

Conjunctions as topicalizers

More on Southeast Asian languages

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0. Introduction¹

Ideas in Mainland Southeast Asia tend to be expressed in seemingly coordinate or sequential units, in a linear fashion rather than in clause-within-clause constructions. These units often occur serially, unmarked by subordinating prepositions or nouns or by conjunctions. Therefore, when conjunctions are used, they signal the likelihood that the speaker wishes to make some point about the relationship between the clauses or phrases involved with that conjunction. One type of conjunction is particularly interesting in that its meaning is nonrestrictive and inexplicit about the relationship being expressed. It is that type of conjunction that I will discuss here, specifically one conjunction in Vietnamese but also similar conjunctions in Hmong and Black Tai.² Whether the type of conjoined structures discussed here is one of the many Southeast Asia areal patterns, a typological feature, or a general language pattern is still a question. I would hypothesize at this point that it is the latter but perhaps with particular areal characteristics related to the overall configurations of speech in the area, especially the running linear pattern of sentences mentioned above.

The Vietnamese conjunction *thì*, the Hmong conjunction *los*, and the Black Tai conjunction *kò* all seem to have meanings something like 'well, (and) then, (and) so, and it happens that, and it turns out that'. They always imply some degree of contrast or comparison with an actual or implied antecedent. That is, these conjunctions must be looked at in a discourse context.

I will claim here that the discourse function of these conjunctions is a topicalizing function, a kind of topicalization

process in which the conjunction highlights a usually contrastive aspect of the background discourse as a given for new information. Since the information in this given may not necessarily be old information, agreement regarding givenness may occur at the time of utterance; that is, the highlighted, or topicalized, element is assumed by the speaker to be received by the audience as marked given background to what follows, what follows frequently being contrary to expectation. Thus, this kind of conjunction explicitly marks phrases and clauses as givens and, at the same time, it introduces the following predication as a new development in the antecedent discourse event or state of affairs. I will tentatively refer to such conjunctions as developmental or inchoative conjunctions to suggest that the conjunction introduces a new development with respect to an element topicalized by the conjunction.³

Except for some object noun phrases, such highlighted phrases and clauses cannot properly be called topics in what is generally understood as marked sentence topic, but I believe this setting out of a given for the focus of new information can safely be called a topicalizing process (cf Haiman 1978 regarding conditional clauses as topics). It has been suggested by Fritz Lehmann (personal communication) that the new information introduced by the conjunction is marked by the conjunction as an antitopic.

In the following sections I will describe the types of grammatical structures generally found with these conjunctions and illustrate the use of the conjunctions in Vietnamese, White Hmong, and Black Tai utterances.

1. Structures with topicalizing conjunctions

A variety of structures can utilize these topicalizing conjunctions. In the three languages shown here the conjunction may be preceded by noun or preposition phrases or by clauses and is followed by the main predication or full proposition. The following chart gives the most common environments, where the topicalized constituents may be inner case relation noun phrases (case relations inherent in the verb) [1A,B,C], time and other outer phrases [2], clauses which possibly are nominalized [3], subordinate clauses [4], and

independent clauses [5]. Subject noun phrases and subordinate clauses predominate. Also given are approximate English examples to help elucidate the respective constructions. I will loosely translate these conjunctions as meaning 'then' in most cases.

TOPICALIZED GIVEN	CONJ	NEW DEVELOPMENT
[1A]NOUN PHRASE (SUBJECT) <i>Rice soup</i>	<i>then</i>	NON-STATIVE PREDICATION <i>is the best thing to give her.</i>
[1B]NOUN PHRASE (SUBJECT) <i>Rice soup</i>	<i>then</i>	STATIVE PREDICATION <i>is perfect for what the doctor ordered.</i>
[1C]NOUN PHRASE (NON-SBJ) <i>The rice soup</i>	<i>then</i>	CLAUSE (MAIN PROP) <i>we'll give her at lunchtime.</i>
[2]TIME PHRASE <i>At lunchtime</i>	<i>then</i>	CLAUSE (MAIN PROP) <i>we'll give her the rice soup.</i>
[3]CLAUSE <i>Giving her rice soup</i>	<i>then</i>	STATIVE PREDICATION <i>is correct, going by what you said.</i>
[4][CLAUSE] (SUBORDINATE) <i>If she won't eat rice soup</i>	<i>then</i>	CLAUSE (MAIN PROP) <i>we'll give her hot tea.</i>
[5]CLAUSE <i>She won't eat the rice soup;</i>	<i>well,</i>	CLAUSE (INDEP CLAUSES) <i>we'll give her hot tea.</i>

For example, the Vietnamese sentence in (1a) is an example of structure [1A]. The first sentence is stated background; the subject noun phrase of the second sentence, which is intended to be contrasted with the stated background, is topicalized by *thì* to highlight that contrast with respect to the new information in the predication. The Hmong sentence in (1b) has two independent clauses linked by conjunction *los* (structure [5]). The first clause is stated background which has been topicalized by *los* to highlight it with respect to the unexpectedness of the new development revealed in the second

clause. That is, the presence of *los* implies more for these two clauses than simple coordination.

(1) a Tôi không biết ông Hai làm gì.
Viet I not know Mr. Hai do what

Cô Ba thì sửa-s soạn tết.
Miss Ba then prepare festival

'I don't know what Mr.Hai is doing.

As for Miss Ba, she is preparing the festival.'

[Dyvik 1984:16]

b Peb los txog tim no
Hmg we come reaching place-across this
los tsis muaj cov Hmoob nyob ntawm
then not have group Hmong stay place-at
no.
this

'We've come over here and there aren't any Hmong living here.'

2. Elucidation of structures

Sentences from the three languages, for each of the different structures listed above, are given below.⁴ Vietnamese *thì* is used in many styles of the language, both formal and informal, spoken and written, in 18th century classical poetry and old folktales and proverbs, in modern fiction and songs, and in contemporary written discussion. Data from all these sources have been used in this study. Hmong and Black Tai, for all practical purposes, have been recorded only since the middle of this century, but the two conjunctions discussed are widely used in contemporary times.

2.1. Topicalized noun phrases

Noun phrases, particularly subject NPs, set off by these conjunctions are very common in Vietnamese and Black Tai. Hmong conjunction *los* much more frequently topicalizes clauses than it does noun phrases.⁵ Sentence (1a) above and sentences (2)-(5) have topicalized subject noun phrases (in

bold) with non-stative predicates, in Vietnamese, Hmong, and Black Tai.

(2) **Cô-dâu... đúng hơn là vợ anh**
thì

Viet bride exact more be wife he then

ngồi ở một bàn lớn.
sit at one table big

'The bride, or more precisely his own fiancé(!), sat at a big table.'
[CTTD]

(3) Nws paub, kuv los kuj paub
Hmg 3SG know I then likewise know

thiab.
also

'He knows it, and I know it too.' [Mottin 1978:142]

(4) **Kón yǔ hủn cham hấu kò**
BTai person stay house ?near we then

ʔé pai toi.
want go with

'Our neighbors, as well, want to go with us.'
[Baccam & Brace 1978:63]

(5) ʔě sui mán ỏ? siə háa mán
BTai want push 3SG out diminish 3SG but

kò bǎu ỏ?
then not go-out

'He tried to push the child off his lap, but the child didn't get off.'
[Fippinger 1975:153-4]

Sentences with subject NPs and stative predicates follow. Note that stative verb 'be able' in (8) and (10) requires an embedded sentence, one of whose arguments is coreferential with the subject of 'be able'.⁶

- (6) "Vịt xáo măng thì nhất."
 Viet duck cook-with bamboo-shoots then be-first
 'Duck cooked with bamboo shoots is the best.'
 [Nguyen N.N.1986:93]
- (7) Cái nón bài-thơ chị mua ở Huế
 Viet thing conical-hat poem sister buy at Hue
 thì rất đẹp.
 then very be-pretty
 'The hat of poetry you bought in Hue is very beautiful.'
- (8) ... ảnh-hưởng của đô-thị cổ này...
 Viet influence belonging city old this
 thì ít được các tác-giả đề-cập tới.
 then little be able PLURAL writer mention to
 'The influence of this ancient town (on...) has
 (nevertheless) been little touched on by writers.'
 [Le 1986:13]
- (9) Peb los tseem noj-qab-nyob-zoo li qub
 Hmg we then still be-happy-and-well as old
 thiab.
 also
 'As for us, we're still fine as usual.'
- (10) Fxw kò dài pai mét lâu.
 BTai anyone then be-able go complete already
 'We've all been (there) already.'
 [Baccam & Brace 1978:73]

Object noun phrases topicalized by fronting may be more emphatically topicalized by insertion of conjunctions between them and their respective proposition. Object NPs may not occur with these conjunctions without having been fronted, i.e. unless they are in subject position. In (11), multiple embedding (indicated by brackets) allows the object NP from the innermost (sentence-final) embedded clause to be

topicalized to the front of the sentence, the topicality being enhanced by the presence of *thì*.

- (11) **Chiếc xe này, thì** [tôi biết ông Hai
Viet CLSFR car this then I know Mr. Hai

đã hỏi cô Ba,
already ask Miss Ba

[ai nói với cô ấy rằng
who speak with Miss that that

[tôi muốn mua]]].
I want buy

'As for this car, I know that Mr. Hai already asked Miss Ba who had said to her that I wanted to buy it.'

[Dyvik 1984:59]

- (12) **Chén-bát thì để** chị-ở giặt quần-áo
Viet bowls then leave maid wash clothes

xong, chị-ấy sẽ rửa.
finish she will wash

'The dishes - leave it for the maid to finish the laundry and she'll wash them.' [Huffman & Tran 1980:176]

- (13) **Nqaij tsis muaj noj, dej los kuj**
Hmg meat not have eat water then likewise
tsis muaj haus.
not have drink

'There is neither food to eat nor water to drink.'

[Mottin 1978:142]

These conjunctions can enhance the topicalization of subject NPs which are already topicalized by other lexical items, such as the Vietnamese NP-initial discourse conjunction in (14). In fact, Vu The Thach (personal communication) states that the presence of *thì* always implies the presence of such pairing conjunctions, a claim which I feel needs to be examined beyond the scope of this paper.

- (14) Còn Lúc thì tối vẫn về ngủ
 Viet remaining Luc then night still return sleep
 trong kho lúa.
 inside storehouse paddy
 'As for Luc, he still slept in the barn at night.'

[CTTD]

2.2. Topicalized time phrases

Outer segments topicalized by inchoative conjunctions include time phrases (NP or PP), locative phrases, and referential constituents. Referential phrases and clauses ('As for (doing) that,...') are structures for investigation in themselves. Time phrases, being the most usual, are the only topicalized outer constituents treated here. Since time phrases are outer sentential arguments, they are frequently preposed to the main proposition. They can, however, be emphasized as givens by conjunctions, as in the sentences following.

- (15) Sáng nay tôi bận nhưng trưa thì
 Viet morning this I busy but noon then
 gặp anh được.
 meet brother able
 'I'm busy this morning but at lunchtime I can meet you.'

- (16) Nhưng sau năm 1637 khi chính-phủ
 Viet but after year 1637 the time government
 Nhật thi-hành ...,
 Japan execute
 thì số người Nhật ở Hội-An giảm
 then number person Japan at Hoi-An decrease
 hẳn đi.
 completely away
 'But after 1637, when the Japanese government
 executed (their closed-door policy), the number of
 Japanese in Hoi An greatly decreased.' [Le 1986:15]

- (17) Trong khi-đó thì người Trung-Hoa không
 Viet inside that time then person China not
 ngừng tăng lên.
 stop incr. up
 '(Whereas) during that time the Chinese people did not
 cease to increase.'
 [Le 1986:15]

- (18) Tamsim no los tseem no thiab.
 Hmg now this then still be-cold also
 'And right now, it's still cold.'

- (19) Chř thau năn taai siă,
 BTai hour old that die diminish
 kô tể năn bẩu dài múa săk-tũa.
 then since that not can go ever
 'Since the time that elderly man died, I haven't ever
 been able to go.'
 [Fippinger 1975:143]

2.3. Clauses with stative predications

These conjunctions almost have a copula function in the structure

PROPOSITION ^ CONJUNCTION ^ STATIVE-PREDICATION

where the stative predication is a comment on the proposition preceding the conjunction, or some aspect of it. This suggests that the highlighted clause may be a nominalization. Following are examples of this structure.

- (20) Anh chia công-tác cho tôi thì được.
 Viet brother divide work to I then be-possible
 'It will be alright if you apportion the work to me.'
 [Khai 1972:200]

- (21) Đi xe-tắc-xi thì đắt hơn nhưng
 Viet go taxi then be-expensive more but
 nhanh hơn.
 be-quick more
 'To go by taxi is more expensive but faster.'

- (22) Nws ua paj-ntaub qab-qwj txiav los
 Hmg 3SG do stitchery snailshell cut then
 zoo-nkauj.
 be-beautiful
 'She does snailshell applique and it's beautiful.'

The conjunction *los* with the stative verb *tau*, as in (23), appears to be an idiom, at least has high frequency although it can never occur alone. The same phrase in Vietnamese ((20) above) is common but not especially idiomatic. The status of the same phrase in Black Tai, as in (24), is not known; in her dictionary of Bangkok Thai (1964:1), Haas lists *kô dâi* as an expression.

- (23) Kuv muaj mentsis thiab kuv mam-li muab
 Hmg I have a-little and I soon hand
 ob peb duas rau koj los tau.
 two three dollar to you then possible
 'I have a little and I'll give you a few dollars, that's fine.'

- (24) Khòì du chòì kò dâi.
 BTai I supervise help then be-possible
 '(Don't worry) I can help you supervise them.'
 [Baccam & Brace 1978:63]

- (25) Chí au kan kò di.
 BTai FUTURE take each-other then be-good
 'So you want to marry one another, that's fine.'
 [Fippinger 1975:142]

2.4. Subordinate clauses marked for topicalization

Conditionals and other subordinate clauses can be introduced by subordinating conjunctions or verbs, can be set off from the following main clause by inchoative conjunctions with or without introductory subordinators, or can occur entirely unmarked -- i.e. serially with the main clause. The

use of an inchoative conjunction makes for explicit topicalization.

Following are examples of subordinate clauses set off by inchoative conjunctions, some of the clauses being introduced by subordinators, as in (28), (29), and (31).

- (26) "Bỏ ở giữa trời
 Viet leave at middle sky
 thì tất có đưa nó phải khiêng đi."
 then surely have person he must carry away
 'If you leave it out in the open, of course someone will take it.'
 [TCNN:12]
- (27) Anh đi Sài Gòn, thì tôi đi với anh.
 Viet you go Saigon then I go join[with] you
 'If you go to Saigon, then I will go with you.';
 'When you go to Saigon, then I will go with you.'
 [Dyvik 1984:29]
- (28) Nếu chị thích thì chúng-ta sẽ đi
 Viet if sister like then weINCL will go
 viếng Seattle.
 visit Seattle
 'If you like, we'll go visit Seattle.'
- (29) Có chị Kim sang đây thì vui lắm.
 Viet have sister Kim cross here then happy very
 'Kim, if you come over here (to visit), that will be great.'
- (30) Nws yuav tuaj los tsis txhob qhib
 Hmg 3SG will come then not don't open
 qhov-rooj.
 door
 'If she's going to come, then don't open the door (for her).'

(31) (Yog) koj tsis pom-qab sau no los
 Hmg be-that you not know write this then
 tsis ua li cas.
 not make as how

'If you don't know how to write this, (then) it doesn't matter.'

My tiny Black Tai corpus yielded only the presumably subordinate verb in (32) and it is unclear whether it is actually a full clause. I have given what I think is an approximate translation; Baccam & Brace have translated the sentence as simply agreement with the preceding sentence ('Oui, d'accord').

(32) Khòi chí au ém-pà pai ha tan mo nǎ
 BTai I FUTURE take aunt go ?seek ?doctor sure
 Pai kò pai.
 go then go

'I'll take you to the doctor.'

'(Fine.) If we're going then let's go.'

[Baccam & Brace 1978:51]

2.5. Independent clauses

When two grammatically independent sentences are related by an inchoative conjunction, the status of both sentences is in question as to whether or not subordination is involved. Although such sentences frequently translate into English with subordinate clauses, in their Southeast Asian structure they appear to be grammatically independent with a coordinate relationship. The conjunction serves to link them closely however, with the first clause being explicitly marked for special backgrounding.

Vietnamese *thì* and Black Tai *kò* can occur interclausally to express sequential parts of an event, but I assume that the inchoative nature of the conjunction is diminished. Although sequence is frequently involved in these inchoative sentences, as might be expected given the nature of inchoation, sequential expressions as such are not addressed in this paper. Following are sentences with conjoined independent clauses.

- (33) Người ấy đem mở ra xem thì
 Viet person that take open out see then
 thấy vàng vẫn-còn nguyên như trước.
 see gold still intact as before
 'He opened it up to see and saw that the gold was still
 there as before.'
 [TCNN:12]

- (34) Một ngày sau tôi đến đó thì cô
 Viet one day after I reach there then Miss
 đã bỏ đi rồi.
 already leave go already
 'The day after, I came there and she had left already.'

- (35) Nws ua paj-ntaub
 Hmg 3SG do needlework
 los tsis muaj chaw muag lawm.
 then not have place sell already
 'She does needlework and/but there's no place to sell
 it.'

- (36) Peb los txog tim no los
 Hmg we come reaching place-across this then
 tsis muaj cov Hmoob nyob ntawm no.
 not have group Hmong stay place-at this
 'We've come over here and there aren't any Hmong
 living here.'

- (37) Khòl lâam thoi, kò bảu mí
 BTai I startle-deceptively that's-all then not exist
 saj káa ḍ̥u.
 what at which
 'I was just startling you; there's nothing there at all.'
 [Fippinger 1975:151]

(38) ʔó laai viǝʔ kò bǎu pai táan
 BTai oh much work then not go direction

dɿu dǎi lo.
 which can PARTICLE

'Oh, I have so much work that I can't go anywhere.'
 [Fippinger 1975:140]

3. Conclusion

In the context of a discourse, a distinctive type of conjunction highlights a constituent of an antecedent and links it with a predication which reveals a new (unexpected) development in the discourse. Such are the conjunctions Vietnamese *thì*, Hmong *los*, and Black Tai *kò*, which topicalize noun phrases and subordinate and independent clauses as givens for such predications.

A linking word seems in itself to carry little semantic weight, but since it is semantic load that determines function, such a word as this conjunction will have a set of semantic features that predict its function and the environment in which the function operates. Its primary or categorial feature is [+Conjunction], which states that the lexical item links grammatical units. The feature, say, [+discourse] states that its reference is outside the domain of the head, i.e. the main verb, of the sentence in which it occurs. At this point in the analysis I shall continue to suggest the semantic feature cluster [+inchoative] for the particular topicalizing and introductory function of these conjunctions until such time as a better designation can be found.⁷

With these conjunctions, the marking of both background and foreground is so explicit as to leave no doubt of immediate reception on the part of the audience of the "inchoative" message. Such immediate reception is of course the purpose of topicalization. It seems apparent, then, that it is for this reason that inchoative conjunctions are used so often and, at least in the case of Vietnamese *thì*, in so many different styles of speech.

According to Kirby Vining (personal communication), Chinese *cū* is widely used in a function parallel to the function described here for the Southeast Asian conjunctions. Chodchoey (1986) analyzes Bangkok Thai *kô*: in its occurrence between subject noun phrases and their predicates. She states that this *kô*: occurs very frequently in oral discourse (p.117)⁸ and functions to highlight or focus the information which *follows* (rather than precedes) it (p.119). I suggest that focus for the succeeding information is provided by the *kô*: function of setting out (topicalizing) the preceding information as background for the succeeding information and that perhaps the sense of "highlighting" of what follows is due to the fact that the information introduced by *kô*: is always new. The discourse linking (conjunctive) function of *kô*: is clear in her examples.

It appears then that there may be a universal tendency to use inchoative conjunctions or markers to set off or topicalize particular portions of speech. The various inchoative uses of the English conjunction *then* are shown with each structure discussed in the paper. The following sentence from Dyvik (1984:10) uses *then* in two environments (my structures [1A] and [4]).

The generalization, **then**, is that, when topics have..., **then** the scope of their sentence operators...

It is interesting to note that if the English conjunction *then* is derived from the deictic time noun *then*, 'at that time', there may be a parallel with Vietnamese *thì*. *Thì* is considered by some to be derived from the Sino-Vietnamese noun *thì* 'time'. (Chinese *shí* has roughly the meaning '(fixed) time'.) In Hmong there is likely a derivational relationship between this inchoative conjunction and the disjunctive conjunction *los* 'or'. It is not known at this point whether Black Tai *kô* is related to a homophonous word. For Bangkok Thai *kô*:, Haas (1964:1) gives the meaning 'then, consequently, also, too' but she gives no other *kô*: except in related compounds and idioms.

Notes

1. This paper is an adaptation of a paper on Vietnamese *thì* (Clark Forthcoming(a)), with material on Hmong from Clark 1988 and additional data from Black Tai researched for this paper. The theoretical discussion in this paper has been revised from the presentation version as a result of discussions with fellow participants at the SEALS conference following presentation of the paper. Particularly helpful were ideas contributed by Bruce Downing, Martha Ratliff, Annie Jaisser, Fritz Lehmann, Vu The Thach, and Carol Compton.

For helpful consultation on the earlier papers, I am grateful to Phuong Tonthat, Lo Giang Tran and Long Nguyen for the Vietnamese data, and for Hmong, many persons over time have helped me, but especially my teacher Vangkoua Cheurtong, Neng Chue Yang, Tong Vang, Youa Vang, Sai Xiong, Youa Yang and more currently Chu Lee. Besides the Fippinger 1975 and Baccam and Brace 1978 material on Black Tai, I have used material collected from Khuyen Baccam in a 1972 field methods course conducted by Stanley Starosta at the University of Hawaii. None of the Black Tai material has been rechecked by myself with a Black Tai speaker.

2. The Vietnamese language, the primary language spoken in Vietnam, is a member of the Austroasiatic language family. Hmong language belongs to Hmong-Mien(Miao-Yao); the Hmong used here is the White Hmong spoken in Laos. Black Tai is a central Tai language spoken in northwest Vietnam and Laos; the data used here is from Black Tai refugees formerly in southern Vietnam and refugees from Laos now in Thailand or the United States.

3. Previously (Clark 1988 and Forthcoming(a)), I have used only the term 'inchoative'. I will continue to use this term until a more definitive one is found. Martha Ratliff (personal communication) suggests the term used by Mottin (1978:132) for related structures, i.e. 'concessive', to imply the conceding of a truth which was unpredictable or unexpected. Whether these conjunctions could share this feature with conjunctions meaning 'although', 'however', etc., as part of their feature complex remains to be looked into.

4. I have used the standard orthography for Vietnamese and the romanized orthography developed in Laos for Hmong (see Smalley 1976:87-101). For romanized Black Tai I have used a compromise between Fippinger & Fippinger 1970 and Baccam and Brace 1978 (who give no phonetic explanation of their orthography), with some thought for one standard romanization of Bangkok Thai. In general, diacritics represent tones in Vietnamese and Black Tai, roughly as follows:

á	high/high rising
à	low
ø	mid/mid high, level
â	falling w/ glottal [Black Tai]
ă, ǎ	mid rising [BlkTai, Viet]
ạ	low (with glottal) [Viet]
ã	mid rising (with glottal) [Viet], mid (with stop) [BlkTai]
ă, â, ê, ô	vowels in Vietnamese;
o = ɔ	in all three languages

The Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet uses VV for Vng (the only final consonant in White Hmong) and consonant symbols word finally for tones:

-b	high level	-g	low falling breathy
-j	high falling	-s	low
-v	mid rising	-m	low with final glottal
-ø	mid level	-d	low rising

5. Another Hmong inchoative conjunction, *mas*, is a regular topicalizer of NPs and clauses, while conjunction *ces* 'and then, thus' occurs interclausally. See Fuller 1985 for full discussion of *mas* and *ces*.

6. In earlier papers I have called such stative verbs requiring embedded sentences 'submissive verbs'; see Clark 1974.

7. Compare the function of these conjunctions with the meaning of the inchoative verb 'become': Given Y of X, *become* (*it happens that*) Predication W. I will not attempt

here to formalize the characteristics of the feature [+inchoative].

8. Chodchoey (1986:119-120) does not look into the function of Thai kô; occurring interclausally because it occurs only rarely in her data; she suggests that it is merely a pause filler. It seems this use is infrequent in Bangkok Thai.

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