The ?au Usages in Thai
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Introduction

The word ?au, generally translated as 'take', occurs very frequently and consistently in colloquial speech in Thai and across different dialects of the Tai language family. However, its usage has never been explained clearly in current grammar books of Thai. This paper explores the semantic distinctions and the syntactic functions of ?au occurrences as a main verb, resultative verb, and coverb. The exceptional usages of ?au, such as in set phrases and idioms will not be included. The focus is on the coverb feature, with a brief comparison to bà in Chinese to demonstrate certain typological similarities as well as functional purposes of a coverb construction.¹

Verbal Function

The closest synonym to the word ?au in Thai is yàit 'to obtain something and hold it in one's possession'. Therefore, 'take hold of' and 'grasp' are close equivalents, although in actual usage the nuances in meaning of ?au vary a great deal. The meaning of ?au as the main verb of a sentence is 'to take' or 'to get', as in the English usage of 'take' in "I took three napkins" or 'get' in "I'll get that book." Examples are:²

1. ?au keːŋkài sì ?ar朋友们对 kwàː keːŋnáá
take chicken curry PAR delicious than beef curry
Take the chicken curry. (It) is more delicious than beef curry.

¹ This paper is based in part on the author's 1987 dissertation, "Tai Lue of Xishuangbanna in China's Yunnan Province: Description and A Study of the OV Order in the ?au Construction." However, the present paper is strictly based on Thai (Siamese) usage.
² Abbreviations: ASP—Aspect; CL—Classifier; DIR—Directional; EMP—Emphatic marker; NEG—Negative; PAR—Particle; PT—Potential; Q—Question marker; REL—Relativizer; TM—Topic marker.
2. *khâu chůai tamùât phró? yà:k cà ?au ñen rañwan*
   s/he help police because want PT get money reward
   S/He helps the police because s/he wants to get the reward.

In many cases, ?au has the meaning 'to take/bring' depending on the
additional motion verbs such as pai 'go', ma: 'come', khâu 'in', ?ɔ:k 'out',
khun 'up', log 'down' that indicate directionality (DR) of the sentence from
the speaker's point of view. Examples are:

3. *chán mài dâi ?au pà:kka: ma: ná*
   I NEG take/bring pen DR (toward) PAR
   (I'm telling you) I did not bring a pen (with me).

4. *fôn cà tòk lé:u ná ?au*
   rain will fall ASP PAR take/bring
   rôm pai sî
   umbrella DR(away) PAR
   It's going to rain (soon); take the umbrella (with you).

5. *?au khanõm ?ɔ:k cà:k tauñòp rà yaŋ*
   take/bring dessert DR (out) from oven Q
   Have you taken the dessert out of the oven yet?

   s/he take/bring marble DR (down) DR (toward)
   cà:k phu:khâu
   from mountain
   S/He brought the marble down from the mountain.

In the Thai examples provided above, indication of directionality is
crucial to the meaning of each sentence just as it would be in English
sentences. The meanings of ?au in these examples are closely bound with ma:
'toward', pai 'away', ?ɔ:k 'out', or log ma: 'down toward'. Without ma:, pai,
and log ma: in examples 3, 4, and 6, respectively, ?au would carry only the
basic meaning of 'to take/get'. Example 3, for instance, would be *chán mài
dâi ?au pà:kka: ná 'I didn't take the pen', which could imply 'I didn't steal
the pen' or 'It is not the pen that I took'. (There may be some other possible
interpretations as well.) These implications do not exist when ma: occurs. Some other indications of directionality, such as ?ɔ:k in example 5,
give nuances in meaning. Without ?ɔ:k, the meaning of ?au khanõm cà:k
tauñòp is 'to take the dessert from the oven'. The focus would be only on
where one gets the dessert, and not on the action of taking it out.
Another common usage of ?au has the meaning 'take/consider', for example:

7. r̄aŋ n̄i: cinthét yà:n̄rai ?au n̄e: māidāi
   story this fact how take/consider sure/certain NEG
The facts about this story cannot be taken seriously.

8. ?au khāu pen phū:nam phāk
   take/consider s/he be example political party
dī: māi
   good Q
What do you think (if) we consider him/her to be the leader
of the (political) party?

9. khāu ?au r̄aŋ rōtīt pen khō: ké: tua
   s/he take/consider story traffic jam be excuse
S/He used the traffic jam as an excuse.

In example 7, ?au n̄e: 'seriously consider' is the comment on r̄aŋ n̄i:
cinthét yà:n̄rai 'how true is this story', which is the topic of the sentence.
The meaning of ?au 'to take/consider' also commonly occurs in an equational
structure with the verb pen 'to be'. In examples 8 and 9 above, khāu and
r̄aŋ rōt īt are also objects of the verb ?au.
Other derived meanings are 'to take/want' or 'to consent', for example:

10. ?au cha: yen māi
    take/want cold tea Q
    Do you want cold tea?

11. māi ?au kradā:t ?̄:k r̄ō:
    NEG take/want paper more Q
    Don’t you want more paper?

12. A. thā: thō: māi pai phō: chān
    if you NEG go father I
    māi hái chān pai r̄ō:k
    NEG allow I go PAR
    pai pen phū:n kan n̄ōi thō nā:
    go be friend together little bit PAR PAR
    If you don’t go, my father will not let me go (either).
    Please be a friend; go with me.

B. ?au pai kō pai
    consent go EMP go
    All right, (I’ll) go.
The forms ?au 'to take/want' as in examples 10, 11, and ?au 'to consent' as in example 12B above occur mostly in spoken language.

The meaning of ?au 'to marry' (literally 'take husband/wife') is also widely used in the Tai dialects. This usage is, however, considered vulgar in modern Thai since it renders the sexual connotation of 'to sleep with'. Perhaps also for this reason, ?au usage is sometimes avoided in formal speech in modern Thai.

Resultative Verb Compound

Besides functioning as a main verb, ?au also occurs as a resultative verb in a verb compound (RVC). In this usage the first verb of the RVC denotes the activity while ?au, which occurs after the verb, indicates the result of the activity, for example:

13. A. phàkbùn̂g rì: tham ?arài cîn̂cîn
watercress TM do delicious truly
This vegetable is truly (cooked) delicious(ly).

B. mài mi: ?arai rò:k phàt ?au
NEG anything PAR  stir-fry RVC
Nothing much (to it). (I just) stir-fried it.

14. chán dau ?au wàa ròt kháu sìa
I guess RVC that car s/he break down
I am guessing that his/her car (must have) broken down.

15. khùn khít ?au ?e:ŋ sì wâ: yà:ŋ nàí dì:
you think RVC oneself PAR that kind which good
You decide (yourself) which one is better.

want know vocab difficult open dictionary
du: ?au sì
see RVC PAR
(If you) want to learn difficult words, look in the dictionary.

Example 13B demonstrates how the activity is carried out. In this case it is by stir-frying the vegetables. In example 14 dau ?au indicates that, by guessing, the speaker came to a conclusion that "someone’s car must have broken down.” The RVC ?au in examples 15 and 16 khít ?au and du: ?au also carries a similar meaning of 'by'.

The meaning of RVC ?au can also indicate the result of an activity in terms of completion/achievement, for example:
17. ṭaak tâu ŝ: di:di: n̂øi
select RVC color good a little
Pick the better colored (ones).

18. thāŋ kháu cà mái mì. n̂øn kháu kɔ
even though s/he PT NEG have money s/he EMP
tâncai cà rian tâu parinya: thọ. hāi dāi
determine PT study RVC master’s degree able to
Although s/he does not have money, s/he is determined to
(continue) studying to obtain a master’s degree.

you think PT move RVC what DR (out) DR (away)
What are the things you plan to move outside?

Although the meaning of completion/achievement is not manifest
clearly in the English equivalents, the omission of the RVC ?täu in exam-

20. n̄a:n tênrâm wânkɔ:n sanûk mã:k ciŋciŋ
party dance the other day fun a lot really
lên tâu chán nɔ:n mãi làp
cause I sleep NEG sleep
pai là:i khu:n nɛ
DR (exceed) many night PAR
The dance party was so much fun the other day that I
couldn’t sleep for several nights (afterwards).

even some people study obtain A DR (toward) all along
yaŋ sɔ:p wîcha: nî. mãi phà:n lɔi
still take exam subject this NEG pass beyond
lên tâu moet kamlâŋ cai pai ta:m ta:m kan
cause discourage DR (exceed) following one another
Even some people who always get As still couldn’t pass this
course. (This fact) makes (other students) feel discouraged.

Unlike a causative tham hāi, which expresses a simple causative (that
is, A causes something to happen to B), the RVC ?täu expresses causation
with additional subjective feelings of the speaker (that is, the speaker’s feelings as a result of A causing something to happen to B; B can also be the speaker him/herself). The meaning of the RVC ʔau, which in this usage perhaps can be conveniently called subjective causative, indicates either displeasure or simply unexpected/surprised feelings. The form lën ʔau in the above examples 20 and 21 can be replaced by tham hâi, but there is a subtle change in meaning to simple causative. A comparison can be made to demonstrate that the subjective causative depends on the occurrence of the RVC ʔau. Notice the following pairs of examples:

22. A. khâu cà khamèn ʔau phôm nâ sî:
    s/he PT try to find fault with I PAR PAR
    S/He tries to find fault with me.
    or S/He affects me by trying to find fault with me.

B. khâu cà khamèn phôm nâ sî:
    s/he PT try to find fault with I PAR PAR
    S/He tries to find fault with me.

23. A. námthûam hôn nî: tham hâi cha:ubâ:n dèat rón: n mâ:k
    flood this time cause citizen trouble a lot
    The flood this time caused a lot of trouble for the citizens.

B. námthûam hôn nî: tham ʔau
    flood this time cause
    cha:ubâ:n dèat rón:n mâ:k
    citizen trouble a lot
    The flood caused a lot of trouble for the citizens.

24. A. námthûam hôn nî: tham hâi phõ:khâ:
    flood this time cause merchants
    khûn ra:kha: khõ:ŋ
    raise price thing
    The flood this time made the merchants raise the prices.

3 The subtle meaning that implies one’s feelings being affected by the result of an event is expressed in different forms in different languages. For example, a certain passive structure is used in Japanese to convey an individual being indirectly affected by a certain event. An English sentence such as “I got rained on” also carries a similar connotation. In Thai, the RVC ʔau can also be used in a similar manner to indicate an individual’s feelings being affected. However, it can also be used to express one’s feelings toward the effects of a causing event.
*B. námthùam hôn nǐ: tham ?au phØ:khá:
flood this time cause merchants
khān ra:kha: khØ:ŋ
raise price thing
The flood this time made the merchants raise the prices.

Examples 22A and 22B demonstrate the differences in meaning depending on whether the RVC ?au is present. Without the RVC ?au, the sentence 22B is a simple descriptive statement (that is, A is doing something to B). The RVC ?au in example 22A addresses an additional subjective feeling by the speaker. Likewise, example 23A simply states the causal relationship between the flood and the hardship of the people. Example 23B, on the other hand, has an additional meaning that the speaker is displeased over the fact that the people are affected by the flood. The words tham hài and tham ?au are both acceptable as long as the speaker is sympathetic toward the event. Notice that the caused event phØ:khá: khān ra:kha: khØ:ŋ 'the merchants raise the price' in examples 24A and 24B is not (under normal circumstances) something that disadvantageously affected the merchants and that would create sympathy. Therefore, tham ?au is not acceptable in 24B.

Coverb Function

It is commonly known among teachers of the Thai language that the syntactic structures of certain ?au usages make it one of the most puzzling and difficult structures for a non-native speaker to master. William Gedney, at the 1985 Council on Thai Studies (COTS) meeting, commented that students learning Thai tend to use dûai 'with' in a sentence where native speakers use ?au. An example can be given here as follows:

25. ?? khru: tàt kradå:t dûai tàkrai
teacher cut paper with scissors
The teacher cuts paper with a pair of scissors.

26. khru: ?au tàkrai tàt kradå:t
teacher ?au scissors cut paper
The teacher cuts paper with a scissors.

The use of the prepositional marker dûai in example 25 is awkward. An acceptable structure in example 26, on the other hand, has an Oblique Object (OO); here, an instrument—tàkrai 'scissors'—occurs with ?au before the verb phrase tàt kradå:t 'cut paper'. In this usage, ?au has been treated in other literature as a full verb in a serial verb construction (SVC) (Stine 1968; Filbeck 1975; Kingkarn 1986). Filbeck (1975) considers ?au to be
the first verb in an SVC, and therefore, ?au has propositional meaning, whereas the verb that follows ?au in the structure is functional.

Besides an Oblique Object, a direct object (DO) can also be preposed from a verb phrase to occur with ?au in the preverbal position, as in 27A. Many occurrences of these ?au sentences with preverbalized DO also have counterpart sentences with similar basic meanings in a simple VO structure, as in 27B. Notice the word order in the following pairs of examples:

27. A. khâu ?au rùːp naːyók khwèːn wáí náː bāːn s/he ?au picture prime minister hang put front house S/He hung the picture of the prime minister in front of the house.

B. khâu khwèːn rùːp naːyók wáí náː bāːn s/he hang picture prime minister put front house S/He hung a picture of the prime minister in front of the house.

28. A. khâu ?au khâːu plàak theː log bon töʔ s/he ?au unhusked rice pour DR (down) on table S/He poured the unhusked rice down on the table.

B. khâu theː khâːu plàak log bon töʔ s/he pour unhusked rice DR (down) on table S/He poured unhusked rice down on the table.

The structures in examples 27B and 28B have typical syntactic order for Thai. The objects rùːp naːyók 'picture of the prime minister' and khâːu plàak 'unhusked rice' follow the verbs khwèːn 'to hang' and theː 'to pour', respectively. Examples 27A and 28A, on the other hand, have the objects occur before the verbs essentially in the order ?au rùːp naːyók khwèːn and ?au khâːu plàak theː.

Reserving the discussion on the status of ?au and the semantic distinction between the two orders for a moment, it is clear that the structure of the ?au construction, such as in examples 27A and 28A, is [NP1 ?au NP2 V X]. NP1 is the subject. NP2 is the object of the main verb, and this object occurs with ?au in a preverbal position. X is a sentential modifier. This syntactic structure differs from a VO string order in the SVC in many respects. The structure of an SVC is [NP V1 (O1) V2 (O2) Vn (On)]. Notice that O1, O2, and On are all objects following their respective V1, V2 and Vn. It is possible for an object to be deleted. It is also possible that an object can have double functions as in a pivotal type of an SVC in which an object of the first verb functions as a subject of the following verb. However, the common characteristic of an SVC is still the succession of a V(O) string. In the ?au construction, on the other hand, the object does
not follow the main verb. Instead, both ?au and the main verb share the same object noun phrase, which has been preposed to a preverbal position.

There are a few SVC that appear to have a partial surface order similar to the ?au construction, for example, tạt sùa khà:i (cut/clothes/sell) 'make clothes (to) sell'. However, unlike ?au, the occurrences of these verbs are limited to only certain cases where they happen to be sharing the same object noun phrase with a verb. For example, the co-occurrence of the verbs tôt 'cut' and khà:i 'sell' is limited. The expression tôt ka:ŋkeːŋ khà:i 'make trousers (to) sell' or tôt tônmái khà:i 'cut trees (to) sell' are possible, but not tôt phöm khà:i: 'cut hair (to) sell' (except in a rare situation). In fact, the shared object noun phrase in an SVC can be deleted if it is already understood in a conversation. For example, it is possible to ask a tailor mâuawa:ŋ tôt khà:i dâi kì: tua (yesterday/cut/sell/obtain/how many/CL) 'How many (clothes) did you make to sell (or for sale) yesterday?' Similar deletion is not possible in the ?au construction. Notice that the occurrence of the verb kin 'to eat' immediately after ?au in example 29B below is ungrammatical:

29. A. dèk ?au khanōm kin mòt lēːu
   child ?au dessert eat all ASP
   A child ate all the dessert.

*B. khanōm níː dèk ?au kin mòt lēːu
   dessert TM child ?au eat all ASP

Besides the versatility of ?au and the preverbal object noun phrase, the ?au construction also requires the presence of a sentential modifier. Notice the following examples:

30. ??A. ?au kraproːŋ khwēːn
   ?au skirt hang
   Hang up the skirt.

B. ?au kraproːŋ khwēːn (sâ sùl lēːu/dìː dì: yàː hài yúp)
   ?au skirt hang (PAR PAR/ASP/good NEG let wrinkle)
   Please do hang up the skirt. /(Someone) has already hung up the skirt. /Carefully hang up the skirt (and) don’t let it wrinkle.

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4 Furthermore, these verbs in series such as tôt sùa khà:i can be relativized, khà:i sùa thīː khàu tôt. This is not the case with the ?au construction sentences. More discussion and examples are presented later on in this paper.
31. ??A. ?au  krathiam  tam  
   ?au  garlic  to pound  
Pound the garlic.

B. ?au  krathiam  tam  (kɔ:n / lé:u/ hài lañat)  
   ?au  garlic  to pound (first/ ASP/finely)  
Pound the garlic first/ (Someone) has already pounded the garlic./ Finely pound the garlic.

The above examples, 30A-B and 31A-B, demonstrate that the acceptability of the ?au construction depends heavily on a sentential modifier, whether it be a single morpheme or a complex phrase. This is not the case in an SVC in which a V(O) can be understood separately, for example:

32. kháu  kôm  loŋ  kèp  kradà:t  
s/he  bend  DR (down)  pick  paper  
S/He bent down to pick up (pieces of) paper.

33. dèk  dɔ:n  pai  talà:t  su:  khanôm  kin  
child  walk  DR (away)  market  buy  dessert  eat  
A child walked to the market to buy dessert to eat.

The above examples demonstrate that a sentential modifier does not have to occur in an SVC. This is not the case in the ?au construction as shown in examples 30 and 31.

Returning to the question of concern regarding the status of ?au, Kingkarn (1986) believes that when an instrument or a theme follows ?au, ?au is a full verb of an SVC with the meaning 'to take hold of'. Like Filbeck (1975), Kingkarn (1986) also considers ?au propositional. However, further analysis reveals that many occurrences of ?au in the ?au construction, such as those in examples 27A and 28A, behave more like a coverb than a verb and that the propositional meaning of an ?au construction sentence is carried not by ?au, but by the main verb. An additional pair of examples is given here for convenience in the discussion:

34. A. chán  ?au  rót  khá:i  pai  lé:u  
   I  ?au  car  sell  DR  ASP  
   I have already sold my car.

B. chán  khá:i  rót  pai  lé:u  
   I  sell  car  DR  ASP  
   I have already sold my car.
Similar to the pair of examples in 27A-B and 28A-B, the above examples 34A and 34B illustrate that with or without ?au the propositional meaning of the sentence is carried by the main verb and not the ?au. The co-occurrence of ?au and the main verb represents one integrated activity. Phonological evidence also shows that hesitation or pause is possible in the SVC but not in the ?au construction. Notice that a pause does not occur between the preposed object rót 'car' and the main verb khá:i 'to sell'. The example 34A above does not convey the two activities ?au rót 'take hold of the car' and khá:i rót 'sold the car'. The word ?au no longer retains its full verbal meaning, but instead it is a part of an overall proposition. In an SVC, although all verb phrases are a part of one overall event, each verb phrase can be understood separately. This is not the case in the ?au construction in which the verbal quality of ?au is reduced. Consider the following comparison:

35. A. kháu ?au cótmä:i sông pai muan ?anãkrit
   s/he get letter send DR England
   S/He wrote a letter and sent it to England.

B. *kháusông cótmä:i thi: kháu ?au (pai muan ?anãkrit)

36. A. kháu kháan cótmä:i sông pai muan ?anãkrit
   s/he write letter send DR England
   S/He wrote a letter and sent it to England.

B. kháu sông cótmä:i thi: kháu kháan pai muan ?anãkrit
   s/he send letter that s/he write DR England
   S/He sent a letter that s/he wrote to England.

In example 35B, ?au in the ?au construction cannot occur in a relative clause following the main verb phrase in a VO order sentence. The meaning of the ?au that occurs as a verb in a relative clause in example 35B differs greatly from the ?au that functions as a coverb in the ?au construction in example 35A. In this case, ?au is no longer a full-fledged verb in the ?au construction. Example 36A, on the other hand, represents a typical SVC sentence. The initial verb kháan 'to write' can also occur in a relative clause as shown in example 36B. The possible occurrence of example 36B is the result of changing from the coverb ?au in the ?au construction in example 35A to a full verb kháan 'to write'. Similar attempts at relativization in other ?au construction sentences also fail; for instance, example 34A would yield the unacceptable sentence *kháu khá:i rót thi: kháu ?au.

Additional evidence also demonstrates the weakening of the status of ?au as a full verb. Notice the relationship between the main verb and the modifiers in the following ?au constructions:

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37. A. ʔau sūa sák boi boi mái
ʔau clothes wash often NEG
dī: nā st. st.t mot
good PAR color fade all
Washing the clothes (too) often is not good. The
color will fade quickly.

B. sák sūa boi boi mái dī: nā st. st.t mot
wash clothes often NEG good PAR color fade all
Washing the clothes (too) often is not good. The
color will fade quickly.

38. A. ʔau khanŏm pān reu reu khāu nām cā duat lè:u
ʔau dessert shape quickly water PT boil ASP
Shape the dessert (dough) quickly. The water is
almost boiling.

B. pān khanŏm reu reu khāu nām cā duat lè:u
shape dessert quickly water PT boil ASP
Shape the dessert (dough) quickly. The water is
almost boiling.

Examples 37B and 38B demonstrate that boi boi and reu reu khāu in
examples 37A and 38A modify a proposition that has sák and pān as main
verbs. When modifiers are attached to ʔau, the meaning changes completely
as in ʔau sūa boi boi 'often take/get the clothes' and ʔau khanŏm reu reu
khāu 'quickly take/get the dessert', which are not the meanings of the sen-
tences in 37B and 38B. The basic meanings are 'wash quickly' and 'shape
(the dough) quickly', but not 'take/get quickly'. This is not the case in an
SVC, for example:

39. chăn chɔ:n khāu ma: kin khāu thè: bā:n boi boi
I invite s/he DR (toward) eat meal at home often
I often invite him/her to eat at my house.

40. lā:n thūai lāːŋ ca:n tāŋ tō? ŕaːhā:n reu reu khāu
wash bowl wash plate set table food quickly
khec cā ma: lē:u
guest PT DR (toward) ASP
Quickly wash the dishes (and) set the food on the table. The
guests are about to arrive.

In example 39 above, boi boi 'often' modifies the whole activity of
inviting someone to eat. The emphasis is on the frequency of the proposi-
tional chɔ:n 'to invite' for the purpose of kin khāu 'to eat'. In example 40,
reu reu khâu modifies both activities, 'washing the dishes' and 'setting the food on the table'. As is shown earlier in examples 37 and 38, this is not the case in the ?au construction. This evidence further confirms that ?au is not a full verb in the ?au construction and that the propositional meaning is in the main verb and not in the ?au.

The fact that ?au occurs in certain environments as a verb and in others as a coverb is confusing, but is nothing peculiar. A coverb can be understood as an intermediate state of development of a verb into a preposition. Li and Thompson (1974a) explain that a coverb is originally a verb that later on develops so as to function like a preposition in a certain environment. Therefore, some coverbs may have a more or less verbal property than others depending on the stage of their development. This seems to be the case for ?au; its verbal quality is still fluctuating. Since Thai is not an inflectional language, there is no morphological marking to indicate the status of ?au. In an inflectional language, the distinction between a coverb and a verb in a preposing object construction can be made clear by a change in the stem modification of the verb and not the coverb. The status of a coverb should not, however, be overlooked in a derivational-type language just because of the lack of surface coding.

Li and Thompson (1974a) also point out that the distinction between a verb and a coverb is that the verbal meaning is lost when a verb becomes a coverb. In the case of ?au, the loss of the verbal meaning is not restricted only to ?au and its relationship to the modifier, as has been discussed earlier. Additional evidence also shows the change in the prerequisites of a noun phrase that can occur with ?au when it functions as a coverb. The preposed object noun phrase that follows ?au in the ?au construction can be <±concrete>. This is not the case when ?au functions as a verb. In a VO order sentence, the object noun phrase of the verb ?au must have the property of <+concrete>. The following examples demonstrate ?au in the ?au construction with an object noun phrase < -concrete >, for example:

41. pà:n níː man khoŋ ?au kwaː:m láp thaːŋ thahāːn bòːk
by now s/he probably ?au secret military tell
phùak kabôt pai lēːu
rebel DR (exceed) ASP
By now s/he probably has already told the rebels about the military secret.

42. kháu ?au khwaː:mkhít ?an níː
s/he ?au idea CL this
saranː kháná kammakaːn pai lēːu
propose committee DR (away) ASP
S/he already proposed this idea to the committee.
The above examples demonstrate that in the coverb function, ʔau can take abstract nouns such as khwːaːm lāp thañ thahā:n 'military secret' and khwːaːmkhít ʔan ní 'this idea'. The changes in the meaning and function of ʔau support the assumption that ʔau in the ʔau construction is no longer a verb, but a coverb. The status of ʔau as a coverb and the OV order of an object noun phrase make the ʔau construction unique. It is this unique characteristic that distinguishes the ʔau construction from other syntactic structures of the SVC.

The development of ʔau in the ʔau construction, as has been discussed, is certainly not an isolated case. Changes in the status of a verb have been previously observed in many African languages (Givon 1975; Lord 1973, 1976). A similar phenomenon can also be seen in the Chinese bā construction.5 Comparative studies of the Chinese bā and the Thai ʔau constructions reveal a few striking similarities. Both constructions have similar syntactic structure: [NP₁ bā (/ʔau) NP₂ V X]. The preposed object noun phrase that occurs in the preverbal position and the essential occurrence of a sentential modifier are among the major shared features. The bā and ʔau constructions differ in terms of what types of verbs, object noun phrases, or modifiers can occur in each construction. A selectional restriction, such as a choice of a certain perceptual-type verb (for example, 'to have'), cannot be used in either bā or ʔau constructions, but there are also many verbs that can occur in one construction and not in the other. These are the distinctions that should be considered language specific, and ones that do not interfere with the overall characteristics of the two constructions.

The following are pairs of examples in Chinese (A) and Thai (B):

43. A. Tā yǐjing bā nèi zhāng juōzi
   s/he already bā that CL table
   bān qū le
   move DR(away) ASP
   S/He has already moved that table out.

   B. kháu ʔau tò yáí ʔɔː:k pai leːu
   s/he ʔau table move DR(out) DR(away) ASP
   S/He has already moved the table out.

5 The bā construction is one of the most analyzed, but the least agreed upon, syntactic structures in Chinese. Analyses of bā range, for example, from traditional interpretations of bā as a Disposal Form to a verbal complement construction (Anne Y. Hashimoto 1971, Unicorn 8), and to a collapsed serial verb construction indicating word order change from a VO to an OV order in Chinese (Li and Thompson 1974b). The controversy over the bā construction and the issue of word order change goes beyond the scope of this paper.
44. A. Zhān sān bā jū zi buō le pí
Zhang San bā orange peel ASP skin
Zhang San peeled the orange.⁶

B. khāu ?au sōm pɔ:k pluak lě:u
s/he ?au orange peel skin ASP
S/He already peeled the orange.

In both examples 43A and 43B, the object noun phrase 'table' is preposed before the verb 'to move'. Certain object noun phrases can be partially preposed. Notice that in example 44, the object noun phrase 'orange' is preposed, while 'its peel' remains after the main verb in both Chinese and Thai.⁷ Both bā and ?au in the above examples function similarly to a coverb marking the preposed object noun phrase (either partial or whole) in a preverbalized position of a sentence.

Besides the structural similarity, the historical development of bā perhaps provides the most insightful look into the study of the ?au construction. The words bā and ?au are semantically similar. Originally, bā was a verb meaning 'to grasp' or 'to hold'; ?au is also a verb with similar meaning. As has been shown earlier, besides a direct object noun phrase, an oblique object, such as an instrument (note example 26), often occurs with ?au in a preverbalized position. This was also the case at one time in the development of bā. Wang Huan (1963) points out that the occurrence of an instrumental-type noun phrase is possible in early colloquial Mandarin usage when verbs such as ná 'to take', yòng 'to use', and bā 'to hold' are interchangeable.⁸ The distinctions among ná, yòng, and bā became more apparent later on in modern Pekingese. With few exceptions, bā in present day Mandarin usage is no longer employed as a main verb. An instrument-type, oblique object no longer occurs with bā. Unlike bā, which has pretty much ceased its verbal function, ?au still occurs as a verb in many environments. Perhaps the dominant distinction is that bā and ?au are in different stages of development.

Returning to the question of the semantic distinction, there is also a certain similarity between the two constructions. Like the ?au construction, many bā construction sentences also have VO counterparts; examples of some typical bā construction sentences with their VO counterparts are the following:

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⁶ See Li and Thompson (1981), 471.
⁷ More details of Lü's (1948) retained object construction can be found in Li and Thompson (1981).
⁸ The early colloquial Mandarin or báihuà was prevalent in the Ming period, the 14th–17th century.
45. A.  wǒ  yǐjīng  bā  wǒ  de  qìchē  mái  le
     I already  bā  I POSS  car  sell  ASP
     I have already sold my car.

     B.  wǒ  yǐjīng  mái  wǒ  de  qìchē  le
     I already  sell  I POSS  car  ASP
     I have already sold my car.

46. A.  tāmen  bā  táng  chē  le
     they  bā  candy  eat  ASP
     They ate the candies.

     B.  tāmen  chē  táng  le
     they  eat  candy  ASP
     They already ate the candies.

Notice that the basic meaning of the above  bā  sentences, with slight
nuances, is similar to the VO order sentences. The semantic distinction
between the two orders in Chinese has first been discussed in terms of the
definiteness of the preverbalized noun phrase in the  bā  construction (Chao
1968). For example,  táng 'candy' in example 46A is a specific item with a
definite reference since it occurs in the preverbal position of the sentence.
Y. C. Li (1974) further defines definiteness in the  bā  construction in terms
of an obligatory anaphoric element that is conveyed through the relationship
between the noun phrase after  bā  and its verb. He believes that the noun
phrase in the  bā  construction must be presupposed, either from an under-
standing of the verb or from an antecedent in the immediate context (Li
1974). With the exception of a few uncommon  bā  sentences, Chinese lin-
guists generally agree that the preverbal object noun phrase in the  bā
construction usually refers to a specific entity about which both the speaker and
the listener have shared information.

Similar to the Chinese  bā, the  ?au construction and its counterpart
VO order also differ in terms of definiteness of the object noun phrase. The
preverbalization in the Thai  ?au construction denotes definiteness as well as
an emphasis on a noun phrase. The preverbal object noun phrase that fol-
lows  ?au is definite in the sense that either it has to physically exist within
the speakers’ shared knowledge or it has already been referred to in the previ-
ous conversation. It is not possible to start a conversation with  ?au if nei-
ter of these conditions is met. In example 34A, for instance,  ?au is possi-
ble at the beginning of a conversation, if the two speakers had previously
been discussing the car. Therefore,  ?au, marks rót 'car', which is known
information, by highlighting it in a preverbalized position. Example 34B,
on the other hand, can occur at the beginning of a conversation, since it
simply gives all new information.
Further evidence also demonstrates that the preverbal noun phrase in the ?au construction cannot be an item that is newly brought into the conversation. Notice the ungrammaticality of the following:

*47. ?au khanôm sú: ma: lé:u
   ?au dessert buy DR (toward) ASP
   I have already bought the dessert.

*48. ?au mòradök dâi ráp lé:u
   ?au inheritance receive ASP
   I have received an inheritance.

The noun phrases khanôm 'dessert' and mòradök 'inheritance' in the above examples cannot be preverbalized since the verbs sú: 'to buy' and dâi ráp 'to receive' imply that the objects are new information. Li’s (1974) interpretation of a presupposition through the meaning of a verb in the bā construction, as mentioned earlier, also applies to the ?au construction as used in examples 47 and 48 above.

The contrast between the emphasis and the definiteness in the ?au construction and the descriptive and indefinite nature of a VO order is clear in the following examples:

49. A. ?au satem kèp
   ?au postage stamp keep
   Keep the stamps.

   —di:di: ná yà: tham há:i sìa lá
   good PAR NEG cause lose being rid of PAR
   Keep the stamps well. Do not lose them. (Context I)

   ??—tângtè: samâi pen dèk
   since period be child (Context II)
   (Someone has been) collecting stamps since s/he was a child.

B. kèp satem
   keep postage stamp
   keep/collection stamps

   —di:di: ná yà: tham há:i sìa lá
   good PAR NEG cause lose being rid of PAR
   Keep the stamps well. Do not lose them. (Context I)
—tàngtè: samāi pen dèk
since period be child (Context II)
(Someone has been) collecting stamps since s/he was a child.

The word kép 'to keep' can mean either 'to put something in a proper place' or, with regard to items such as stamps, 'to collect'. In example 49B, either meaning of kép is possible since satem 'postage stamps' is non-specific. Therefore, either Context I or II is acceptable for the VO order in 49B. However, in the ?au construction as in example 49A, satem 'postage stamps' is definite (for example, particular stamps that one has just been given). Therefore, only the meaning of 'keep the stamps well' (that is, 'to put the stamps in a safe place'), which occurs with Context I, is acceptable. The meaning of 'to collect' as indicated in Context II through the modifier 'since s/he was a child' is ungrammatical because a noun phrase within the activity of 'collecting' cannot be a definite entity.

It appears that the two different linguistic forms, the ?au and its counterpart VO order sentence, express the basic meaning of a sentence in two different ways. The regular VO order sentence simply describes an event in a declarative sentence. The ?au construction, on the other hand, puts an emphasis on the noun phrase by highlighting it to a preverbal position. In the ?au construction, ?au appears to have lost its original verbal quality and instead has gained a prepositional quality of introducing a noun phrase that has a definite reference.

Final note

The development of ?au as a coverb still needs further research, particularly in comparison to the Chinese bā. Although some bā and ?au constructions are different due to the selectional restrictions in each language, a comparative study of the two constructions does reveal unique typological similarities. The fact that both Chinese and Thai are also geographically close leads to the need for a further look into possible historical contact and an in-depth study of this type of linguistic phenomenon.
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