

NEGATION IN LAI

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In this discussion, we want to determine the syntactic position of the Lai¹ negative particles *lo* and *hlah*. In English, the negative particle *not* follows the finite verb.

- (1) *We do not know.* (21:27)
- (2) *I do not know you.* (25:12)²

In sentences like these, the finite verb is *do*, an auxiliary with no obvious meaning; if *not* is removed, this auxiliary disappears, and the verb following *not* becomes the finite verb.³

- (3) *we know*
- (4) *I know you*

In the corresponding yes/no questions, the finite verb appears preceding the subject; in this case *do* remains even if *not* is removed.

- (5) *do we not know?*
- (6) *do we know?*
- (7) *do I not know you?*
- (8) *do I know you?*

If the finite verb is *be* or *have*, or if it is a modal auxiliary such as *will*, then the removal of *not* has no further effect on the sentence.

- (9) *He is not here;* (28: 6)
- (10) *you will not see me again,* (23:39)
- (11) *he is here*
- (12) *you will see me again*

¹ Lai is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Chin(-Naga) group, spoken primarily in Central Chin State, Myanmar.

² The examples accompanied by chapter and verse citations are taken from the text of the Gospel according to Matthew, in the Revised Standard Version for English and *Lai Baibal Thiang* (1978) for Lai.

³ English has a more colloquial style in which negation appears as a suffix *-n't* on the finite verb:

- (1') *we don't know*
- (2') *I don't know you*
- (9') *he isn't here*
- (10') *you won't see me again*

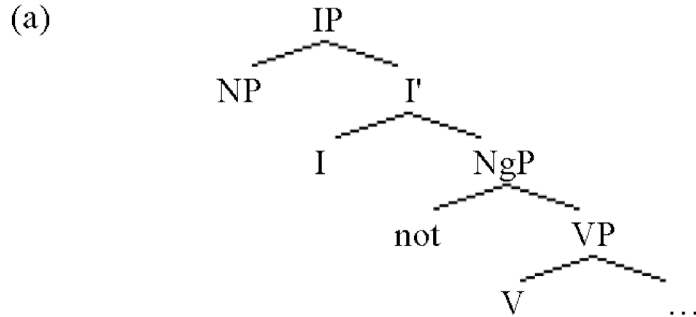
This style is generally avoided in the RSV. The arguments in this paper are preserved in both styles of English negation.

Shoichi Iwasaki, Andrew Simpson, Karen Adams & Paul Sidwell, eds. *SEALSXIII: papers from the 13th meeting of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society* (2003). Canberra, Pacific Linguistic, 2007, pp.13-23.

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- (13) *is he not here?*
 (14) *is he here?*
 (15) *will you not see me again?*
 (16) *will you see me again?*

These facts concerning the English negative particle *not* lead to the conclusion that the syntactic structure of an English negative sentence is as in (a).



The position of the finite verb is labelled I, an abbreviation of 'inflection'. In sentences like (1) and (2), the verb *know* appears in the V position. The English suffixes *-s*, marking agreement in the present tense with a third person singular subject, and *-d*, marking the past tense, originate in I; if they are adjacent to the V position, as in (3) or (4), then they appear as inflections of the verb: *knows* or *knew*; but if the sentence is negative or a yes/no question this is blocked and *do* appears to support the suffix. Examples like (1) and (2) show that there is a similar inflection in the other forms of the present tense, which has no phonological shape. *Be* and *have* may appear either in I or in V, but they take priority over *do* in the I position. Modals like *will* appear only in I, and they do not co-occur with the inflectional suffixes. *Not* appears in the Ng position, as head of NgP (negative phrase).

Sentences (17) and (18) are Lai versions of English (1) and (2). Lai is a head-final language as opposed to head-initial English, and the word order of Lai is generally the mirror image of that in English. One exception is the subject, which precedes the finite verb in both languages.

- (17) *Kan hngal lo*, (21:27)
 (18) *Kan hngal hrimhrim hna lo*, (25:12)

The Lai negative particle *lo* is typically located at the end of a clause, following the finite verb. No verb in the same clause can follow it. Various particles can come between the finite verb and *lo*. In (17) the finite verb is *kan hngal* 'we know', directly followed by *lo*. In (18), the verb is followed by the adverbial *hrimhrim* 'certainly' and *hna*, the object plural marker, which both precede *lo*. If *lo* is removed, these examples appear as (19) and (20).

- (19) *kan hngalh*
 (20) *kan hngalh hrimhrim hna*

The form of the verb *hngal* 'know' changes to *hngalh*; this change however has nothing to

do with the finiteness of the verb.⁴ In (17) as well as (19), *kan* is the first person plural subject agreement marker attached either to *hngal* or to *hngalh*. In (18) as well as (20), *kan* is a combination of the first person singular subject agreement marker *ka* with the second person object agreement marker *in*; *hna* after the verb indicates that the second person object is plural, and really is part of the finite verb.⁵ In neither example is the subject or object overtly present.

The Lai sentences (21) and (22) are likewise versions of English (9) and (10).

(21) *Amah cu hika ah hin a um ti lo*, (28: 6)

(22) *na ka hmu hrimhrim ti lai lo*, (23:39)

Lai does not treat the verb *um* 'be (location or existence)' in (21) differently from any other verb, and its future particle *lai* 'will' in (22) follows the finite verb but precedes the negative particle *lo*. Another adverbial particle illustrated in both sentences is *ti* 'any longer'. *Amah cu* 'he/she' in (21) is an overt subject preceding the finite verb, which might be omitted. It is paired with *a*, the third person singular subject agreement particle, part of the finite verb *a um* 'he is'. In (22) *na* marks agreement with a second person singular subject and *ka* with a first person singular object. If *lo* is removed from (21) or (22), the result will be as in (23) or (24).

(23) *hika ah hin a um*

(24) *na ka hmu hrimhrim lai*

The verb *um* in (21) and (23) does not show variation depending on the presence of *lo*, but in (22) and (24), there is variation between *hmu* and *hmu h* 'see' parallel to that seen in (15) and (16) versus (17) and (18). There is no difference in the Lai verb in yes/no questions either, as shown in (25) to (28) corresponding to English (5), (6), (13) and (14). The Lai yes/no question particle *maw* follows the negative *lo*.

(25) *kan hngal lo maw?*

(26) *kan hngal maw?*

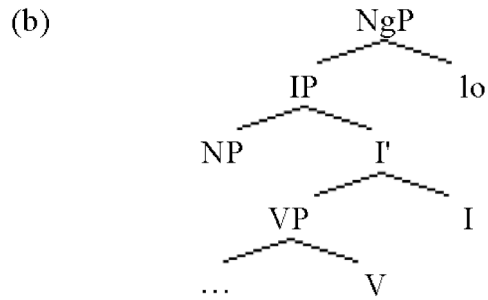
(27) *hika ah a um lo maw?*

(28) *hika ah a um maw?*

These facts lead to the conclusion that the syntactic position of *lo* in a Lai sentence is different from that of *not* in an English sentence, as can be seen by comparing (b) with (a) above.

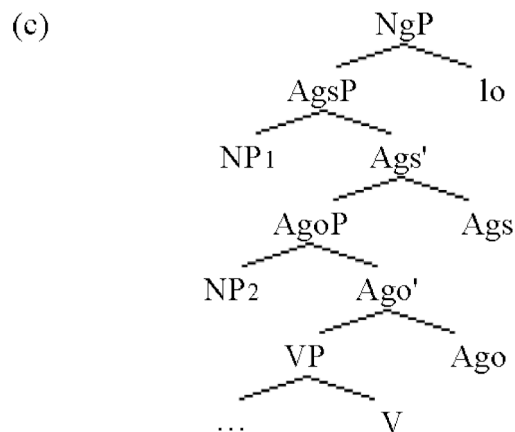
⁴ In the literature about this stem variation, *hngal* is called the 'stem I form' and *hngalh* the 'stem II form'. In Lai, stem II appears if the sentence is transitive and affirmative, stem I if it is transitive and negative. For a general discussion, see Kathol and Vanbik (1999).

⁵ See Bedell (1995) for a discussion of the agreement system of Lai.



In English, *not* is located beneath IP and above VP, thus accounting for its typical position within the sentence, following the finite verb. In Lai, *lo* is located above IP, thus accounting for its typical position at the end of the sentence, following the finite verb. The location of *not* in English, together with the inversion of the subject and finite verb in yes/no questions, provides crucial evidence that the I and V positions are distinct. In Lai, where negation (*lo*) does not intervene between I and V, and in which a yes/no question is marked by a particle (*maw*) rather than by inversion, negative sentences and yes/no questions do not offer evidence in favor of a distinction between I and V.

Nevertheless, the subject agreement particles of Lai (*ka*, *na*, *a*, and *kan* illustrated in (16), (22), (21) and (15)) constitute a kind of inflection, and we will assume that they behave syntactically like the English inflectional suffixes; that is, they belong to a category like I located above VP and below NgP. In Lai tense is distinct from subject agreement, so that this category might be labeled Ags rather than I. Since Lai has object agreement in addition to subject agreement we assume further that object agreement (*ka* in (22) and *-n ... hna* in (21)) belong to a distinct category Ago, located above VP but below subject agreement. That is, a more complete Lai structure will be as in (c).



Here NP1 is the subject position and NP2 the object position. In English the finite verb is composed of V with an I suffix; in Lai the finite verb is composed of V with particles both preceding and following.

In addition to its basic sentence negative particle *not*, English has a number of other types of words which incorporate negation. For example, it has negative pronouns like *no one* or *nothing*, which occur in the same syntactic positions as other pronouns.

(29) *when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing*, (27:24)

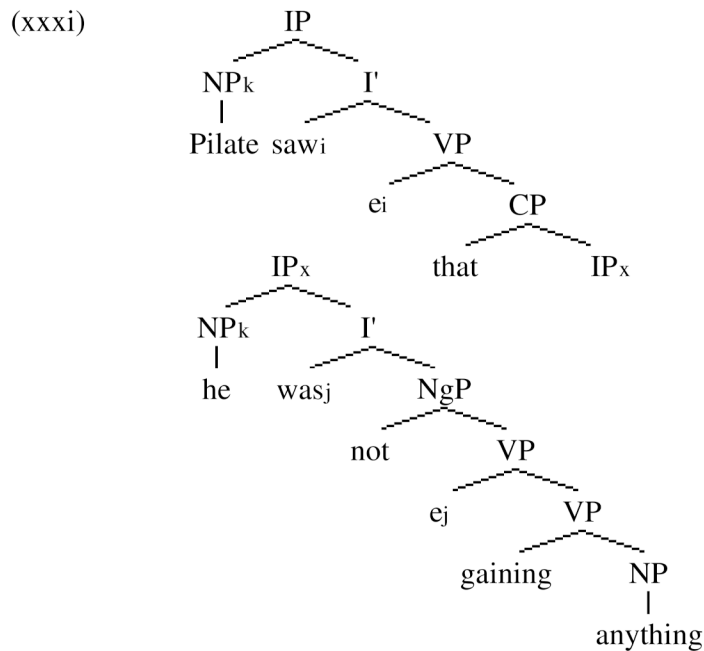
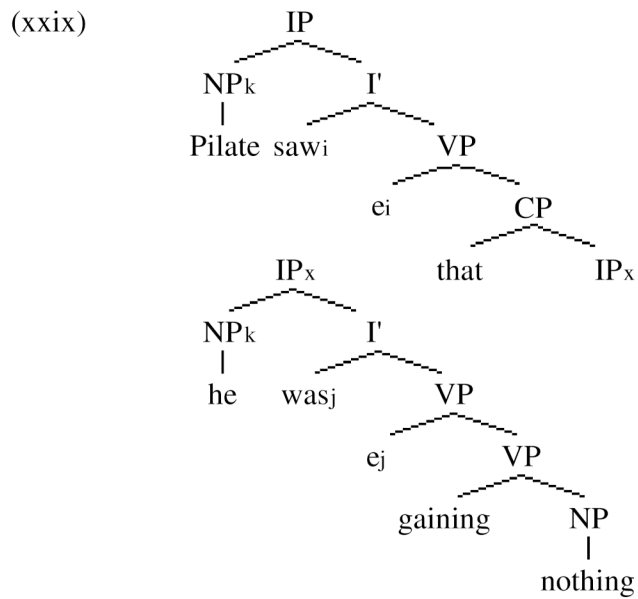
(30) *there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist*; (11:11)

No one or *nothing* is often equivalent to *not* accompanied by an indefinite pronoun *anyone* or *anything*.

(31) *when Pilate saw that he was not gaining anything*

(32) *there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist*

Thus the meaning of (31) and (32) are the same as (29) and (30) respectively. The syntactic structure of (29) is shown in (xxix) and that of (31) in (xxxi).



There is, however, a restriction on this equivalence: if *no one* or *nothing* is the subject of a sentence, then an equivalent with *not* in the usual sentence negation position and *anyone* or *anything* in subject position is not available.

(33) *Because no one has hired us.* (20: 7)

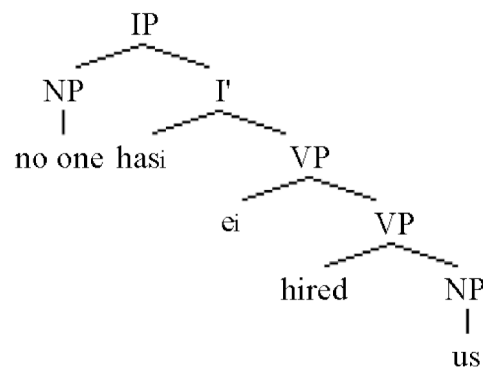
(34) *so fierce that no one could pass that way.* (8:28)

(35) **because anyone has not hired us.*

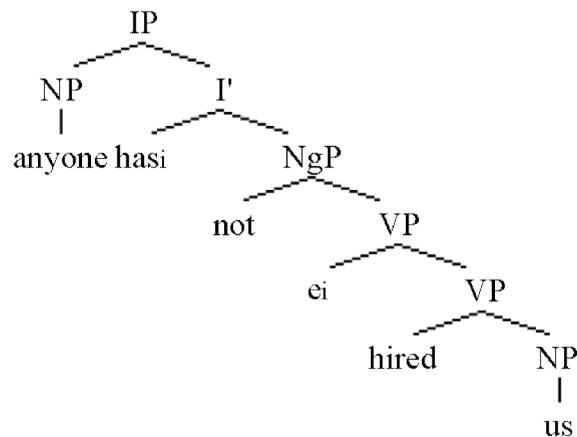
(36) **so fierce that anyone could not pass that way.*

(35) and (36) are completely ungrammatical. The syntactic structures of (33) and (35) are given as (xxxiii) and (xxxv).

(xxxiii)



(xxxv)



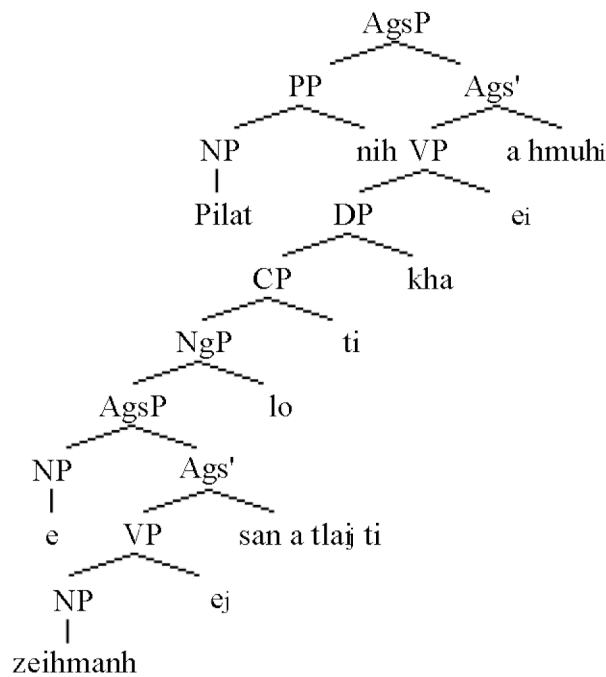
The difference between sentences like (31) and (32) on the one hand and (35) and (36) on the other clearly has to do with the relative syntactic positions of *not* and the indefinite pronoun *anyone* or *anything*. We assume that *not* has a syntactic scope defined as everything within the negative phrase (NgP) of which it is the head, and that the indefinite pronoun must be within that scope in order to have the meaning of a negative pronoun. If so, we can see that the possibility of the *not ... anyone* or *not ... anything* variants depends directly on the position of *not* in English as shown above in (a). The subject is the only NP position which is not within the scope of *not*.

Lai has no negative pronouns corresponding to English *no one* or *nothing*. But it does have indefinite pronouns *ahohmanh* 'anyone' and *zeihmanh* 'anything', which are composed of *aho* 'who' and *zei* 'what' followed by a particle *hmanh* 'even'. These indefinite pronouns must be used in the scope of negation to express the same meaning as the English negative pronouns. Lai versions of English (29), (30), (33) and (34) are as follows, where the Lai structure in fact resembles (31), (32), (35) and (36).

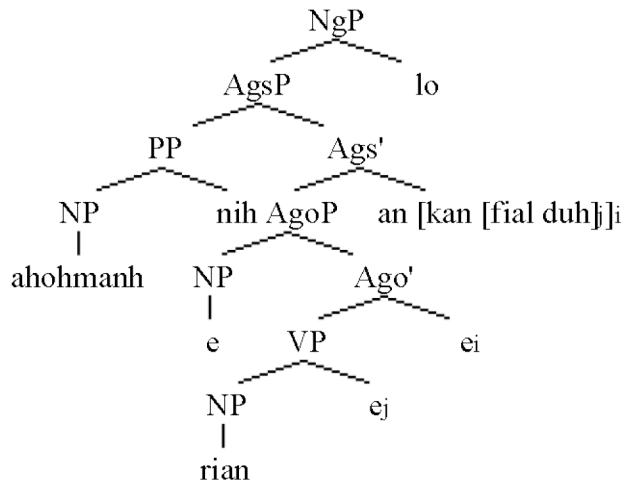
- (37) *Pilat nih ... zeihmanh san a tlai ti lo ... ti kha a hmuh tikah* (27:24)
 (38) *Johan tluk in a nganmi ahohmanh an um lo*; (11:11)
 (39) *Ahohmanh nih rian an kan fial duh lo caah a si*, (20: 7)
 (40) *cu lam ah cun ahohmanh an kal ngam lo*. (8:28)

For comparison, the syntactic structures of (37) and (39) are as in (xxxvii) and (xxxix).

(xxxvii)



(xxxix)



Lai has a second negative particle *hlah* which is used in imperative clauses, both main and subordinate.

- (41) *Lai va nawng hlah*; (19:18)
'do not murder'

Like *lo*, *hlah* always follows the verb in a sentence, but unlike *lo*, it may be followed by person and number agreement markers.

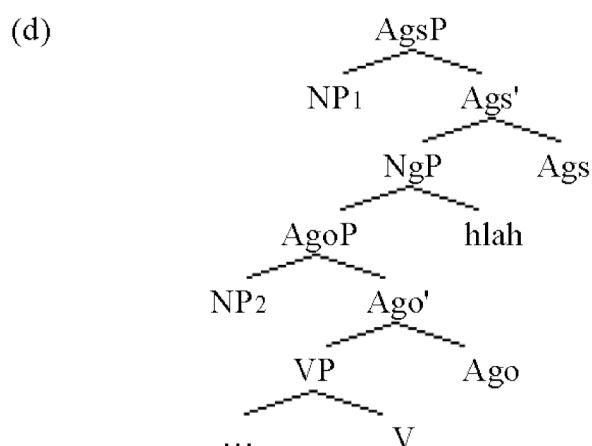
- (42) *Lai va nawng hlah u*, (5:21)
(43) *nan hawikom thrabik hmanh nih thei hlah seh*, (6: 3)
'don't let even your best friend know'

In (42) the particle *u* indicates that the negative command is addressed to more than one person, and in (43), the particle *seh* indicates that the subject of the command is third rather than second person. Both particles are distinct from those which serve the same function in declarative or interrogative clauses, but appear in affirmative imperative clauses as well.

- (44) *Tho u, nan thinphang hlah u!* (17: 7)
'get up, and don't be afraid'
(45) *Ngakchia cu ka sinah ra ko hna seh, dawn hna hlah u*; (19:14)
'let the children come to me, and do not hinder them'

Thus the first clause in (44) has a plural subject and that in (45) a third person subject. Note that the plural marker for third person imperative subjects (*hna*), differs from the second person marker (*u*) but is identical to the second and third person object plural marker, an example of which is seen in the second clause in (45).

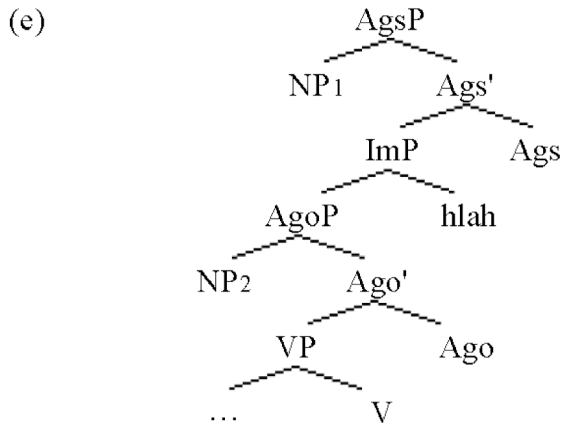
By the same reasoning used to establish the syntactic position of *lo* in (c) above, the projection headed by *hlah* ought to be below that headed by subject agreement; that is its position should be as in (d), like English *not* but unlike *lo*.



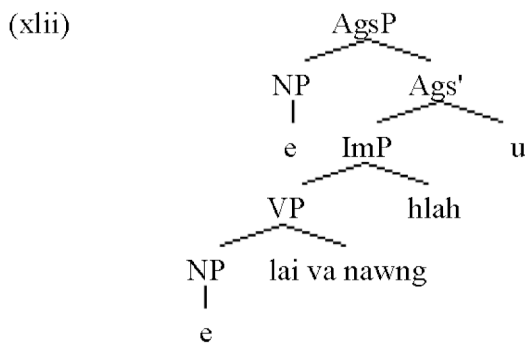
This might seem problematic, since NgP occupies different syntactic positions in different

clause types. But there is no very good reason to insist that *lo* and *hlah* must belong to the same functional category. They are both negatives, but in a language like English, negation appears as a semantic component of words belonging to a variety of categories: pronouns like *no one* or *nothing*, adverbs like *nowhere* or *never*, determiners like *no*, conjunctions like *nor*, and so on. The morphological and syntactic differences observed in sentences like (42) to (45) in comparison with (17), (18), (21) and (22) could be interpreted as *prima facie* evidence that *hlah* belongs to a different category than *lo*.

In that case, the basic structure of negative imperative clauses is something like (e) rather than (d).



In (e), ImP is headed by *hlah* which belongs to the category Im, an abbreviation of 'imperative'; *hlah* itself is then a negative mood marker rather than a kind of sentence negation. The structure of (42) will then be as in (xlii).



Finally, we might think that if the syntactic position of *hlah* is the same as English *not*, Lai negative commands ought to disallow appearance of the indefinite pronoun in subject position, as in English (35) or (36). This is incorrect, however. In (46) the indefinite *ahohmanh* is the object, inside the scope of *hlah* according to (d) or (e). In (47) by contrast it is the subject, and therefore outside the scope of *hlah* according to (d) or (e).

- (46) *Ka bia ngai, ahohmanh chim hna hlah*, (8: 4)
(Listen to my words, do not tell anyone)
(47) *I ralring u law ahohmanh i hlenter hna hlah u*. (24: 4)
(be careful and do not let anyone deceive you)

But in fact (47) is fully grammatical as well as the only way to express its content in Lai. (46) corresponds to both English (48) with a negative pronoun and (49) with an indefinite pronoun.

- (48) *tell no one*
(49) *do not tell anyone*

(47) similarly corresponds to (50) and (51). These English sentences are not true imperatives, but complex structures with two verbs. Here *anyone* and *no one* are the subjects of the subordinate verb *deceive* but not of the entire clause.

- (50) *let no one deceive you*
(51) *do not let anyone deceive you*

In English as well as Lai, the subjects of true imperatives are typically not expressed, but indefinite pronouns may serve as subjects of negative commands, as in (52) and (54), and in English negative pronouns may serve as imperative subjects as in (53).

- (52) *ahohmanh chim hlah*
(53) *no one speak*
(54) *do not anyone speak*

Sentences like English (54) are as mysterious as those like Lai (47) and (52).

Regardless of what needs to be done to account for negative imperatives, it appears that in other sentence types, NgP is positioned differently with respect to AgsP or IP in Lai than it is in English. This is of some general interest in the light of attempts to find constraints governing the configurations of functional categories and their projections.⁶ In particular, this discussion offers evidence that the hierarchical relations of functional categories, though roughly similar across languages, cannot be strictly universal but subject to at least some parametric variation.⁷ Though Lai is not a well known language, considerations similar to those mentioned here suggest that negation is higher than IP also in more familiar Classical Greek. Greek is Indo-European and generally head-initial like English. On the other hand in Japanese, generally head-final like Lai, negation appears to be below IP.

⁶ For details see Cinque (2002) and the references cited there.

⁷ For a similar but more unusual case, see Bedell (2001) in which it is argued that in Lai PP is positioned below DP, unlike most languages in which the reverse relation is found.

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