

## **The Proper Syntax of Case and the Determiner Phrase (DP) in Lai Chin<sup>1</sup>**

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Lai Chin is an ergative language in the sense that a subject of a transitive verb is marked distinctively and the subject of an intransitive verb is marked in the same way as the object of a transitive verb; we may call the first ‘ergative case marking’, the second ‘absolute case’. In the first, the determiner phrase ( hereafter DP, namely, the nominal phrase that is bounded by a determiner and properly contains the noun phrase itself) features the element *nih* following the noun; in the second *cu*. Thus,

1. a. Kei cu ka-kal (I go/went)  
I ABS 1sg go  
‘I go/went.’
- b. Keimah nih amah (cu) ka-hmuh (I see/saw him/her)  
I NIH he/she ABS 1sg see  
‘I see/saw him/her.’

The basic syntax is, nevertheless, nominative-accusative with subject agreement, regardless of transitivity, as seen in (1) above. Ergativity is, however, not merely morphological; for, transitive verbs have a basic declarative stem form (Stem I) that is in general a derived phonological form whilst Stem I for intransitive verbs is the etymological phonological form (see Hyman and Van Bik (In press), Kathol and Van Bik 2001, Chit Hlaing 1996).

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1. This paper, in somewhat more technical form, was first presented at the Thirty Fifth International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics (ICSTLL XXXV), at Arizona State University, 7 November, 2002.

It has been customary when dealing with ergativity to call *nih* the ergative case marker and *cu* the absolutive case marker (cf. Hay-Neave 1948), although Bedell (2000) argued persuasively that *nih* in particular has to be a postposition. Bedell's argument, however, was only indirectly syntactic and we want to present here a rigorous syntactic argument for Bedell's otherwise correct conclusion. The evidence and thus the argument are remarkably simple, but the results may seem problematical until one sees that they follow nicely in the line of some new but very significant developments in formal syntactic theory, as we shall show below.

We claim that ergativity, indeed case marking exists in the interaction between a postposition (of a postpositional phrase of the DP [Determiner Phrase – essentially the Noun Phrase]) and the determiner itself—where (Chit Hlaing 2000) the determiner (D) proper is the final element in a full nominal expression, as

2. DP[*cu* NP[*ca-uk*] *cu*]  
     spec book D  
     'this book'

and where case is marked on D (at the right edge of DP), as

3. *cu* PRO *ca-ah* *cun*  
     spec pro P D+OBL  
     Therefore [lit. for that (one)]

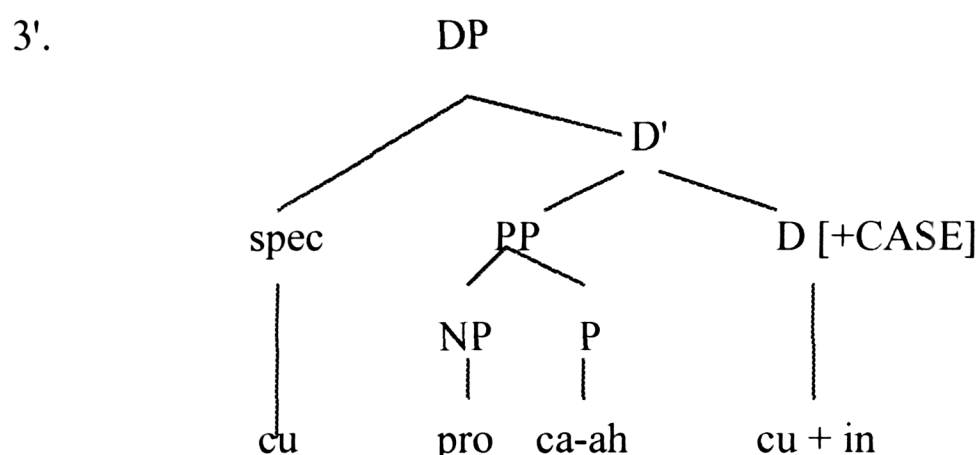
[*cun* > *cu* + *in*, the basic form of the Oblique structural case<sup>2</sup>; *ca-ah* being a composite postposition, with *ah* itself being the generalised postposition of dative/goal/locative — 'at'/'to']

very roughly,

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2. *in* : *duhsa-teiin* 'slowly', where *in* marks the manner adverbial based on the derive noun 'slowness' (*duh*, 'slow' + *sa-te*) as oblique; cf.

i. Halkha-*in* ka-kal  
     Hakha-'ly' (OBL) I come perf.  
     'I've come from Halkha'



Thus,

4. Hakha-*ah* ka-kal  
 Hakha-to 1sg go  
 'I go to Hakha.'

Now, let us look further at the ergative case. While it is true that in the default simplest form we can say, (1b) above, one can always put the ergative case in a more elaborate form, as

5. keimah nih cun ka-hmuh  
 I see (him/her/it)  
 'I see/saw him/her.'

Here we notice that *nih*, which stands precisely in the position of such postpositions as *ah*, can in fact be followed by *cun*, i.e., the determiner+ the oblique case marker! Moreover, we see from such examples likewise that *cu* is not after all to be taken as marking non-ergative DPs, even though the short or default forms of subjects, transitive and intransitive, respectively, make it seem so — which is how the matter is customarily stated in earlier literature on the Chin languages. That is, in full form an intransitive subject ends in *cu*; a transitive subject ending in *cun*.

Now we can see how right Bedell was about *nih* etc. *nih* is indeed a postposition, and as such it 'governs' oblique case as marked on the determiner. Ergative, then, has an oblique case, structurally, whilst the Absolutive morphological case is structurally nominative.

Two further points. First, Lai Chin, like so many Kuki-Chin, indeed Tibeto-Burman languages, has remarkably few postpositions. In fact it seems that there are only four or so of them: *ah*, *nih*, *ca-ah*,<sup>3</sup> and *he* (with/together-with). Further distinctions often marked by different prepositions, as in English for instance, are, in these languages, made by putting one of the postpositions, especially *ah*, after a subordinated noun, as in such examples as

6. Inn chung(ah)  
house inside-LOC  
'Inside the house' (*chung* being a bound nominal, 'interior')

We mention this because one might (incorrectly) argue that, say, *he* is not a postposition, on the following grounds. Consider examples below:

7. a. Za Huat nih thil a-cawk  
Za Huat by thing(s) 3sg buy  
'Zahuat buys things'
- b. Za Huat *i* thil a-cawk-mi cu...  
ones  
'The things Zahuat buys'
- c. Van-ah va an-zuang  
Sky-LOC bird(s) 3pl fly  
'A bird flies into the sky'
- d. Van-*i* va a-zuang-mi cu ...  
'The bird that flies into the sky'
- e. Tlang-in lung a-ril

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3. It just may be that the *ca* of *caah* (for) is itself not a postposition at all, or even part of one except morphologically/prosodically. It may be a dependent nominal of a kind mentioned in the body of the paper next above. I cannot pursue this matter here.

hill-OBL stone 1sg roll-down  
 ‘A stone rolls down the hill.’

f. Tlang-*i* lung a-ril-mi cu...  
 ‘The stone that rolled down the hill’

In all these examples we see that the postposition changes into the *i* that marks a dependency (‘genitive’) relation between nominals when an absolutive DP of the basic declarative clause is made the head of a relative clause. The result is, in effect, for, say, example (7f.),

f’. The stone that rolled *of/ with regard to* the hill.

However, if we look at the postposition *he* (with, together with), this change fails to take place.

8. a. (keimah) ka-kawi *he* kan-ra  
       (I) 1sg friend-with 1pl come  
       ‘I came with my friend.’ (Note the required plural agreement!)
- b. Keimah *he* a ra-mi ka-kawi ...  
       ‘My friend who came with me.’

This is not to be construed as evidence that *he* is not a true postposition. What seems to be going on here is that where the postposition changes to *i* the relativised postpositional phrase itself, is an argument of the clause, but with *he* it is not. Examples (7c and e) require comment. One might imagine that postpositional phrases are all adjuncts rather than arguments. However, in these two examples, ‘fly’ and ‘roll-down’ are manner or motion verbs, and in these languages such verbs rigidly select postpositional arguments to complete the sense of the verb — just as, in more elaborate form, generalised verbs of motion require a co-verb of directionality. Thus, *kal*, which we glossed above as ‘go’, is really the compound verb *va-kal* ‘go-forth’, and so on.<sup>4</sup> So, it seems clear that the postpositional examples

in (7c, e) are in fact, by strict selection, at least very argument-like. As for *he*, its PP is strictly an adjunct, and hence not subject to the change from a postposition proper to genitive *i.*; this in spite of the peculiar agreement fact associated with *he* above, which seems to be motivated by logical entailment: if I come with my friend, clearly, he has come with me, and conversely.<sup>5</sup>

It may seem strange to claim that a postpositional phrase lies inside a DP, but there is a recent argument in formal syntactic theory that provide ample context for this, and the interested reader is referred, therefore, to Pesetsky and Torrego (2002)

In any event there has always been an ambiguity in syntax between calling something a pre/postposition and calling it a case marker, for the many languages in which case inflexions seem always to be pre/postpositionally marked (cf. Burmese *kou*, *kiu*, marking either a dative or an indirect object or the direct object, where the latter is animate. In Lai Chin, however, we have an instance where the functions are morphologically distinct but interact strongly with regard to ergativity.

There is another question regarding Lai Chin postpositions that bears significantly upon the basic analysis of the present paper, and that has to do with the supposed postposition *in* that can be rendered in English as ‘from’ and also as the ‘with’/‘by’ of instrumentality. I refer to the formative *in* as in

9. a *namte-in*  
knife with  
‘with a knife (cutting)’
- b. *Halkha-in* *Falam-ah*

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4. This is related to the fact that the goal of a motion verb takes a specific determiner indicating directionality, such as downward, upward, along, and so on. We cannot deal with this in the present paper. In any case, this latter phenomenon is rapidly disappearing from the language amongst the younger generations.

‘from Hakha to Falam’

These examples are readily interchanged with

5. Assume, then, that the *X+he* is an adjunct. Clearly it has to be adjoined to NP or DP if we are to have a proper account of the agreement facts. Since agreement has to be, as we might say, the subject DP as a whole, DP must be plural in effect, must logically *include* more than one individual. Furthermore, *inclusion* is a non-trivial relation. The agreement here is with the *first* person (1stpl), from which it ought to follow that the *he*-PP is either subjoined or adjoined to the DP, more precisely, that, plural though it be, the *head* must be first person. For a consideration of this sort of apparent person-and-number agreement paradox, see now Harley and Ritter 2002, especially note 3). We say *adjoined* because it simply makes no sense to imagine that the PP is a complement of the DP (or its included NP). We might just as well, perhaps even more perspicuously, say *conjoined*, in as much as plurality is least problematical under [logical and morphosyntactic] conjunction (cf. As for John *and* me, *we* hate one another.). But then it would require some *ad hoc* stipulation to define only the first person element as the DP head. And after all, it is not unprecedented for the same lexical element to serve both as a conjunction and as what is in English the preposition *with*. Indeed in Burmese (a Tibeto-Burman language like Lai Chin) *ne*. (နင့် *hnin*. in Written Burmese) serves in both these capacities. It is fairly easy to argue that where it ‘means’ its whole PP is adjoined outside the relevant DP (right-adjoined to that DP — because it normally follows the head noun with a clear parenthetical intonation, and with the direct object, if any, following after (by assumption in a specifier of IP lower than the subject DP). When it means *and*, it is suffixed to the first DP, the second DP of the conjunction following ‘bare’ of any postposition. So, for instance,

- i. nga. hkamya *ne*. Maung Maung-gou thatme  
 ငါ ခင်ဗျာ နင့်. မောင်မောင်ကို သတ်မယ်:  
 I you with him Maung Maung-OBJ kill-FUT  
 ‘I’ll kill Maung Maung [together] with you.’
- ii nga. *ne*. Maung Maung thu.kou thatme  
 ငါ နင့် မောင်မောင်ကို သူ့ကို သတ်မယ်:  
 ‘I and Maung Maung will kill him.’

Where, for at least many speakers, *either* may mark the verb ‘plural’ (that *ca*, me သတ်ကမယ်).

- 9'. a    namte-cun  
       knife    with  
       'with a knife (cutting)'  
       b.    Halkha-cun Falam-ah  
             'from Hakha to Falam'

where, as above, there is no (overt) postposition present. Many speakers can, with varying degrees of reservation however, also accept, e.g.,

- 9''    Halkha-in cun  
       'from Hakha ...'

It appears that somehow one feels that there is or ought to be a postposition here, and it is interesting to explore why.

Consider (9''); there is a problem with the *D cu* here although syntactically it is fine. Namely, whilst in some sense it does mark the DP as 'contrastive' (see now Ceu Hlun 2002 — one is going from Hakha rather than from elsewhere; the distance to Falam, say, varies according to the starting point chosen) is at least marginally out of order semantically because it is in the first instance a discourse anaphoric demonstrative: 'that' or 'such', entailing that speaker and hearer share a knowledge of it as having already been mooted in the discourse. The result has to be a null *D*, which is not in the least strange; nouns without determiners or articles are no problem for any theory of morphosyntax. So what about the final *-n* in *cun*, which is, remember, a contracted form of the case-marker *-in* ? It is needed, but has no *D* to suffix to (it is a strictly bound form), and so, *faute de mieux*, it suffixes to the nearest overt element in the DP, the noun itself., giving (9b). Now its presence here very likely makes it come to look as if it is a postposition on the order of *ah*, *nih*, and *he*. Then, for many speakers at least (again with varying degrees of acceptability), even if one does use *cun*, one ends up inserting (a copy of?) case-marker *-in* in the place of a postposition, giving, for this example, (9''b).



Basically, however, a bare oblique, without a PP inside the DP, is in fact a manner adverbial form, as in

10. duhsate-in  
     slow<sub>LY</sub>  
     (lit. 'as one pleases [*duh* 'to want']')

where it makes no sense to try and render it even in English as a post(pre) position.

All this gives added substance to Michael Noonan's observation, when this paper was presented at the 35<sup>th</sup> Sino-Tibetan conference at Arizona State University (November, 2002), that the system is clearly in 'transition' between having a Direct/Oblique (Nominative/Accusative) case system (which is the structural case morphology here) and an Ergative/Absolutive one. And the non-raising of PP to the edge of DP is no doubt due to the long-distance (probe-agree) interaction between case (the probe at DP) and the P goal, with regard to case 'Features'. Case (Pesetsky and Torrego 2002, 2-3) seems to be an uninterpretable 'tense' (T) feature on D. Then, in so far as P selects case (which is uncontroversial on DP, where it ends up overtly seems a matter of scope, or maybe rather of the default way of feature-checking and Agreement, P moving to the specifier of DP, pre-empted in Lai, however, by having a P-like formative *in* at the right edge of DP. In other words, D has  $F_i$  ( $i$  = interpretable) and it checks Case as  $F_u$  (uninterpretable) on P; but P fails to move for this checking, its position, so to speak being already filled by the case-suffix. Hence, by long distance agreement the case suffix itself 'probes' down to P. This probing *from*  $F_u$  *to*  $F_i$  on a lower Goal, and consequent long-distance Agree, is already, as in Pesetsky and Torrego, fundamental in current minimalist syntax (e.g., Chomsky 2000, 2001).

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