

LOCATION IN THAI AND LAO

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In one variety of modern American slang the phrase "where it's at" has gained a certain currency. For example, the expression "This is where it's at" has a higher frequency than Clarence Barnhardt might ever have calculated and a virtual omnipresence in today's *youthspeak* that would have horrified William Strunk and E. B. White. Nevertheless, I believe it is both appropriate and accurate to characterize Ann Arbor as one of just a few places in the world which are where it's at for Tai studies. The reason for according this distinction to such an otherwise unlikely place is the presence there of my former mentor and colleague, William J. Gedney. It is a real pleasure to contribute some thought on the literal equivalent in Lao and Thai of *where it's at* to this volume in Bill Gedney's honor.

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The close similarity between Lao and Thai has been demonstrated and commented upon frequently in the literature¹ and, therefore, need not be detailed here. It is, in fact, the aim of this paper to analyze some aspects of a portion of the syntax of Lao and that of Thai to illuminate certain details of what might be called the grammar of location.

The following sentences, which represent ordinary, grammatical, oral competence² in context, are illustrative of several location expressions in Thai and Lao.³ The English glosses provided are meant to be suggestive of meaning, not definitive translations.

Thai

Lao

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|---|---|
| 1. phān phǒm yùu thīi talàat
friend my be at market
My friend's at the market. | 2. mūu khōy yūu talàat
friend my located market
My friend's at the market. |
| 3. khǎw chǎay nǎng thīi roonǎng
he/she show films at theater
He showed films at the theater | 4. láaw sǎay nǎng yūu hóonǎnēe
he/she show films located theater
He showed films at the theater |
| 5. roonǎn yùu thīinǎy
school be where
Where's the school? | 6. hóonǎn yūu sǎy
school located where
Where's the school? |
| 7. khun àan nǎngsǎi thīinǎy
you read book where
Where do you read? | 8. càw āan pīm yūu sǎy
you read book located where
Where do you read |

These sentences can be characterized with this terminology: N, noun; NP, noun phrase; VP, verb phrase; V_{i-loc} , location verb (which is intransitive); Q_{loc} , location question word; Loc, location word or words (the meaning of which is clarified below); and Prep, preposition (used provisionally and discussed further below).

Looking at the surface phrase structure of these sentences a variety of constructs may be observed. In the questions, exemplified by (5) and (6), note that /thîinǎy/ and /sǎy/ fill identical functions in $[NP V_{i-loc} Q_{loc}]$ structures. The remaining sentences contrast, however, and do so in an interesting fashion.

Questions (7) and (8) have /thîinǎy/ corresponding to /yūu sǎy/, while statements with the V_{i-loc} like (1) and (2) have /yūu thîi/ corresponding to /yūu/. Complex sentences present still another contrast; /thîi/ alone corresponds to /yūu/, as examples (3) and (4) show.

The phrase structure analysis for Lao appears to be reasonably straight forward (see Table 1). In declaratives, of the general type $[NP_1 + LOC + NP_2]$, example (2), $[LOC]$ is realized as /yūu/. The same analysis holds for $[NP_1 + VP + LOC + NP_2]$ declaratives (with the embedded location sentence), example (4). Paralleling this are interrogatives of both the $[NP + LOC + Q_{loc}]$ type, example (6), and the $[NP + VP + LOC + Q_{loc}]$ type, example (8). In the interrogatives $[LOC]$ is realized as /yūu/, just as in declaratives. Put another way, location sentences can be transformed into questions with no change in $[LOC]$. Finally, $[Q_{loc}]$ is regularly realized as /sǎy/. Note that Lao /yūu/ has verb-like functions (sentences (2) and (6) and preposition-like functions (sentences {4} and {8}), hence the deliberately vague label, "location word".

Table 1

NP ₁	yūu	NP ₂		NP	yūu	sǎy
NP ₁	VP	yūu		NP	VP	yūu sǎy

Location in Lao

In Thai (see Table 2) the interrogatives are only partly analogous to Lao phrase structure. $[The NP + Loc + Q_{loc}]$ type, example (5), and the $[NP + VP + Loc + Q_{loc}]$ type, example (7) share the $[Q_{loc}] \rightarrow /thiinǎy/$ rule, but in the former $[Loc] \rightarrow /yūu/$, while in the latter $[Loc] \rightarrow \emptyset$. In the declaratives we find $[NP_1 + Loc + NP_2]$ to be more complex, as example (1) illustrates, since $[Loc] \rightarrow /yūu thîi/$. The

remaining declarative with embedding has the structure $[NP_1 + VP + Loc + NP_2]$, as in example (3), and $[Loc]$ is realized as /thîi/.

Table 2

NP ₁	yùu	NP ₂		NP	yùu	thîinăy
NP ₁	VP	thîi	NP ₂	NP	VP	thîinăy

Location in Thai

Looking more closely at Thai, a modification is possible in the description of the simple declarative sentence and, thereby, the complexity just noted may be eliminated. The shape of this modification is suggested by the occurrence of sentences of the following sort:

11. phān phǒm yùu bān
 friend my be home
 My friend's at home.

Given these data, it seems not inappropriate to analyze strings like /thîi talàat/ as instances of noun compounds of location. These noun compounds of location have the structure, $[N_1 + N_2]$ and $[N_1] \rightarrow /thîi/$, so /thîi/, $[N]$, "place" and /talàat/, $[N]$ "market" are an $[N_1 + N_2]$ compound. By this analysis sentences (1) and (11) share an $[NP_1 + Loc + NP_2]$ structure, in which $[NP_2]$ may be realized as $[N]$ or as $[N_1 + N_2]$, in which $[N_1] \rightarrow /thîi/$. Note that, although this solution is perhaps somewhat forced for the modern language, it may ultimately be supported by diachronic studies.

The proposed modified description of the simple declarative is also useful in handling the contrast between sentences⁴ like these:

12. khǎw yùu thîi krungthêep
 he/she be in Bangkok
 He's in Bangkok.
13. khǎw yùu krungthêep
 he/she live/stay Bangkok
 He's a Bangkokian.

Sentence (12) is of the $NP_1 + Loc + NP_2$ type with a noun compound of location. Sentence (13) involves a verb /yùu/, meaning "live in, reside in, stay in", which is semantically related to the V_{i-loc} /yùu/, but distinct from it.

For an understanding of the embedded [NP + VP + ...], sentences in Thai, a return to the Lao material is instructive. If we impose the Lao pattern of Thai we would have a phrase structure of [NP₁ VP yùu NP₂] and would generate in place of example (3):

14. *khǎw chǎay nǎŋ yùu roonǎŋ
 he/she show film be theater
 He shows films at the theater.

Similarly, a phrase structure of NP VP yùu thīnǎy would replace example (7) with:

15. *khun àan nǎŋsǎi yùu thīnǎy
 you read book be where
 Where do you read?

It should be noted that (15) is a perfectly well-formed sentence if /yùu/ is not the V_{i-loc}, but rather the homophonous post-verbal (or co-verb) which marks duratives. Under this latter interpretation the phrase structure is [NP + VP + Q_{1oc}] and [VP] → [V + N + V_{co}], which may be glossed 'Where have you been reading?'.

It appears that it is precisely this homophony between the post-verbal /yùu/ and the location verb /yùu/ which blocks strings of the form of (15). This is all the more remarkable in view of the immense systemic pressure favoring a string like (15), as the Lao patterns (Table 1) confirm. Moreover this /yùu/ block may be said to have extended to (14)-type strings, apparently in response to the Thai internal pressure against ambiguous interpretations in the (15)-type strings. In fact, there is no way in which (14) can be assigned even one interpretation, let alone two; (14) is thoroughly ungrammatical.

We would conclude that underlying the Lao surface structures described in Table 1 are precisely the same kinds of strings (see Table 3). Table 3 collapses declarative and interrogative by considering the latter as derived from the former and so /sǎy/ is treated as an instance of an [NP]. In addition, [NP₁ + VP + yùu + NP₂] is no longer in the Lao table because it is an instance of [NP' + yùu + NP''] embedded in [NP + V + NP'].

Table 3

NP ₁	yùu	NP ₂	

Lao

For Thai it is possible to arrive at a conclusion analogous to that for Lao (see Table 4). However a /yùu/ block rule must be posited to operate on embedded sentences so we have a derivation of the sort: [NP + V + NP'] + [NP + yùu + NP''] → [NP + V + NP' + yùu + NP''] (in which NP'' contains a noun compound of location). [If NP''] → [thîi + N] then we have [NP + V + NP' + yùu + thîi + N] on which the /yùu/ block operates to produce [NP + V + NP' + thîi + N]. As with the Lao analysis, interrogatives are derived from declaratives and /thîinăy/ is treated as an instance of an [NP₂].

Table 4

NP ₁	yùu	NP ₂	

Thai

To recapitulate, we have seen that superficially disparate location strings in Lao and Thai (of which sentences) (1) through (8) are representative) have identical underlying descriptions (tables 3 and 4). Only further study will reveal the extent to which Lao and Thai, and other Tai languages, share a common underlying syntax.

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The residue of this analysis includes Thai /khun ca pay năy/, 'Hello' (a formula greeting, rather than an actual location inquiry), which should not be derived from /khun ca pay thîinăy/, 'Where are you going?'. The latter string is regular and is analyzeable with the approach proposed here, while the former is best considered an idiom and is idiosyncratic. Similarly /khăw maa càak năy/, 'What's his origin?' (used often jocularly in the sense of 'Where in the world is he from?') falls outside this treatment, the grammar of joshing is yet to be written for Thai (!). Note, however, that /khăw maa càak thîinăy/, 'where's he from?' is regular and analyzeable. For Lao the residue includes /khôy si pay talâat yūu thîi thanŏn làansàan/ which is found alongside the expected /khôy si pay talâat yūu thanŏn làansàan/. The former, unlike the other data of this paper, seems not to be ordinary oral usage, but rather a restricted, formal style. It is likely, given the preponderance of evidence from conversational style Lao, that this usage reflects dialect (or language) interference.

- ¹ See, for example, Li, F. K. 1960. "A Tentative Classification of Tai Dialects," in *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*. Edited by S. Diamond. New York.
- ² The data were determined by Vilai Prathnadi Grandstaff and Thao Kham-Oui to be acceptable standard (Central Plains) Thai and standard (Vientiane) Lao, respectively. I am indebted to Ms. Grandstaff and Mr. Kham-Oui for their help and gratefully acknowledge it; the interpretation is mine and I must be held accountable for any errors of analysis.
- ³ The transcription is based on Gething, Thomas W. 1972. *Aspects of Meaning in Thai Nominals*, The Hague. Appropriate modifications have been made for Lao and the following tone marks utilized: \emptyset , lower mid level; $\bar{}$, upper mid level; $\acute{}$, high; $\grave{}$, rising; $\`{}$, high falling; and $\hat{}$, low falling.
- ⁴ I am indebted to Kanchanee Dulalumpa for these examples.