91) | (yo) <u>voy</u> | (nosotros) <u>vamos</u> |
| | (tu) <u>vas</u> | (vosotros) <u>vais</u> |
| | (él/ella) <u>va</u> | (ellos/ellas) <u>van</u> |

The Lai system of pronominal particles illustrated in (1) to (6) and (9) through (36) has several features which are characteristic of morphological agreement marking but not of lexical

pronouns.¹⁴ One is that among the three persons, first person is most overtly and systematically marked and third least so, with second person intermediate. In object agreement, the same particles distinguishing both person and number are used for first person objects as for subjects. With second and third person objects, number is marked by distinct particles after the verb, while second person is marked differently with singular and plural subject particles and third person is not marked overtly at all. Pronouns which amalgamate both subject and object, like kan or an in (9) and (14) are extremely rare if they exist at all, as are pronouns which discontinuously express person and number, like in ... hna in (30) and (35). (23) and (28) show both features simultaneously. Finally the restriction to two pronominal particles per verb is rare if found at all in pronoun systems. For a morphological agreement system in an unrelated language which shares these features, see Bedell (1994).

The Lai agreement system as illustrated particularly in (9) through (36) is characteristic of written Lai; it is found for example in the 1978 Bible translation. But there is at least one feature which seems not to be current in all varieties of spoken Lai: that is the separate second person object person marker in as in (16), (21), (30) and (35). In place of these some speakers use the following forms.

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|------|------------------|--------------------|
| (92) | Annih hmuh. | 'they see/saw you' |
| (93) | Kannih hmuh. | 'we see/saw you' |
| (94) | Annih hmuh hna. | 'they see/saw you' |
| (95) | Kannih hmuh hna. | 'we see/saw you' |

These may be a result of analogical pressure on the model of an and kan, the amalgamated subject and object agreement markers as in (9), (14), (23) and (28). But while these are ambiguous with the same particles as marking plural subject agreement as in (17), (22), (31) and (36), the further ambiguity which would result from their extension to mark both subject plurality and object second person is apparently not to be tolerated. Instead, the corresponding pronouns from the set (61) appear to be used as the required particles. Annih and kannih in these cases are agreement markers rather than pronouns by the same criteria employed above; for example under contrast an independent pronoun may appear; compare (96) with (93).

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|------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| (96) | Kannih nih kannih hmuh. | ' <u>we</u> see/saw you' |
|------|-------------------------|--------------------------|

In this form of Lai, the second person object marker in appears only in imperatives, or when a particle such as rak is used as in (84) or (85).

Notes

¹ 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 Samuel Ngun Ling for teaching me what I know about Lai; to those who attended the fifth meeting of SEALS, particularly F. K. Lehman; and to those who attended the Chin Linguistics Seminar in Yangon in January, 1996, particularly David Van Bik.

² Lai pronouns and pronominal particles do not distinguish gender. Also, though there are Lai tense/aspect particles which form part of the verb complex, they are not obligatory and a verb unaccompanied by them is unspecified as to tense. In glossing Lai examples, the approximate range of meaning is shown by alternative pronoun and verb forms separated by slashes.

³ The particle a in this example goes with the main verb duh 'want' rather than with kal.

⁴ English 'you' fails to distinguish number, so that for example the gloss given for (23) is identical with that for (9). The Lai sentences are distinct in meaning.

⁵ Particles spelled with a double 'aa' have a low vowel [a] as opposed to a mid central [ə]. The orthographic distinction is not consistently observed.

⁶ This *i* is responsible for the long vowel in (37) and (38). Compare (38) with (38').

(38') Amah le amah a rak i hmu. 'he/she/it saw him/her/itself'

See the discussion of sentences (83) to (85) below. In reflexive and reciprocal constructions the initial X le X 'X and X' phrase does not belong to the verb complex and may be omitted. These constructions also require a distinct morphological form of many verbs, for example hmu versus hmuh. The precise conditions for this variation are unclear to me, and in any case discussion of it would take us too far afield.

⁷ The term 'imperative' may not be appropriate for the full range of forms in (40) to (73).

⁸ As in note 6, the Lai sentences (41) and (44) are distinct in meaning even though glossed identically in English.

⁹ Examples followed by a reference are taken from the Lai Bible and recent publications of the Chin Association for Christian Communication. See the References for an explanation of the abbreviations used.

¹⁰ Pronominal particles identical with those in (1) and (6) are used as genitive particles in noun phrases; examples appear in (80) an kut 'their hands' and (79) ka sin 'to me'. A particle hna is the usual noun phrase plural marker; an example appears below in (88) ngakchia hna 'children'.

¹¹ The noun phrase particles nih and cu as illustrated in (77) to (82) occur very commonly. Most often nih appears with subjects of transitive verbs and cu with the subjects of intransitive verbs or the direct objects of transitive verbs, but they are not always obligatory and the precise conditions for their use are not clear to me. Cu belongs to the system of demonstrative particles which also includes hi, kha and khi.

¹² In (79), it would be possible to use a second person particle with the infinitive: nanmah ... tipil na pek; but it is not obligatory. A first person particle cannot be used unless the second person particle is: *keimah ... tipil ka pek but keimah ... tipil na ka pek.

¹³ Spanish lacks agreement between a verb and its object, and thus has nothing which directly corresponds to the Lai object pronominal particles. The forms in (91') are the Spanish equivalents of (9) through (36).

(91')	(yo) te veo	(nosotros) te vemos
	(yo) lo/la veo	(nosotros) lo/la vemos
	(tu) me ves	(vosotros) me veis
	(tu) lo/la ves	(vosotros) lo/la veis
	(él/ella) me ve	(ellos/ellas) me ven
	(él/ella) te ve	(ellos/ellas) te ven
	(él/ella) lo/la ve	(ellos/ellas) lo/la ven
	(yo) os veo	(nosotros) os vemos
	(yo) los/las veo	(nosotros) los/las vemos
	(tu) nos ves	(vosotros) nos veis
	(tu) los/las ves	(vosotros) los/las veis
	(él/ella) nos ve	(ellos/ellas) nos ven
	(él/ella) os ve	(ellos/ellas) os ven
	(él/ella) los/las ve	(ellos/ellas) los/las ven

The Spanish object pronouns me, te, lo, la, nos, os, los and las resemble Lai object pronominal particles in having a position within the verb complex. But they do not co-occur with ordinary noun phrase objects, and therefore are pronouns rather than agreement markers. In some Spanish dialects in which so-called 'clitic doubling' is found, they may be analyzable as agreement in the same way as Lai particles.

¹⁴ These features will be apparent in Tables I, II and III, summarizing the Lai agreement system.

Table I: Agreement pattern in intransitive sentences

1	2	3	1p	2p	3p
ka	na	a	kan	nan	an
Ø	Ø	Ø	u	u	hna

Table II: Agreement pattern in transitive indicative sentences

	1	2	3	1p	2p	3p
1	x	na ka	a ka	x	na kan	a kan
2	kan	x	an	kan in*	x	an in*
3	ka	na	a	kan	nan	an
1p	x	nan ka	an ka	x	nan kan	an kan
2p	kan/hna	x	an/hna	kan in*/hna	x	an in*/hna
3p	ka/hna	na/hna	a/hna	kan/hna	nan/hna	an/hna

Table III: Agreement pattern in transitive imperative sentences

	1	2	3	1p	2p	3p
1	x	ka	ka	x	ka/u	ka/hna
2	in	x	in	in/u	x	in/hna
3	Ø	Ø	Ø	u	u	hna
1p	x	kan	kan	x	kan/u	kan/hna
2p	in/hna	x	in/hna	in/hna u	x	in/hna
3p	hna	hna	hna	hna u	hna u	hna

In Tables I, II and III, 'x' means that no such form exists (within the pattern illustrated); 'Ø' means that the form exists, but has no agreement particles; '/' shows the position of the verb when it comes between particles. The slightly literary forms with in are marked by * in Table II.

References

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