Meaning and Use of Thai лежw

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1. Introduction
1.1 Overview

If you look up the Thai word лежw 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 лежw 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 лежw is a perfect, a perfective, a past tense, a conjunction, or an adverb. Schmidt (1992) compares лежw with the Mandarin Chinese morpheme “le”, which has two different aspects associated with its different sentential positions:

Diagram #1:

\[ S + лежw \text{ (sentence-final)} \rightarrow \text{perfect} \]
\[ лежw + S \text{ (sentence-initial)} \rightarrow \text{perfective} \]

The purpose of this study is to examine лежw 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 лежw 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 léew from my data:\(^2\)

(1) S + léew :

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: ʧâaw takrâa hâay pay léew nêŋ bay
     EXC basket hide go léew one CLS
     “Oh, one basket has disappeared!”

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

(2) léew + S:

1 Flo lian baŋsêen dây pìi nêŋ lêw kô kàp study Bansaen able.to year one léew so return
   “I studied at Bangsaen for a year and then I returned,”

   (.5)

2 Flo maa fêŋŋaan thî nîi lêw kô tham ŋaan lêewy come be.intern here léew so do work pass
   “came here as an intern, and started working.”

1.2 Research Questions

1.) How do Native Speakers actually interpret léew?
2.) What does léew 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 léew itself, as opposed to other elements in the context, contribute to the interpretation of speech?
4.) How does léew 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 lẹw. 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 lẹw’s case.

The “perfect” basically means that the situation being marked is prior to and relevant to the reference time. 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, and one stranger-stranger conversation about the Northridge Earthquake, comprising a total of 2,873 clauses.
By dividing the data into intonation units (IU), \( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \)'s clausal positions were identified as the following: (1) "VP-final": \( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \) occurs at or near the end of an IU; (2) "Inter-clausal": \( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \) occurs at the beginning of an IU.

2.2 Results

2.2.1 Position and Frequency of \( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \)

To illustrate the frequency with which \( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \) occurs in each of these clausal positions, its distribution in the two data sets is shown in Figure 1:

**Figure 1: frequency \( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \) position:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VP-final</th>
<th>Inter-clausal</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pear Story:</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthquake 3:</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>336</strong></td>
<td><strong>411</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \) 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 \( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \) is much less frequent than inter-clausal \( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \). 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 \( \text{\L\text{e\w}} \) 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 леэ 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 леэ, as shown in Figure 2:

**Figure 2: Foreground Clauses with леэ:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of FG clauses</th>
<th>% of FG clauses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no леэ</td>
<td>825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with леэ</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 shows that only 18% of the total number of foreground clauses in my data were marked by леэ, while 82% were not marked by it. This shows that леэ 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 леэ occurs within a foreground context, which describes a temporal sequence of events. This context, not the occurrence of леэ, contributes to the interpretation that each event is viewed as a bounded whole.
(2) \text{nìw} + S:
1 Flo lian bânšën dây piî nà̂n \text{nìw} kō kâp study Bansaen able.to year one \text{nìw} so return “I studied at Bansaen for a year and then I returned.”

(.5)

2 Flo maa fāk próximo thî nîi \text{nìw} kō tham ūan \text{leèy} come be.intern here \text{nìw} 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 \text{nìw} 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 \text{nìw} in background versus foreground clauses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pear Story</th>
<th>Earthquake 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>background</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreground</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3 shows that nearly all tokens of verb-phrase final \text{nìw} 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 \text{nìw} (see Howard 1996 for a full description of coding procedures), these results demonstrate that \text{nìw} 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 liew is not incompatible with imperfective grams. In example 3, liew co-occurs with the Imperfective marker yiu:

(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:

I Patty: te yan baan khon baan khaw lok yu liew
but still some people house 3.p be.messy IMP liew
“But for some people, their house was already a mess.”

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

(4) nay theen thuukpwen baatcep sia liew
Mr. Tan hit gun injure FP liew
“Mr. Tan had already been shot (and) injured.”
(Burusphat 1991: 91)

However, the interpretation that this event is complete could come either from liew, 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 liew 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 liew 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: khâw bōk tâk ḷian pay khây nın ƚɛɛw
3.s/p tell building lean go side one ƚɛɛw
“She said the building was leaning to one side.”

2 yañ mây yàk yâay
still NEG want move
“But she still didn’t want to move.”

In Example 5, ƚɛɛw co-occurs with the state verb ḷian (‘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 ƚɛɛw were a perfective, it should impose a bounded meaning even when occurring with non-punctual situations, but it does not.

2.2.4 ƚɛɛw as a conjunction

What about the claim that in inter-clausal position ƚɛɛw 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 ƚɛɛw connects two clauses temporally such that the situation in the first is prior to the situation in the second. In this case ƚɛɛw is functioning as an external temporal/sequential conjunction.
(2) lew + S:

1 Flo lian baŋsêen dây piì nèŋ lew kò kâp study BansaeN able.to year one lew so return “I studied at Bangsaen for a year and then I returned,”

(.5)

2 Flo maa fekkàan thî nî lew kô tham ñaان leey come be.intern here lew so do work pass “came here as an intern, and started working.”

lew 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 kô mây lúu ca wâa yanŋay we then NEG know IRR say how “We don’t know what to do.”

(.4)

2 ??a lew kô khaneen kô mây dîí ná khâ uh lew so grade so NEG good PRT Q “Uh, and her grades are not good either.”

We also find inter-clausal lew 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 nàat leew kô phôm dam
have mustache leew so hair black
"He has a mustache and black hair."

The fact that inter-clausal leew 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 leew is more specific in meaning.

2.2.5 leew in Discourse

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

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

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

Diagram #4:

situation A [leew] situation B
<---------------- [RT]---------------->

Diagram #4 illustrates the fact that between two clauses, leew coincides with RT: Situation A precedes situation B.

In a narrative discourse, leew can connect two narrative events in time, occurring between the two. However, in other types of discourse, leew can be "packaged" (co-occur in a clause) with either situation A or situation B, without explicit mention of the other situation. VP-final leew 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:

\{\text{situation A + [Iēw]}\}
\text{<-------------------[RT]}

Inter-clausal lēw 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:

\{[lēw] + \text{situation B}\}
\text{[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 lēw 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 nī kōo ?aw phōnlamāay sày krabuŋ which child CLS this so take fruit put basket “And this boy puts the fruit back in the basket.”

2 lēw kōo līan rōt tōo pay lēw 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: tēē kāo kháw ṭaw maa sāy lēēw
but so 3.s/p take come put lēēw
"but then he has put more in,"

2 kā tem
so be.full
"so it's full."

The temporal information provided by lēēw 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 lēēw in a certain way in order to take a temporal perspective and alternative focus on the situation.

The fact that inter-clausal lēēw has more uses, which go beyond temporal readings, suggests that its meaning is more general than that of VP-final lēēw. VP-final lēēw focuses on situation A, and makes that situation's relevance to the reference time apparent. On the other hand, placing lēēw 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

lēēw 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, lēēw 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 grounding function, its interpretation interacts with, rather than overrides, different semantic verb types; and it co-occurs with the imperfective marker. Nor is inter-clausal lēēw a perfective: since lēēw, 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 *lēg* 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 *lēg* in rapid speech. Based on these three statements, we might assume that these distributional variations of *lēg* 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 *lēg* 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 *lēg*’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 *lēg* 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.


References


