

GENITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN LAI¹

George Bedell

International Christian University
<gdbedell@yahoo.com>

Lai has a set of pronominal particles, shown in (1), which accompany nouns and mark agreement with a preceding noun phrase.

(1)		singular	plural
	1st person	<i>ka</i>	<i>kan</i>
	2nd person	<i>na</i>	<i>nan</i>
	3rd person	<i>a</i>	<i>an</i>

These pronominal particles appear identical to the set of pro-nominal particles which accompany verbs and mark agreement with the subject.² The second and third person plural pronominal particles are illustrated in (2) and (3) accompanying a noun, and in (4) and (5) accompanying a verb.

(2) *an zal chung khan* ‘out of their bags’ (2:11)

(3) *nan zal ah* ‘in your bags’ (10: 9)

(4) *annih an kal hnuah* ‘after they went’ (2:13)

(5) *nan kal* ‘you go’ (23:15)

Such parallelism between noun phrases and clauses is not uncommon in the languages of the world; the question naturally arises as to what accounts for it.

One possibility often suggested is a parallelism in the overall syntactic organization of clauses and noun phrases. It has been argued in earlier work that subject-verb agreement markers in Lai are the syntactic heads of clauses, and the verb is attached to them, as illustrated in (v).³

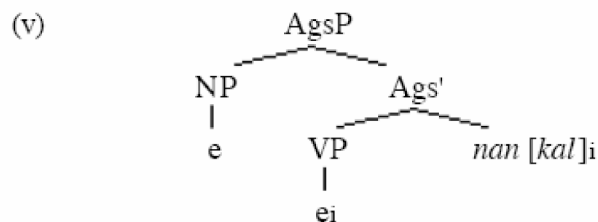
¹ Lai (often called (Hakha) Chin) is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken primarily in central Chin State, Myanmar. The examples accompanied by a chapter and verse notation are taken from the Gospel according to Matthew in the 1999 Lai Bible. I am grateful to Kenneth Van Bik and Stephen Hre Kio for assistance with some points of Lai grammar.

² See Bedell (1995) for a discussion of subject-verb agreement in Lai.

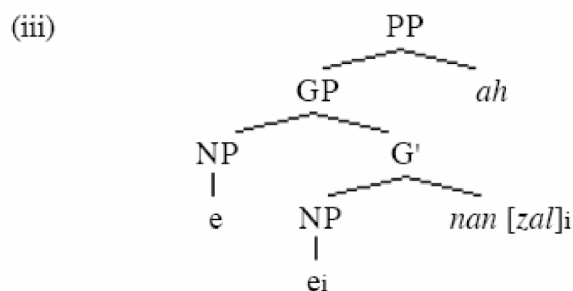
³ See the papers cited in Bedell (1999) and (2000).

Ratree Wayland, John Hartmann & Paul Sidwell, eds. *SEALSXII: papers from the 12th meeting of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society* (2002). Canberra, Pacific Linguistics, 2007, pp.9-21.

© George Bedell



If phrases like (2) and (3) are parallel to those like (4) and (5), the structure of (3) might be as in (iii).



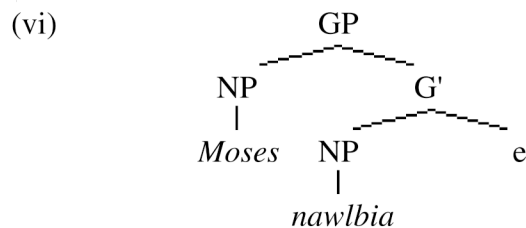
The empty NP in (v) occupies the subject position, and is understood as second person plural. The first empty NP in (iii) occupies the corresponding position; it too is understood as second person plural. *Nan* in (v) belongs to the category Ags (Subject Agreement), which is the head of this clause structure; Ags and AgsP appear as I and IP (where I represents the more general Inflection) in some versions of this terminology. *Nan* in (iii) belongs to the category G (Genitive); it too is the head of the given structure. In some versions of this terminology used for the discussion of English, G and GP appear as D and DP (where D represents the more general Determiner). In Lai, as will be argued below, the projection of G represented in (ii) is distinct from that headed by deictic elements. The meaning expressed by the pronominal particles in examples like (2) and (3) is possession, but the syntactic structure in (iii) is by no means restricted to possession. In its semantic variability also, that position resembles the subject position of a clause as in (v). The term ‘genitive’ will be used in general for the construction in (iii), to emphasize its syntactic nature, and the empty NP in (ii) will be said to occupy the genitive position.

In (6) and (7), the genitive position is filled with a noun phrase.

(6) *Moses nawlbia* ‘the law of Moses’ (7:12)

(7) *profet hna cawnpiaknak* ‘the teachings of the prophets’ (7:12)

That is, the structure of (6) is something like (vi).



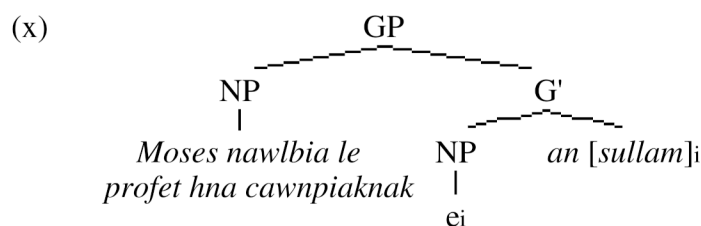
Thus (6) and (7) have a different structure than the semantically parallel (8) and (9).

(8) *a nawlbia* ‘his law’

(9) *an cawnpiaknak* ‘their teachings’

Particles like *a* and *an* have very different syntactic properties from noun phrases like *Moses* and *profet hna* ‘the prophets’. The difference is clear in examples where both a particle and a noun phrase co-occur, as in (10).

(10) *Moses nawlbia le profet hna cawnpiaknak an sullam* (7:12)
 ‘the meaning of the law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets’



Pronouns represent a special case of noun phrases, and they may appear in the genitive position, as in (11) and (12).

(11) *nanmah zultu* ‘your disciple(s)’ (12:27)

(12) *anmah zultu tlawmpal hna* ‘a few of their disciples’ (22:16)

The structure of (11) is parallel to (vi), and quite different from that of (13) parallel to (iii), despite their similarity in meaning.

(13) *nan zultu* ‘your disciple(s)’

(xiii)

```

      GP
     /  \
    NP   G'
    |    /  \
    e   NP   nan [zultu]i
        |
        ei

```

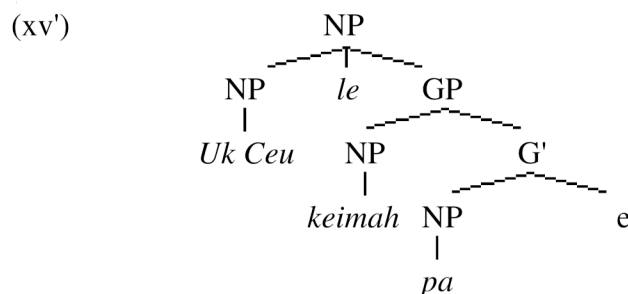
(xiv)

The syntax tree for (xiv) shows a root node GP branching into NP and G'. The NP branches into the word *nannih*. The G' node branches into NP and *nan*. The NP under G' branches into the word *ei*. The word *nan* is followed by the phonetic transcription *[zultu hna]i*.

(xv)

```
graph TD
    GP[GP] --- NP1[NP]
    GP --- Gp[G']
    NP1 --- NP2[NP]
    NP1 --- NP3[NP]
    NP2 --- UC[Uk Ceu]
    NP3 --- le[le]
    Gp --- NP4[NP]
    Gp --- e[e]
    NP4 --- keimah[keimah]
    NP4 --- pa[pa]
```

In the second reading, the conjunction involves *Uk Ceu* and *keimah pa* ‘my father’; as in (xv’). The ambiguity arises because of the absence in Lai of a genitive marker like English ‘-s’.



In an example like (17), only the second interpretation is possible; a noun phrase like *Uk Ceu* cannot conjoin with a particle like *ka*.

(17) *Uk Ceu le ka pa* ‘Uk Ceu and my father’

In fact, genitive particles cannot conjoin at all.

(18) **a le ka pa* ‘his and my father’

It may be worth observing that the meanings conveyed by the genitive constructions in examples (6) through (14) do not include possession. In the case of (7), the relation between the genitive noun phrase *profet hna* ‘the prophets’ and *cawnpiaknak* ‘teachings’ is often called the ‘agent’ relation. *Cawnpiaknak* is a nominalized form of the verb *cawnpiak* ‘teach’, and in a clause containing that verb it will be the subject which has that relation. In (11) on the other hand, the relation between *nanmah* ‘you’ and *zultu* ‘disciple’ is often called the ‘patient’ relation. *Zultu* is a nominalized form of the verb *zultu* ‘follow’, and in a clause with that verb it will be the object which has that relation. In (10), the noun *sullam* ‘meaning’ is not a nominalization, and the semantic relation between that noun and the genitive *Moses nawlbia le profet hna cawnpiaknak* ‘the law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets’ is different from either agent or patient. In the case of (6), the relation between *Moses* and *nawlbia* ‘the law’ may appear to resemble the agent relation as in (7), but it is rather vaguer; we do not know exactly what it is if we are not familiar with the Bible story of the Ten Commandments. The meaning which characterizes the genitive position in a genitive construction depends in large part on the meaning of the head noun, but some details may depend on the particular genitive noun phrase or the context. This situation is parallel to the interpretation of clause subjects, and found in all languages.

If the analysis just proposed is correct, then the Lai pronominal particles in (1) are agreement markers when they accompany nouns, just as they are when they accompany verbs. In the former case they mark agreement between the head noun and a noun phrase in the genitive position. Nonetheless there are differences in the two cases which it will not do to ignore. For one thing, a clause generally contains a subject in addition to a verb, so that finite verbs are always accompanied by an agreement particle. In the presence of

agreement, the subject position may often be empty, as in (iv). Noun phrases, however, do not require that the genitive position be present, so that most nouns are not accompanied by any agreement marker. Like the subject position, the genitive position may be empty in the presence of genitive agreement, as in (ii) or (xi). Secondly, an overt clause subject is echoed by the corresponding agreement marker on the verb; but as illustrated in examples like (6), (7), (11) and (12), the genitive position in a noun phrase can contain an overt noun phrase without any agreement particle accompanying the head noun. Examples like these are quite ordinary, with examples like (10) or (14) relatively unusual.

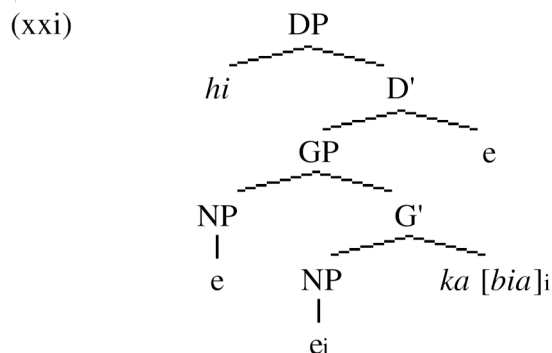
There is in addition a restriction on the use of pronouns as genitives. Lai has two sets of pronouns as in (19) and (20), which are more or less interchangeable in many contexts.

- | | | |
|------|----------------------|---------------------|
| (19) | <i>kei</i> 'I' | <i>kannih</i> 'we' |
| | <i>nang</i> 'you' | <i>nannih</i> 'you' |
| | <i>anih</i> 'he/she' | <i>annih</i> 'they' |
-
- | | | |
|------|----------------------|---------------------|
| (20) | <i>keimah</i> 'I' | <i>kanmah</i> 'we' |
| | <i>nangmah</i> 'you' | <i>nanmah</i> 'you' |
| | <i>amah</i> 'he/she' | <i>anmah</i> 'they' |

Genitive pronouns are usually from the second set, in which the element *-mah* originally meant 'self'. The more basic pronouns in (19) sound odd, though there are a few examples in the Bible; (14) is one such.

As mentioned above, Lai differs from English in treating deictics and genitives separately. A clear example appears as (21), with the structure shown in (xxi).

- (21) *hi ka bia* 'these words of mine' (7:24)



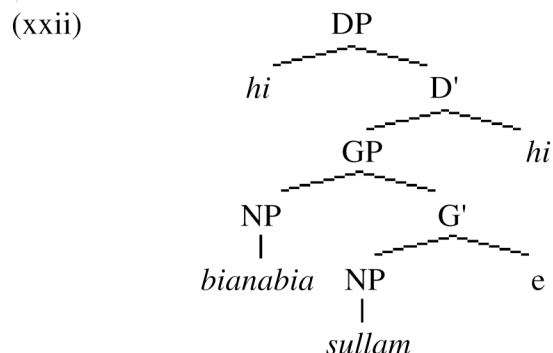
According to the analysis given in Bedell (1999), *hi* is located under DP as shown. In English a demonstrative like 'these' and the genitive pronoun 'my' appear to occupy the same position, since they cannot co-occur *'these my words', *'my these words', and (21) can be glossed in English only by using a post-nominal 'of' phrase.⁴ Since the genitive

⁴ Phrases like 'these my words' may be possible in some styles of English. If so, they do not fit the usual assumed structure.

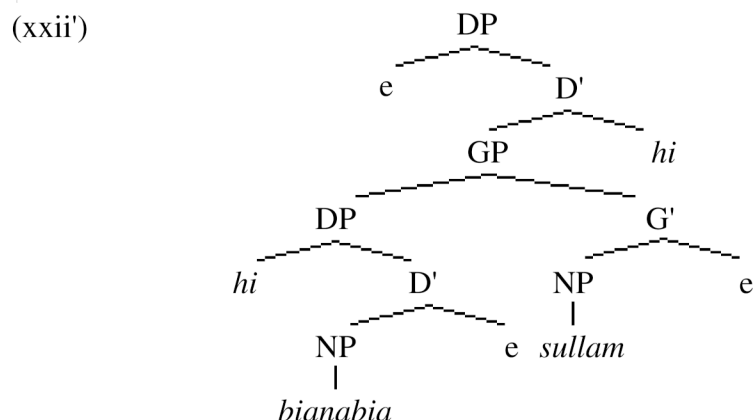
position and the head D position are empty in (21), it may appear possible to place *hi* in the former, obviating the need for distinct G and D projections.

In example (22), both the genitive position and the head D position are filled, and the structure will be as in (xxii).

(22) *hi bianabia sullam hi* ‘this meaning of the parable’ (13:18)

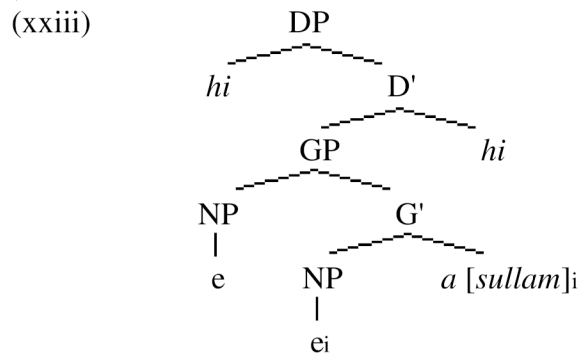


(22) may not be conclusive, since it would be possible to take the first *hi* to be accompanying the noun *bianabia* ‘parable’ rather than the noun *sullam* ‘meaning’. If so, the gloss ought to be ‘the meaning of this parable’. In that case the structure would be (xxii’) rather than (xxii), and the D and G projections might still be collapsed.



In examples like (23) to (25), however, it is clear that both the head position of G and the head position of D are filled and therefore there must be two distinct projections. The structure of (23) will be as in (xxiii).

(23) *hi a sullam hi* ‘this meaning of it’ (24: 15)



(24) *ka fapa hi* ‘this son of mine’ (17: 15)

(25) *nan sayapa hi* ‘this teacher of yours’ (9: 11)

This is clear also from genitive constructions in which the head noun is understood in context. This position cannot be left empty as in English, but must be occupied by the dummy noun *ta*. Such constructions may have a genitive particle as in (26), a genitive pronoun as in (27), or other genitive noun phrases as in (28) and (29).

(26) *na ta* ‘yours’ (25:25)

(27) *nanmah ta* ‘yours’ (5: 3)

(28) *Pathian ta* ‘God’s’ (22:21)

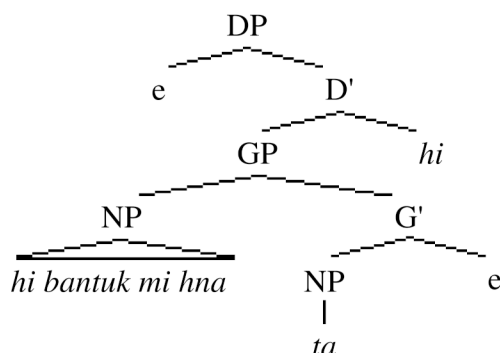
(29) *siangpahrang ta* ‘the king’s’ (22:21)

In an example like (30), even though no agreement marker is present, the G projection must be distinct from the D projection, as shown in (xxx).

(30) *hi bantuk mi hna ta hi* ‘of people like these’ (19:14)

In this example the initial deictic *hi* probably has to be taken as attached to *bantuk* rather than to the entire phrase, since *bantuk* requires a deictic. Thus (xxx) is parallel to (xxii’) rather than to (xxii).

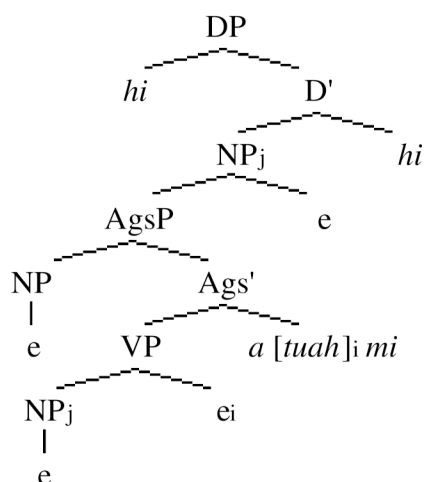
(xxx)



Example (31) resembles (23), except that the head noun *tuahmi* ‘action, deed’ is derived from the verb *tuah* ‘do’. The structure might be the same as (xxiii) with *tuahmi* replacing *sullam*. But it also might be analyzed as (xxxi), containing a kind of relative clause.

(31) *hi a tuahmi hi* ‘these doings of his’ (8:17)

(xxxi)



In this case, the particle *a* accompanies a verb rather than a noun, and thus marks agreement of the verb *tuah* with its empty subject rather than (as in the analyses parallel to (xxiii)) of the noun *tuahmi* with its empty genitive, and the gloss should be ‘these things which he did’. It is difficult to decide which of these two analyses is preferable. Examples like (32) and (33) provide evidence in favor of the genitive analysis.

(32) *hi tleipi kung cung i ka tuahmi hi* ‘these doings of mine to the fig tree’ (21:21)

(33) *Cucu Bawipa tuahmi a si.* ‘That is the Lord’s doing.’ (21:42)

In (32), the postpositional phrase *tleipi kung cung i* ‘to the fig tree’ has the postposition *i* (used to modify nouns) rather than *ah* (used in adverbial modification). In (33), no agreement marker appears, a characteristic of genitive constructions and not of clauses. On the other hand, an example like (34) cannot be analyzed as a genitive construction.

- (34) *thratnak a tuahmi he thratlonak a tuahmi he* (5:45)
 ‘both those who do good and those who do evil’

Examples like (35) and (36) also favor a relative clause analysis.

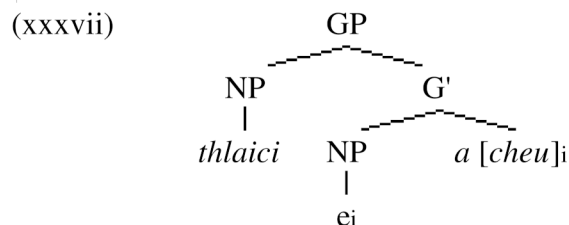
- (35) *nan chung i khuaruahharnak ka tuahmi vialte hi* (11:21)
 ‘all the miracles which I performed in you’
- (36) *na chungah ka tuahmi khuaruahharnak vialte hi* (11:23)
 ‘all the miracles which I performed in you’

In (36) the relative clause is *na chungah ka tuahmi* ‘which I performed in you’ modifying the head noun *khuaruahharnak* ‘miracle’, while in (35), the relative clause would seem to be *nan chung i khuaruahharnak ka tuahmi*, a head-internal structure.⁵

Genitive constructions are used in Lai with a partitive meaning, as in (37) or (38).

- (37) *thlaici a cheu* ‘some of the seed’ (13: 8)
- (38) *phungbia cawnpiaktu saya a cheukhat* ‘some of the teachers of the law’ (9: 3)

The predominant pattern with *cheu* ‘part’ is to have genitive agreement, whether the genitive noun phrase appears overtly or is interpreted in context. It is a noun which is restricted to the head position of a genitive construction; the structure of (37) is (xxxvii).

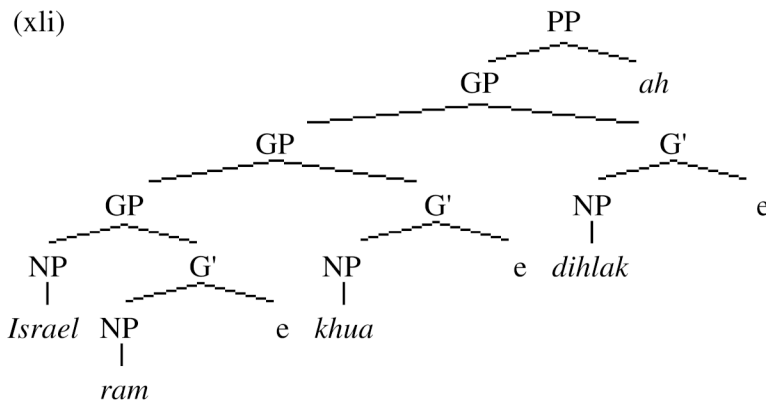


A similar situation obtains for *dihlak* ‘all’, as in (39) to (42).

- (39) *a dihlak in* ‘all of it’ (6:22)
- (40) *nan dihlak in* ‘all of you’ (18:18)
- (41) *Israel ram khua dihlak ah* ‘to all of the towns of Israel’ (10:23)
- (42) *na lungthin dihlak le na ruahnak dihlak le na nunnak dihlak in* (22:37)
 ‘with all your heart and all your thoughts and all your life’

⁵ See Kathol and Vanbik (1999) for a discussion of head-internal relatives in Lai.

Dihlak does not require genitive agreement, but it is restricted to a postpositional phrase which may modify another noun phrase, or be adverbial. The structure of (41) will be as in (xli).



The Lai word *dang* ‘other’ seems to belong with this group of nouns also. Like *cheu* it seems restricted to the head position of a genitive construction, though not clearly partitive in this case.

(43) *tahchunhnak bia a dang* ‘another parable’ (13:33)

(44) *tahchunhnak bia a dang pakhat* ‘one other parable’ (13:31)

(45) *Mari dang pakhat* ‘another Mary’ (27:61)

(46) *a dang Mari* ‘the other Mary’ (28: 1)

As analyzed in Bedell (2000), Lai has a large subclass of nouns whose meaning is expressed in English by different prepositions. English objects of such prepositions correspond to Lai genitives on those relational nouns. The full range of genitives appear, as illustrated in (47) through (58).

(47) *na sinah* ‘to you’ (14:28)

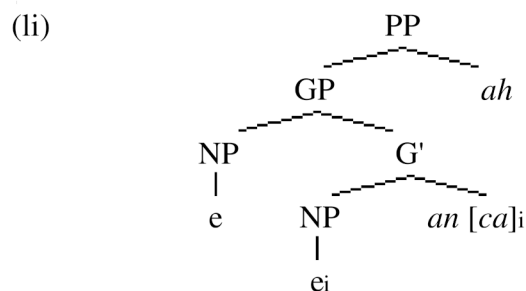
(48) *na sin i* ‘to you’ (26:35)

(49) *nan chung* ‘your insides’ (23:28)

(50) *nan chung i* ‘in you’ (6:23)

(51) *an caah* ‘for them’ (18: 6)

In (47) to (51), genitive agreement appears with no overt genitive noun phrase. The structure of (51) will be as in (li).



(52) *Josef sinah* 'to Joseph' (2:13)

(53) *amah sinah* 'to him' (4:24)

(54) *lawng chungah* 'in the boat' (4:21)

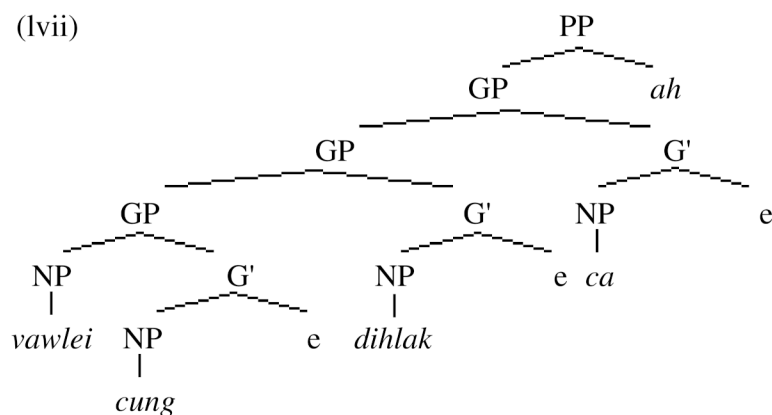
(55) *nangmah chung (in)* 'out of you' (2: 6)

(56) *miphun vialte hna caah* 'for all people' (5:13)

(57) *vawlei cung dihlak caah* 'for all on earth' (5:14)

(58) *nang caah pakhat, Moses caah pakhat, Elijah caah pakhat* (17: 4)
'one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah'

In (52) to (58), there is a genitive noun phrase with no agreement. In (53), (55) and one of the conjuncts in (58) those noun phrases are pronouns. In the last case the pronoun belongs to set (19) instead of the usual (20). The structure of (57) will be as in (lvii).



Finally, Lai has a large subclass of compound verbs of which the first member is a noun, and on which one argument is marked as genitive agreement. Many of these compounds are 'psycho-collocations' as described in Van Bik (1998).

- (59) *ka rawl a tram* ‘I was hungry’ (25:35)
- (60) *ka zang an fak* ‘I pity them’ (15:32)
- (61) *na khuk naa bil i* ‘you kneel’ (4: 9)
- (62) *nan thinphang hlah u* ‘do not be afraid’ (10:31)
- (63) *an khuaruah a har* ‘they were amazed’ (7:28)
- (64) *an thin a hunter ngaingai hna* ‘it made them very angry’ (15:12)

Unlike other genitive constructions, it is not possible to have a genitive noun phrase replacing the agreement as in (65) or (66). There can be a noun phrase, as in (67) or (68), but it is the subject of the verb and not a genitive.

- (65) **keimah rawl a tram*
- (66) **anmah khuaruah a har*
- (67) *keimah (cu) ka rawl a tram* ‘I was hungry’
- (68) *mi zapi cu ... an khuaruah a har* ‘the crowd was amazed’ (7:28)

Exactly what the structure of such compounds should be is not clear, but it is certainly their morphological nature which precludes full syntactic expression. Some speakers say that it is possible to have (65) or (66) when ‘pragmatically contrived’.

References

- G. Bedell, 1995, ‘Agreement in Lai’, *Papers from the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society*, Tempe, Arizona: Program for Southeast Asian Studies, Arizona State University, pp. 21-32.
- G. Bedell, 1999, ‘The Syntax of Deixis in Lai’, presented to the 32nd ICSTLL, Urbana, to appear in *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*.
- G. Bedell, 2000, ‘Postpositions and Relational Nouns in Lai’, presented to the Fifth International Symposium on Languages and Linguistics, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
- A. Kathol and K. Vanbik, 1999, ‘Morphology-Syntax Interface in Lai Relative Clauses’, *NELS* 29 pp.427-41.
- K. Van Bik, 1998, ‘Lai Psycho-collocations’, *LTBA* 21:1. pp. 201-33.
- (D. Van Bik), ‘Matthai sinin Thawngthra’ (the Gospel according to Matthew), *Lai Baibal Thiang* (The Holy Bible in Lai), Bible Society of Myanmar, centennial edition, 1999.

