# Meaning and Use of Thai lέεw

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## 1. Introduction
### 1.1 Overview

If you look up the Thai word lέεw in Mary Haas' (1964) Thai-English dictionary you will find that it is a verb meaning "to be finished", a serial verb meaning "already", and a conjunction meaning "then, afterwards, later." While lέεw no longer occurs as the verb 'finish', at least not in my data and apparently not in most dialects of spoken Thai, it does occur in the serial verb and conjunction positions.

Researchers have variously proposed that lέεw is a perfect, a perfective, a past tense, a conjunction, or an adverb. Schmidt (1992) compares lέεw with the Mandarin Chinese morpheme "le", which has two different aspects associated with its different sentential positions:

Diagram #1:

S + lέεw (sentence-final)---------------> perfect
lέεw + S (sentence-initial)--------------> perfective

The purpose of this study is to examine lέεw in each of its distributional, discourse and semantic contexts in order to identify the temporal and aspectual meanings associated with this morpheme. A basic meaning which accounts for the diverse uses of this word will be suggested.[1]

Some researchers claim that sentence-final lέεw is an adverb meaning "already" (Warotamasikkhadit 1972) which functions much like other temporal adverbials. Some claim that it is a perfect marker (Dahl 1985; Sareechareonsatit 1984; Thepkanjana 1986). Still others claim it provides a completive meaning or a perfective meaning (Boonyatispark 1983; Scovel

1970; Sindhvanandha 1970). Example 1 shows Schmidt's (1992) so-called sentence-final lɛ́ɛw from my data:[2]

(1) S + lɛ́ɛw :

The speaker is telling the Pear Story. She has just described the pear-picker who comes down to find one of his baskets missing. She quotes him:

1    S18:    ʔâaw̆ takrâa hǎay pay **lɛ́ɛw** nɨ̀ŋ bay
                EXC basket hide  go  **lɛ́ɛw** one CLS
                "Oh, one basket has disappeared!"

Example 2 below shows Schmidt's (1992) sentence-intial lɛ́ɛw which he claims is a perfective, while others claim it is a conjunction meaning "then, later":

(2) lɛ́ɛw + S:

1    Flo    lian baŋsɛ̆ɛn dây    pii nɨ̀ŋ **lɛ́w** kɔ̆ kàp
             study Bansaen able.to year one  **lɛ́ɛw** so  return
             "I studied at Bangsaen for a year and then I returned,"

             (.5)

2    Flo    maa fɨ̀kŋaan thî nîi **lɛ́w** kɔ̆ tham ŋaan ləəy
             come be.intern here  **lɛ́ɛw** so do    work pass
             "came here as an intern, and started working."

## 1.2 Research Questions

1.)   How do Native Speakers actually interpret lɛ́ɛw?
2.)   What does lɛ́ɛw really mean: is it a perfect, a perfective, a past tense, a sequential conjunction? And what is the relationship between these meanings?
3.)   What does lɛ́ɛw itself, as opposed to other elements in the context, contribute to the interpretation of speech?
4.)   How does lɛ́ɛw function in natural spoken discourse?

## 1.3 Tense and Aspect: Meanings and Categories

The meanings of tense, mood, and aspect markers in the languages of the world have been difficult to characterize, because they are abstract and subtle, making a difficult task for researchers trying to establish cross-linguistic categories. This has contributed to some of the difficulty categorizing lɛɛw. But recent attempts to establish such cross-linguistic categories in broad samples of languages (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994; Dahl 1985) have provided new information which helps to explain lɛɛw's case.

The "perfect" basically means that the situation being marked is <u>prior to and relevant to the reference time</u>. Reference time (RT) can be speech time, or any other time, and the ways in which situations may be relevant to the RT vary greatly from language to language (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994). Diagram #2 illustrates this meaning:

Diagram #2

situation

————————·.....................[]

RT
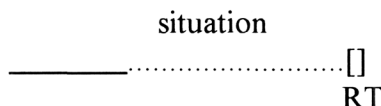
The "perfective", on the other hand, marks a situation which is viewed as a bounded whole, and of which the speaker takes an external perspective (Comrie 1976). Diagram #3 illustrates this sense of boundedness:

Diagram #3

—————————{...}————————

situation
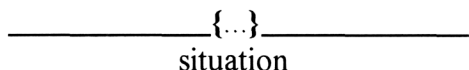
## 2. The Study
## 2.1 Methods

In order to investigate this question, I examined a data base of Thai spoken discourse which consists of the monologic Pear Story narratives of 20 speakers,[3] and one stranger-stranger conversation about the Northridge Earthquake, comprising a total of 2,873 clauses.[4]

By dividing the data into intonation units (IU),[5] lέεw's clausal positions were identified as the following: (1) "VP-final": lέεw occurs at or near the end of an IU; (2) "Inter-clausal": lέεw occurs at the beginning of an IU.

## 2.2 Results
### 2.2.1 Position and Frequency of lέεw

To illustrate the frequency with which lέεw occurs in each of these clausal positions, its distribution in the two data sets is shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1: frequency lέεw position:

|  | VP-final | Inter-clausal | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pear Story: | 26 | 229 | 255 |
| Earthquake 3: | 49 | 107 | 156 |
| TOTAL | 75 | 336 | 411 |

lέεw occurs in the verb-phrase final position only 75 times of a total 411 tokens, while it occurs in the inter-clausal position 336 times. VP-final lέεw is much less frequent than inter-clausal lέεw. According to Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca's study of the evolution of tense and aspect morphemes: "Since the more generalized a gram is, the wider its domain of applicability, we should expect that the more generalized a gram is, the higher its incidence of use" (1994: 19–20). They also hypothesize that this co-evolution is accompanied by phonological reduction as well. Based on this hypothesis, we should expect the more frequent inter-clausal lέεw to be more semantically general and phonologically reduced.

## 2.2.2 Aspect and Grounding

Much of the data examined in this study contains a rich sample of narratives, stories in which the events are told in the same order that they actually occurred. Such stories have two layers, termed foreground and background: the foreground provides the main storyline, while the background provides information necessary to the interpretation of that storyline. This

layering is linguistically marked, and allows the listener (or reader) to process a complex flow of information. The foreground/background distinction allows the speaker (or writer) to express the same real world events in different ways, marking a different path through the story, and providing a different backdrop. Given these important functions of foreground and background in narrative, languages use a range of devices, including aspect, to distinguish them.

Foreground clauses move the reference time of the narrative forward, are chronologically sequenced and focus on the events rather than states or descriptions. This linear ordering of events in the foreground leads to their construal as bounded, unitary occurrences and their marking in many languages as perfective. (Hopper 1979; Reinhart 1984).

The fact that languages that have a perfective tend to mark every foreground clause with it provides the basis for hypothesis #1: If lɛɛw is indeed a perfective, then narrative foreground clauses should strongly tend to be marked with it. However, in my data only an insignificant percentage of the total foreground clauses were marked with lɛɛw, as shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2: Foreground Clauses with lɛɛw:

|  | # of FG clauses: | % of FG clauses: |
|---|---|---|
| no lɛɛw | 825 | 82% |
| with lɛɛw | 182 | 18% |
| TOTAL | 1007 | 100% |

Figure 2 shows that only 18% of the total number of foreground clauses in my data were marked by lɛɛw, while 82% were not marked by it. This shows that lɛɛw does not have the foregrounding function, in either of its positions, that we would expect of a perfective marker.

Let's look back at example 2: Here lɛɛw occurs within a foreground context, which describes a temporal sequence of events. This context, not the occurrence of lɛɛw, contributes to the interpretation that each event is viewed as a bounded whole.

(2) lɛ́ɛw + S:

1 Flo lian baŋsɛ̌ɛn dâ_y pii nὲŋ lɛ́w kɔ̌ kàp
    study Bansaen able.to year one lɛ́ɛw so return
    "I studied at Bangsaen for a year and then I
    returned,"

    (.5)

2 Flo maa fὲkŋaan thî nîi lɛ́w kɔ̌ tham ŋaan lǝǝy
    come be.intern here lɛ́ɛw so do work pass
    "came here as an intern, and started working."

According to the cross-linguistic, discourse-level evidence about the background of a narrative, we can postulate hypothesis #2: If lɛ́ɛw does the work of a perfect in VP-final position, it will tend to occur in the background clauses of narrative. The results are shown in figure 3:

Figure 3: VP-final lɛ́ɛw in background versus foreground clauses

|  | Pear Story | Earthquake 3 |
|---|---|---|
| background | 23 | 43 |
| foreground | 3 | 6 |
| TOTAL | 26 | 49 |

Figure 3 shows that nearly all tokens of verb-phrase final lɛ́ɛw occurring in my data were in background clauses. Since the identification of a clause as background was decided on the basis of criteria independent of lɛ́ɛw (see Howard 1996 for a full description of coding procedures), these results demonstrate that lɛ́ɛw indeed has a backgrounding function in discourse, a function which is often attributed to the perfect, and not the perfective, in other languages.

2.2.3 Aspect and Context

  The way in which given aspect markers interact with their context has also been investigated in many languages. First, according to Comrie (1976), the perfective aspect contrasts with

the imperfective aspect in a given language, making the Imperfective and Perfective incompatible. But lɛ́ɛw is not incompatible with imperfective grams. In example 3, lɛ́ɛw co-occurs with the Imperfective marker *yùu*:

(3) Tina has just complained that cleaning up after the earthquake was a waste of time. Patty describes a friend who felt the same way:

1 Patty:  tɛ́  yàŋ baaŋ khon  bàan   kháw lók    **yù   lɛ́ɛw**
          but still  some people house  3.p be.messy IMP lɛ́ɛw
          "But for some people, their house was already a mess."

The claim that verb phrase-final lɛ́ɛw marks the "completion" of an action, is supported by Burusphat (1991) who cites example 4:

(4)     nay thɛ́ɛn thùukpʉ̀ʉn bàatcèp sǐa  **lɛ́ɛw**
        Mr. Tan  hit    gun  injure  FP  lɛ́ɛw
        "Mr. Tan had already been shot (and) injured."
        (Burushpat 1991: 91)

However, the interpretation that this event is complete could come either from lɛ́ɛw, or from the interaction effects of a perfect meaning within the context: the verb "shoot" describes a punctual event which has no duration; when used with a perfect as in "he has been shot", it gives the implicature of completion since a punctual event which occurs prior to reference time should be complete. In fact, as Boonyatispark (1983) describes, this implicature can be cancelled in certain contexts resulting in a non-completive interpretation.

In my data lɛ́ɛw co-occurs with all four semantic verb types—state, activity, achievement and accomplishment—being interpreted and used slightly differently with each one depending on the context.

For example, verb-phrase final lɛ́ɛw has an anterior continuing meaning with non-punctual verbs. It can refer to activities which began before and continue at reference time. Or,

with a state verb, it can refer to a state that began prior to, and continues at, the reference time:

(5)     Patty's friend didn't want to move after the earthquake even though her building was dangerous:

1     Patty:  kháw bɔ̀k tɛ̀k        ʔiaŋ  pay  khâaŋ  nɛ̀ŋ  lɛ́ɛw
               3.s/p  tell building  lean  go   side   one  lɛ́ɛw
               "She said the building was leaning to one side."

2            yaŋ  mây  yàk   yáay
             still NEG  want  move
             "But she still didn't want to move."

In Example 5, lɛ́ɛw co-occurs with the state verb ʔiaŋ ('lean'), and the situation of "leaning" began prior to a reference point in the past, and continues at that reference time. Grammatical aspect markers (perfective and imperfective) impose their temporal meaning on situations. If lɛ́ɛw were a perfective, it should impose a bounded meaning even when occurring with non-punctual situations, but it does not.

<u>2.2.4 lɛ́ɛw as a conjunction</u>
        What about the claim that in inter-clausal position lɛ́ɛw is a conjunction? According to Halliday and Hasan (1976) temporal conjunction can be external, referring to the temporality of the situations being described, or internal, referring to the temporal nature of the discourse itself. We find this in English with the logical connectors "firstly..., secondly..., lastly...", for example.
        As shown in example 2 lɛ́ɛw connects two clauses temporally such that the situation in the first is prior to the situation in the second. In this case lɛ́ɛw is functioning as an external temporal/sequential conjunction.

(2) lέεw + S:

1    Flo    lian baŋsɛ̌ɛn dây    pii nɯ̀ŋ lέw kɔ̂ kàp
            study Bansaen able.to year one  lέεw so return
            "I studied at Bangsaen for a year and then I
            returned,"

     (.5)

2    Flo    maa fɯ̀kŋaan thîi nîi lέw kɔ̂ tham ŋaan ləəy
            come be.intern here  lέεw so do    work pass
            "came here as an intern, and started working."

lέεw is also used as an internal temporal conjunction,
marking a discourse move as new and sequential to a previous
one, as in example 6:

(6) In a meeting with her student's father, the teacher is discussing
the various problems that this student is having. They have already
discussed that she is behind in her courses, and missed an
important test:

1    Teacher:    law kɔ̂    mây lúu    ca    wâa yaŋŋay
                 we   then  NEG know   IRR   say   how
                 "We don't know what to do."

     (.4)

2              ʔa lέεw kɔ̂ khanɛɛn kɔ̂ mây dii    ná    khá
               uh lέεw so grade      so  NEG good  PRT   Q
               "Uh, **and** her grades are not good either."

We also find inter-clausal lέεw being used as an additive
conjunction whose temporal meaning is bleached, as in example
7:

(7) This speaker is describing the pear picker in the Pear Story
film:

1    S1   mii   nùat      **lέεw**  kɔ̌ phǒm dam
            have  mustache lέεw so hair    black
            "He has a mustache **and** black hair."

The fact that inter-clausal lέεw is used as an external and internal temporal sequential conjunction, as well as an additive conjunction, is a sign of an advanced degree of semantic generalization, as Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca's (1994) co-evolution hypothesis would have predicted for a morpheme of this level of frequency (see section 2.2.1). Indeed the less frequent VP-final lέεw is more specific in meaning.

## 2.2.5 lέεw in Discourse
       It seems that we can revise Schmidt's (1992) formulation in the following way:

    1.)    VP-final lέεw functions as a perfect.
    2.)    inter-clausal lέεw functions as a sequential conjunction.

A problem still remains: what is the relationship between these two meanings? I am proposing a basic meaning for lέεw that accounts for all of these uses. lέεw involves the notions of anteriority and sequentiality: it connects two situations in time. This means that the use of lέεw presupposes both an anterior and a succeeding situation. This can be schematized as follows:

Diagram #4:
             situation A [lέεw] situation B
             <------------- [RT]------------->

Diagram #4 illustrates the fact that between two clauses, lέεw coincides with RT: Situation A precedes situation B.
       In a narrative discourse, lέεw can connect two narrative events in time, occurring between the two. However, in other types of discourse, lέεw can be "packaged" (co-occur in a clause) with either situation A or situation B, without explicit mention of the other situation. VP-final lέεw is packaged with situation A.

This creates a strong expectation of a situation B to which A will be antecedent and relevant: This is shown in Diagram #5:

Diagram #5:
> {situation A + [lɛ́ɛw]}
> <-----------------[RT]

Inter-clausal lɛ́ɛw may occur between two clauses that express situation A and situation B, as in Diagram #4. It may also occur only with situation B, strongly presupposing a situation A which precedes it:

Diagram #6:
> {[lɛ́ɛw] + situation B}
> [RT]----------------->

   If either one of the situations is not explicitly marked in the immediate linguistic context, the listener must interpret what the situation marked by lɛ́ɛw is relevant to. Compare the following two segments of the pear story:

(8) The speaker has just told us that a boy has spilled the pears from his bike basket after hitting a rock and falling:

> (.5)

1 S17:  sùan  dèk  khon nîi  kɔ̂ɔ ʔaw phɔ̌nlamáay sày krabuŋ
         which child CLS  this so  take fruit        put basket
         "And this boy puts the fruit back in the basket."

2       **lɛ́ɛw** kɔ̂ɔ lɯ̂an rót  tɔ̀ɔ      pay
         lɛ́ɛw so  move bike continue go
         "And then moves on with the bike."

(9) The speaker has told us about a pear picker who is filling baskets with the pears he has picked. One basket is full, the other isn't:

1 S18:   tɛ́ɛ  kɔ̌ɔ  kháw  ʔaw  maa  sày  **lɛ́ɛw**
           but  so    3.s/p  take  come  put  lɛ́ɛw
           "but then he has put more in,"

2         kɔ̂  tem
         so  be.full
        "so it's full."

The temporal information provided by lɛ́ɛw in these two segments seems to be the same, but the speaker has chosen to focus more on situation A or situation B. Andersen (forthcoming) points out that aspect is often chosen by the speaker to convey a certain temporal perspective on the situation. Perhaps a Thai speaker chooses to use lɛ́ɛw in a certain way in order to take a temporal perspective and alternative focus on the situation.

    The fact that inter-clausal lɛ́ɛw has more uses, which go beyond temporal readings, suggests that its meaning is more general than that of VP-final lɛ́ɛw . VP-final lɛ́ɛw focuses on situation A, and makes that situation's relevance to the reference time apparent. On the other hand, placing lɛ́ɛw with situation B seems to focus on situation B as sequential to whatever came before, and the relevance meaning seems to be weakened in this position.

## 3. Conclusion
    lɛ́ɛw occurs in two different positions in the clause and has rather different functions in these two positions. When occurring at, or near, the end of a clause or intonation unit, lɛ́ɛw is used in a way which is characteristic of perfect, and not perfective, morphemes in other languages: it signals that situation is prior to and relevant to the reference time; it has a backgrounding function, its interpretation interacts with, rather than overrides, different semantic verb types; and it co-occurs with the imperfective marker. Nor is inter-clausal lɛ́ɛw a perfective: since lɛ́ɛw, in regardless of clause position, occurs in only 18% of narrative foreground contexts, it does not have the essential foregrounding function that a perfective would have.

Inter-clausal lɛ́ɛw is slightly more generalized in its use; it is more frequent, and based on informal observation in my data, it is often more reduced than VP-final lɛ́ɛw in rapid speech. Based on these three statements, we might assume that these distributional variations of lɛ́ɛw are beginning to diverge. However, they are clearly related in meaning, their phonological form is not distinct, and it is not clear whether they are even distributionally distinct (there were some tokens of VP-final lɛ́ɛw that would be better interpreted as a sequential conjunction, perhaps functioning as a floor-holder).While it is not yet clear whether to consider them to be different words, at the least we should see them as forms in transition. Remaining to be explored is the question surrounding lɛ́ɛw's semantic generalization and increase in frequency in the inter-clausal position, without showing the phonological tell-tale signs of diachronic development, as predicted by Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca (1994), that are necessary in order for speakers of a language to differentiate separate forms.

## Notes

1. This paper is based on Howard (1996) which is a more extensive study of the uses and functions of lɛ́ɛw in natural spoken discourse.

2. Transcription notation: CLS: classifier; FP: final particle; IRR: irrealis; EXC: exclamation; IMP: imperfective; NEG: negative; PRT: interaction particle; Q: question particle; 3.s/p: third person pronoun. Length of pause indicated in parenthesis, e.g. (.5).

3. Pear Story Narratives were collected, transcribed and translated by Supa Chodchoey.

4. Funded by the Pacific Rim Studies Program, University of California, Los Angeles: Principle investigator, Shoichi Iwasaki; transcribed and partially translated by Amy Meepoe.

5. See Iwasaki (1996) for a description of intonation units in Thai.

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