PRAGMATIC INFLUENCE ON PRONOUNS IN LAI (HAKHA) CHIN, WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO FOCUS AND CONTRAST

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0 Introduction

Grice's (1975) maxim of quantity says that people generally follow the rule of "say no more than you must" This maxim seems to provide a possible explanation on the ellipsis of some particles or phrases in many of *pro*-drop or Free Empty Category languages. This interface between pragmatics and syntax is obviously shown in the relation between pragmatics and argument structure (on the relationship between the verb and its argument, Goldberg, *forthcoming*) in Lai, a language spoken in Myanmar. In this paper I will attempt to describe the pragmatic influence on the choice of pronouns in Lai.

First I will briefly describe the morphology of argument structure, describing the agreement system of the verb phrase that plays a vital role in the argument structure of Lai sentences. Then I will describe the distribution of pronouns in general. I will discuss the constraint on argument ellipsis in the third section, where I will make my claim that all pronouns in Lai are either focal or contrastive, or, arguments in Lai are overtly expressed solely for what is conventionally called 'focus'. Nevertheless, I will treat focus and contrast rather as different pragmatic notions having opposite polarity, as opposed to Schwarzschild (1999). In the later sections of the paper, I will focus on the contrast between focus and contrast.

Not much research has been done on this language. George Bedell (1996) described the agreement systems of Lai, which was a major breakthrough, as the pronominal agreements, with which Lai is rich, were thought to be pronouns before that time. Bedell, however, was not focussing on the other part of argument structure, and that is, the reason pronoun ellipsis was not explained. A few researchers, such as Melnik and K. Van Bik (of UCB), and F. Lehman have been working on the morpho-syntax of this language, but none of these scholars has worked on this topic so far. This work is intended to provide an insight into the argument structure of Lai as well as Burmese, which has similar phenomena of argument ellipsis (but not verbal agreements). But I will not discuss the Burmese case here.

1 Language Information

Lai (often known as Hakha Chin) is a Tibeto-Burman, spoken in Chin State, Myanmar (formerly Burma). It has been categorized as an ergative-absolutive language where the direct object takes an empty case marking element. Basically the language has a word order of SOV; but the word order is very flexible. It can be OSV, or the VP alone. Some scholars, F.K. Lehman for example characterize it as an Free Empty Category language while others might prefer to say it is a *pro*- drop language. Pitch and stress do not effect the logical semantics interpretation of an utterance.

2 Lai Agreement

Lai has a paradigm of pronominal agreement on the verb stem, which are clitics functioning to recover the 'phi-features' of the arguments of the verb (Bedell, 1996).

Table 1: *Pronominal agreement*

		1st	2nd	3rd
Subject	sg	ka-	na-	a-
Subject	pl	kan-	nan-	an-
Object	sg	ka-	in-	-∅
Object	pl	kan-	in..V..hna	-hna

These pronominal agreements are also possessive when prefixed to nominal expressions.

The basic word order SOV is maintained in the morphology of the VP, but the syntax of the arguments is controlled by discourse structure. The VP can represent the whole sentence as long as the arguments are recoverable, and the pronominal agreements are correctly affixed to the verb stem.

Lai VPs have the basic structure: subj-agr > (obj-arg>), V (> obj-arg). For example:

(1)   a   ka   zoh
        3sS   1sO   look
        She/He/It looks at me.

(2)   ka   zoh   hna
        1sS   look   3pO
        I look at them.

(3)   kan   in   zoh
        1pS   2O   look
        We look at you.

There is no pronoun in the examples above, but the pronominal agreements are what stand for the arguments in their absence. This is the strategy to minimize the amount of utterance to conform to Grice's maxim of quantity. Pronouns are required only when need arises to focus on an argument.

3 Lai Pronouns

Lai pronouns are mainly applicable to human or personified subjects and objects. The chance of having pronouns diminishes with the inanimacy of the entity. In reciprocals, pronouns are used for everything—human or non-human. Lai pronouns can be divided into two main categories, based on their pragmatic roles—focus pronouns and contrast pronouns.

Table 2: *Focus and contrast pronouns*

First Person		
	Sg	Pl
Focus	keimah	kanmah
Contrast	kei	kannih

Second Person		
	Sg	Pl
Focus	nangmah	nanmah
Contrast	nang	nannih

Third Person		
	Sg	Pl
Focus	amah	anmah
Contrast	anih	annih

4. Distribution of Pronouns in Lai

Pronouns occur overtly only as focused NPs and otherwise, in general, their features are recoverable[1]. Generally, the pronouns can occupy either the subject or object position with some constraints on the type of the pronouns. The choice of the pronoun is, however, constrained by the discourse structure. Thus the pronoun can occur:

1.   As agent in transitive sentences, having ergative case marked by postposition *nih*. The focus is on the agent.

(4)   anmah *nih*   an   hal
       they   erg   3pS   ask
       THEY asked him/her/it.

2.   As patient in transitive sentences, having absolutive case when the focus is on the patient.

(5)   keimah an   ka   hal
       I   3pS   1sO   ask
       They asked ME.

It is less common that two pronouns overtly occur in the same clause. It is sometimes claimed that languages tend to avoid more than one "new" argument per clause (Goldberg, *forthcoming*, citing Dubois 1987). However, the occurrence of two pronouns is not uncommon, as the language allow two focused elements in the same clause.

(6)   Nanmah   nih   amah   hal   u.
       2pS   erg   3sO   ask   IMP(erative)
       YOU ask HIM.

3.   As subject in the intransitive clause, having absolute case when the focus is on the subject NP.

(7)   Keimah   ka   kal   lai.
         I   1sS   go   will
         I will go.

4.   Focus pronouns occur as reciprocal NPs (contrast pronouns cannot).

(8)   Keimah le   keimah ka   i   hal.
         I   and I   1sS   RECIPR   ask
         I ask *myself.*

(9)   Anmah le   anmah an   i   al.
         They   and they 3pS   RECIPR   debate
         They are arguing with one another/themselves.

5.   Pronouns occur as possessive markers before the nouns when they are focused.

(10)   Nangmah   kedan maw   keimah kedan?
         YOUR   shoes or   MY   shoes?

As against unfocused

(10')   na kedan maw ka kedan

5 Argument Omission

It has long been known that subjects are more likely to be omitted (Goldberg *forthcoming*, citing Bloom 1970; Chomsky 1982, Hyams 1986; Jaeggli and Hyams 1988; Uziel-Karl and Berman 2000), since subjects are supposed to be topical in most cases. In Lai, however, the objects are, on such grounds possibly just as topical; any of the two or arguments, if present, can occupy the topic position that is in most cases, by default, that of the subject of the sentence. Present or absent, they are essentially represented by their agreement clitics, and it is these that take fixed order, subject always being first. The claim that subjects are more likely to be omitted is therefore weakened by evidence shown by Lai. This is possibly because either/any of the arguments can be topicalized depending on the discourse structure. This is possibly a compensation for a passive construction that is very rare in the language. I will not go further on this point. Thus a simple transitive sentence (11), where the agent is topicalized, is also uttered as (12), where patient is topcialized, depending on the speaker's choice of topic.

(11)   ui   nih   me   an   dawi hna
         dog   erg   goat   3pS   chase 3pO
         The dogs chase the goats.

(12) me   ui   nih   an   dawi hna
     goat dogs erg   3pS   chase 3pO
     The goats the dogs chase,
     i.e. The dogs chase the goats.

One or both of the arguments can be omitted as in (13) where the verb with the agreements represents the full clause.

(13) [ui nih] (me) an dawi hna
     They chase them

Although it appears that the simplest instances of sentences with overt subjects are mostly intransitive, as with wh-questions, overt subject and object commonly occur in other simple sentences such as exclamations, depending on the information structure. Either the subject or the object, or both, in that case, is likely to be indefinite, like *mi* 'people' in (15). There is no argument omission in such utterances.

(14) Zei   dah   a   cang?
     What Q   3sS   happen
     What happens?

(15) Ngal   nih   mi   a   tai!
     boar   erg   person 3sS   slash
     A boar slashed somebody!

6 Focus Pronouns *vs*. Contrast Pronouns

Schwarzschild (1999) discusses the notions of "novelty focus" and "contrastive focus," and claims that both of them are the outcome of the combination of the Givenness Constraint and Avoid F. In his paper he treats focus and contrast as (more or less) the same category, which is contrary to the evidence given by the choice of pronouns in Lai.

Lai has distinct pronouns for focus and contrast, which indicates that focus and contrast are different pragmatic notions. I will show their different occurrences in different discourse situations, to demonstrate the pragmatic constraints on their occurrences.

6.1 Morphosyntactic Evidence

As opposed to focus pronoun,

1.   Contrast pronoun cannot occur in object position in imperative sentences.

(16) *Amah* va   hal   ko
     **Anih* va   hal   ko
     Just go and ask HER.

2.   Contrast pronoun cannot occur as reciprocal NPs, as the object is not in contrast with other persons but is fixed to the subject. The pronoun is essentially a focus pronoun.

(17) *Keimah* le   *keimah* kaa   hal
      *Kei   le   *kei*   kaa   hal
      I ask myself.

(18) *Anmah* le   *anmah* an   ido.
      *Annih le   *annih* an   ido.
      They are fighting one another/themselves.

3.   Contrast pronoun cannot occur with emphasized expressions marked by prefix *a-*.

(19) Nangmah rilmal i *a-keimah/*a-kei* tehna ke   tawlcu ka   ruat   kho lo.
      you   great p emph-me   leg   wash   D   1sS think can NEG
      I can't imagine that You, the Great One, would wash the feet of a layman like ME.

      Where p marks a sort of truncated relative construction, so that 'rilmal i' amounts to "one who is great"; D = determiner; HUM is a humiliative marker.[2]

4.   Contrast pronouns cannot occur before intensifiers, particles like *ko* 'particularly' and *hrimhrim* 'the very' (these are translations only). *Cu* (a generalized determiner) in (20) marks the topic, not as it marks contrast in other cases.

(20) Amah ko cu pei a zual cu!
      *Anih ko cu pei a zual cu!
      HE is the extreme!

(21) Nangmah hrimhrim nih va pe hna.
      *Nang hrimhrim nih va pe hna.
      (YOU) Go yourself and give [it to] them.

6.2 Pragmatic Difference
Context: An army commander is urging the soldiers to go to the battlefield, telling them how important it is to fight this battle. In fact, the coward does not intend to go.

(22) *Amah* (caang) cu a kal lai lo.
      [caang 'but he'] (Foc)
      HE will not go, or
      Him, HE won't go.

      Another commander has to stay at camp while others are going to the battlefield because he is expecting an important guest who is coming to visit the camp, otherwise the commander would go enthusiastically to the battlefield.

(23) *Anih* cu a kal lai lo.   (Contr)
      *Anih caang cu a kal lai lo.
      HE will not go (he will not go with them)

The two structures are similar morphologically, but the discourse determiner *cu* (a determiner that fundamentally 'points' not in real space but in the space of the existing discourse) in the two sentences has different roles. It marks the topic in (24) while it marks contrast in (25), as it does in the following examples.

(24)   *Keimah* (taktak) cu kaa lio lai lo.   (Focus)
                     actually
        I myself (for one) am not going to actually swim.
        [I've just come to watch the kids.]

(25)   *Kei* cu kaa lio lai lo.   (Contr)
        *Kei taktak cu kaa lio lai lo.
        I am not going to swim. [*You* go, if you want.]
        (Different subjects for one event)

The difference between the two expressions is obvious when negation (*lo*) is deleted.

(26)   *Keimah cu kaa lio lai.
(27)   Kei cu kaa lio lai.
        I'm taking a swim [You will not!]

Focus and contrast have opposite polarity—contrast being the negative—according to the choice of Lai pronoun in different contexts. That is, focus is related to the "peculiarity" of an entity to the rest of its type, whereas contrast would be related to the "exceptionality." I will illustrate this point in an example.

Context: In an airport lounge where passengers are waiting, the flight attendant announces that they need a volunteer to delay his/her flight as they have oversold tickets. She asks, "Who would like to volunteer?" Sam raises his hand and says:

(28)   *Keimah* kaa pe lai.
        I will do it. (I will commit myself and I do not know, maybe not even care, about what anyone else may do.)

At the time of boarding, another passenger, who is expecting Sam to move toward the boarding gate along with them, tells Sam to move. Sam refuses, saying:

(29)   *Kei* cu ka kal rih lai lo.
        I am not flying yet. [But you are!]

In (28) Sam, by his peculiar behavior, is committing himself to do something. That is a positive-minded action. In (29) he is making himself an exception to other passengers. That is a negative-minded action. Here the focus pronoun *keimah* is used for a commitment, whereas the contrast pronoun *kei* is used for avoidance or excuse. In (28) Sam is not opposing himself to anyone else. In (29) he is contrasting himself to other people.[3]

Context: Husband and wife

(30)   Rawl chuang ning.   (Non-F)
         food   cook   1st-IMP
         I will let myself cook, *or* I will cook (lit. Let me cook..)

(31)   *Kei* rawl chuang ning.   (Contr)
         I will cook [and YOU take care of the baby.]

(32)   *Keimah* rawl chuang ning. (Focus)
         I   food cook   1st-IMP
         I will cook (because *I* cook better than all of you.)

Note that we can see with this example that, in some sense, Focus often amounts to a limited case of Contrast, namely, as against the world in general.

Example (30) is not focusing on anything. In (31) the supposed husband is contrasting himself with his wife in terms of their division of labor. He is not, however, contrasting himself with other specifiable people in (32).

As has been argued, pronoun ellipsis marks the argument and, if the omitted argument is the subject, especially if the predicate is intransitive, the clause as non-focal. Non-F clauses use pronominal agreement only. Similar examples (30)-(32) support the different readings determined by the choice of pronoun, e.g., to mark possession.

Context: At a picnic; Talking about a camera

(33)   *Ka*   ta   a   si   lo.   (Non-F)
         1sS   possession   3sS   be   NEG
         This is not mine. It does not belong to me.

(34)   *Keimah*   ta   a   si   lo.   (Focus)
         my (foc)   possession   3sS   be   NEG
         This is not MINE. It's my FRIEND's.

(35)   *Kei*   ta   a   si   lo.   (Contr.)
         my (contr)   possession   3sS   be   NEG
         This is not MINE. I don't know whose this is. [MINE is not black.]

In (33), the speaker is making himself an exception from the set of all people that might possibly own that camera. This expression is not possible if it is non-negative declarative sentence.

(36)   *Kei ta a si
         It's MINE!

This indicates that the contrast pronoun is a negative polarity item as well. That is compatible with the fact that that pronoun *kei* is used to make a contrastive *exception* on

one person to the rest of the population in the discourse. On the other hand, the focus pronoun is used in non-negative sentences in both cases—where the pronoun is focused or contrasted.

(37)   Keimah ta a si
        It's MINE.

The focus pronoun is used again in positive statements, whereas the contrastive pronoun is chosen for negative ones.

Context: Talking about going to a party when the daughter is demanding to go.

(38)   *Ka duh ah ka kal lai; *ka* **nawl a si.**
        my wish at 1sg go fut; my choice it-is   (Non-focal)

(39)   Ka duh ah ka kal lai; *keimah* **nawl a si**.
        I will go if I want; **it's up to ME.**   (Focal)

(40)   Na pa hal. ***Kei*** **nawl a si lo.**
        your dad ask (Contrastive)
        Ask your dad. **It's not up to ME.**

7 Summary

In this paper, I have claimed that, in Lai, any pronominal arguments can, indeed, must be omitted, unless they are either focal or contrastive, as long as the argument is recoverable, or indeed, in the case of a three place predicate, whether or not it is recoverable. In that case, the basic word order is maintained in the morphology of the verb complex. Thus the verb with its agreements can represent the whole sentence if no argument is in focus. Only the focused pronoun is overtly expressed as the subject or the object. I have also tried to show that contrast is different from focus, as shown by the choice of Lai pronoun morphologically, syntactically, and pragmatically, contrary to the implicit claim of Schwarzschild. I made a claim that *focus* and *contrast* are of opposite polarity, where contrast has the negative polarity. In this paper, I think I have been able to point out the interface between syntax and pragmatics, as it describes how the omission of the argument of the verb is sensitive to pragmatic factors such as the maxim of quantity or recoverability of the topic. On the other hand, the infelicitous choice of pronoun can change the interpretation of the utterance, and even the whole discourse eventually.

Notes

1.   Actually not every such empty argument pronoun is recoverable. With a three place predicate, the indirect object is mirrored by an agreement clitic, but *not* the direct object. It is this that makes Lai and related languages a Free Empty Category language rather than a pro-drop

language, and for languages like Burmese, without any agreement system, none of the empty argument positions are recoverable.

2.   amounts to 'a mere I'.

3.   Comparison with Burmese is helpful here. The distinction parallels that between the post-nominal particle *ka* and the postnominal particle compound *ka. taw.* . In Upper Burmese at least, keeping in mind that, like Lai, Burmese is a Free Empty Category language that 'avoids pronoun' unless it is needed for focus or contrast, subject pronouns in particular tend quite generally to be followed by one or other of these postnominal elements. If I say

> i. cunnaw-*ka..*   thwa::me
>   I   KA   go fut.

It means that I, for one, at any rate, am going to go, regardless of what others may do. If I say

> ii. cunnaw *ka.taw.* thwa::me

It is understood that I mean to go *instead of* anyone else, regardless. For evidence that *ka..* is, like Lai postnominal <u>*cu*</u>, a determiner, see Lehman 2000; for similar evidence for Lai Chin *cu,* see Lehman 2002.

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