

Relativization, Parataxis, and Underspecification in White Hmong

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Relative clauses in White Hmong (henceforth Hmong) are postnominal and are introduced by an invariant, non-pronominal marker *uas* which is obligatory or strongly preferred in some contexts, optional in others, and preferably not used in still others. All positions on the Keenan-Comrie NP Accessibility Hierarchy (Keenan and Comrie 1977) can be relativized, and all positions can show either a gap or a resumptive pronoun (Mottin 1978). An example of relativization of a subject with *uas* is given in 1.

1. ...cov nplooj tsawb uas seem...
GRP leaf banana that left over

'the banana leaves that are left over' (Lis 1986:9)

Example 2 illustrates relativization of an object of a preposition with *uas* and a resumptive pronoun.

2. tus txiv neeg uas kuv pub ib rab riam
CLF man that 1SG give 1 CLF knife
rau nws
to 3SG

'the man that I gave a knife to (him)'

(Mottin 1978:139; my translation from the French)

Example 3 shows relativization of a direct object without *uas* introducing the clause:

3. ...nws yog ib neeg nom tswv ntxub
3SG be 1 person official hate

'S/he is a person that officials hate.' (Thao 1985:17)

Mottin states that in cases where no ambiguity would arise, the relative marker is often omitted, especially after

a classifier. In Riddle (1989a) I show that not only does *uas* serve to introduce relative clauses and mark them as subordinate, but also, depending on the context, often adds to the degree of specificity expressed by the clause.

In this paper I focus on restrictive relative clauses in which *uas* is optional. I show that omission of *uas* in certain cases can create surface syntactic ambiguity and suggest that this is symptomatic of a larger propensity for parataxis and underspecification in the syntax and morphology of Hmong in general.

I will first give a brief overview of what I consider to be some typical paratactic and underspecified phenomena in Hmong. (See Riddle 1990a,b and Riddle and Stahlke 1992 for further discussion.) Parataxis involves the juxtaposition of elements with no overt marker of subordination or coordination, which means that it underspecifies clause relations on the surface. In Hmong, parataxis of whole clauses is very common, and verb serialization is a major pattern of clause structure. In addition, adverbial clauses are often introduced not by subordinating conjunctions, but rather by NPs which have a paratactic relationship to the rest of the sentence. They may also take the form of an independent existential clause juxtaposed to the beginning of the clause expressing the main assertion, as in 4:

4. Muaj ib h nub Lwj Txheeb Ty Ching coj tau
 have 1 day general Ty Ching led can
 ib pab tub rog
 1 group soldier...

'One day General Ty Ching was able to lead a group of soldiers...' (Yang Dao 1987:9)

Reduplication of verbs for emphasis or augmentation is very common. This is paratactic in the sense that two instances of a verb are simply strung together. NPs are also often joined paratactically rather than by a conjunction, which sometimes results in an elaborate expression as in 5.

5. khwv iab khwv daw
toil bitter toil salty

'arduous toil' (Johns and Strecker 1987:106)

Another form of parataxis occurs when a topic is juxtaposed to the beginning of a sentence. This may be a topic NP not coreferential with the subject, as in 6, a coreferential NP, as in the case of left dislocation in 7, or a whole clause, as in 8:

6. Tej tus npuas hma noj tas ib ceg...
GRP CLF pig wolf eat finish 1 leg

'Some pigs, the wolf ate only a leg...'

(Fuller 1985:95)

7. Nkauj Ntsuab thiab Sis Nab nkawd khiav
Nkauj Ntsuab and Sis Nab 3DUAL run
tau ntau hnuv
get many day

'Nkauj Ntsuab and Sis Nab, they ran for many days.' (Johnson 1981:24)

8. Nej cog nplej mas cog sib
2PL plant rice TOP plant spaced far apart
los tuab
or thick

'Do you plant rice spaced far apart or close together?' (Whitelock 1982:86, with amended gloss and translation)

Another notable feature is that a single NP may appear as the surface argument of two items simultaneously, as in 9:

9. Nws nyeem ntawv rau kuv niam nloog
s/he read book to my mother listen

'S/he's reading to my mother.' (Strecker and Vang 1986:14)

This is paratactic in the sense that what is important is the juxtaposition of the NP in a particular order relative to the other items, and it is an example of what I consider to be underspecification of surface constituent structure.

Finally, compounding is the major word formation strategy in Hmong. This is paratactic in that no element of a compound is morphologically dependent on or subordinate to another, in contrast to affixation. It is often unclear whether to analyze a string as a compound or a phrase. Ratliff (1991) shows that Hmong has a flexible syntax in which lexical items may be ambiguously specified as to word class in the lexicon and in which context may determine syntactic function. In particular, when a noun is semantically underspecified for a particular reference, a unit classifier may complete the meaning of the noun and itself serve as a noun in a noun-noun compound in addition to functioning as a classifier for counting and other purposes. Thus the unit classifier *tus* in 10 is used as part of a noun-noun compound to convey the meaning 'river,' but no additional classifier is needed in those contexts, such as counting, where a classifier is required, as in 11:

10. *tus dej*
 CLF water
 'river'

11. *yim tus dej*
 8 CLF water
 '8 rivers'

Mottin states that when the relative marker *uas* is omitted, the relative clause is taken as an adjective phrase, adjectives being postnominal as well. Exactly what he means is unclear since his example, given in 12, has a verb plus direct object in the phrase.

12. *Nws qhia xws li tus neeg muaj hwj chim*
 3SG teach like CLF person have authority

'He teaches like someone who has authority.'

(Mottin 1978:138; my translation from the French)

At any rate, the fact that the head NP is the object of *xws li* 'like' makes it clear that *muaj hwj chim* 'have authority' is intended in a restrictive sense. In other cases, however, the descriptive phrase following a noun is more ambiguous between an adjectival and a relative clause reading, especially since in addition to both structures being postnominal, adjectives are also stative verbs. The latter characteristic is another example of general word class underspecification in comparison to a language like English.

Consider also example 13, taken from a folk tale about a man who took away another man's wife. (It is glossed at this point but not provided with a good English translation.)

13. Ib tug yawg muaj muaj txiag xav tau
 1 CLF man have have money want get
 Nkauj Ntsuab
 Nkauj Ntsuab

(Johnson 1981:6)

The relative marker *uas* is omitted in 13 but can be inserted with no particular change in meaning, as in 14:

14. Ib tug yawg uas muaj muaj txiag xav
 1 CLF man that have have money want
 tau Nkauj Ntsuab
 get Nkauj Ntsuab

The fact that *uas* can be inserted in 13 encourages analysis of the string *muaj muaj txiag* glossed as 'have have money' as a relative clause, as in 14. Moreover, in his extensive survey of relativization in the world's languages, Keenan (1985) considers any clause identifying a subset of the domain or head noun to be a relative clause, regardless of the presence or absence of a relative marker or pronoun. On the other hand, *muaj muaj txiag* is a conventional collocation which Heimbach (1969) translates as 'rich' or 'wealthy'. However, the fact that a particular set of free morphemes is habitually

collocated is not a sufficient criterion for determining status as a lexical item, and since the nonreduplicated form *muaj tziag* 'have money' is also used in the same general meaning of 'rich' (Heimbach 1969), the longer collocation looks like an example of productive reduplication. This makes it seem like a phrase rather than a compound, and thus like a relative clause rather than an adjective. I suggest that this is a case where the string is structurally underspecified and that the boundary between compound lexical item and phrase is fuzzy. Thus 13 can be translated in the three ways shown in 15 all with the same basic propositional meaning:

- 15a. A man who/that had a lot of money wanted Nkauj Ntsuab.
 b. A man that was rich wanted Nkauj Ntsuab.
 c. A rich man wanted Nkauj Ntsuab.

Consider also example 16:

16. Cov neeg (uas) haus cawv kheev
 GRP person that drink alcohol possible
 kheev muaj mob taub hau mob plab
 possible have sick head sick stomach
 thiab tsam plab...
 and gassy stomach

'People who drink alcohol often have headaches, stomach aches, and gas...' (Community Health Care Center n.d.:1)

Uas can be inserted after *neeg* 'person,' producing an overt relative clause. This implies that the string *neeg haus cawv* glossed as 'person drink alcohol' is a relative clause with the relative marker omitted, much as 'you saw' in 17 would be considered a relative clause in English, according to Keenan (1985), even though the relative marker or pronoun is omitted:

17. I know the woman you saw.

Another analysis is that *neeg haus cawv* is a compound meaning 'alcoholic' (although it is not the only expression used to convey this meaning), or 'problem drinker,' as in the English original of which this is a translation. Evidence for the compound analysis is that this string follows exactly the same pattern as other items which are fixed expressions with a nominal sense, such as 'doctor' in 18:

18. kws kho mob
 expert fix sick
 'doctor'

Again, I suggest that there is a fuzzy boundary between words and phrases in Hmong, and that the string of morphemes *neeg haus cawv* glossed as 'person drink alcohol' does not fit neatly into either the phrase or the word category, except that use in a particular context may favor one or the other analysis on a given occasion. In a language as isolating as Hmong, such fuzziness is not surprising. These cases follow what I consider to be a general preference for parataxis in Hmong, in that the surface syntactic clue to interpretation is juxtaposition or relative position in a string. In addition to this, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse factors also bear a heavy functional load.

Mottin notes that *uas* cannot be omitted if ambiguity would result. I have found that this often involves parsing ambiguity, such as initial interpretation of the relative clause as a main clause in a context where this would convey the wrong meaning. Consider example 19:

19. Txhua tus naj npawb xov tooj uas pib
 every CLF number telephone that begin
 800 yuav yog xov tooj tham los hu
 800 will be telephone converse or call
 dawb...
- free

'Every telephone number that begins with 800 will be for a free telephone call.' (Thoj 1981:36)

If *uas* is omitted in 19, a reader might initially interpret the sentence as meaning the false statement "Every telephone number begins with 800," just as with omission of *that* in English.

In other cases, however, a clause with *uas* omitted may not only look like a main clause on the surface, but also have a meaning compatible with either an appropriate main clause or restrictive relative clause sense. In other words, it may be ambiguous, at least from the English point of view. For example, in 20 *uas* can be left out with no change in meaning, and in this case, the string can be parsed as a sequence of two main clauses as in 21 with no change in the propositions conveyed, although they are packaged differently.

20. Ib nqi uas tseem ceeb rau peb cov
 1 section that important to 1PL GRP
 neeg thoj nam yog nqi sau xyoo
 person refugee be section write year
 1980...
 1980

'One section that is very important for us refugees is the section written in 1980...' (Thao 1985:17)

21. One section is very important for us refugees. It is the section written in 1980.

Two syntactic properties of Hmong make this possible. First, zero anaphora in subject position to show continuation of topic is extremely common (Fuller 1985), so the string *yog nqi sau xyoo 1980* 'is the section written in 1980' can function as a main clause, itself containing a relative clause without *uas*. Second, parataxis of whole clauses, i.e. the joining of two clauses with no overt indication of subordination or coordination, is also very common. I suggest that on the surface, the constituent structure of this string is underspecified in comparison to a language like English.

Another example is given in 22:

22. Cov sau phau ntawv no yog ib pawg
 GRP write book this be 1 group
 neeg paub cai Isducis (Indochinese)
 person know custom Indochinese
 thiab Asmeslivkas uas paub zoo txob
 and America that know good about
 neeg thoj nam tej teeb meem ua neej
 person refugee GRP problem do life
 tshiab
 new

'The writers of this book are a group of people who know Indochinese and American customs and who know well the problems of refugees in making a new life.'

(Thoj 1981:preface)

Notice that the string *paub cai Isducis (Indochinese)* [sic] *thiab Asmeslivkas* 'who know Indochinese and American customs' has a relative sense and is translated into English as a relative clause even though *uas* is not present. The second relative clause is introduced with *uas*, but this can be omitted as well, resulting in a pair of paratactically joined clauses which could be syntactically parsed as either a sequence of two relative clauses understood but not marked as a conjunction (as in the translation of 22 above) or as a sequence of a relative plus a main clause as in 23.

23. The writers of this book are a group of people who know Indochinese and American customs. They know well the problems of refugees in making a new life.

Since the information in the two clauses has a parallel quality, interpretation as a pair of relative clauses is likely, but the interpretation in 23 makes perfect sense as well. Thus the syntax is ambiguous but a discourse factor could favor a particular interpretation. Now consider example 13 again. At least in theory, 13 could be taken out of context as being a sequence of two independent clauses, as in 24:

24. A man had a lot of money. He wanted Nkauj Ntsuab.

However, there are discourse reasons for strongly preferring the relative clause interpretation. First, the first main clause in 24 would be an odd way to introduce a character. That is, the first clause does not present an assertion which should receive the prominence conveyed by a main clause at this point in the story. It would make more sense for it to occur in an existential construction if it were to be a main assertion rather than a restrictive descriptor. Second, *muaj muaj txiag* glossed as 'have have money' is repeated in subsequent references to the character, where interpretation 24 would not make sense. Thus identification of the string in question as a relative clause depends not on the surface syntax or even on the semantics but on discourse factors.

25 is another case where *uas* can be omitted but which still has only a relative clause reading for discourse reasons:

25. Thaum nyuam qhuav tuaj txog nej yuav
 time just come arrive 2PL will
 muaj teeb meem ntau yam ntau nrog
 have problem many kind tsav with
 neeg uas nej yuav ntsib...
 person that 2PL will meet

'When you have just arrived, you will have many different kinds of problems with the people that you meet.' (Thoj 1981:preface)

Although the relative clause has a gap for the object relativized, it still conforms to a main clause surface structure pattern since Hmong allows zero anaphora of direct objects. However, it is very unlikely that it would be interpreted as a main clause for discourse reasons. The information given in the clause about meeting people is presented out of logical temporal sequence with respect to the main clause assertion about having problems with those people. This suggests that relativization can function as a strategy for presenting information out of sequence, much like the past perfect tense does

in English.

Thus the syntax of some clauses which could be introduced by *uas* but in which it is omitted, along with the syntax of neighboring clauses, allows them to be parsed as main clauses. In some cases, either interpretation as a relative clause or as a main clause is plausible. In other cases, discourse factors rule out or favor a particular interpretation. I suggest that the constituent structure of such clauses is underspecified; what is important in the surface syntax is the particular juxtaposition of elements in a string, and discourse factors bear a major functional load in narrowing down the interpretation.

Hmong relative clauses are unusual among the languages of the world in allowing resumptive pronouns in subject position, as in example 26:

26. cov tub uas lawv mus los
 GRP boy/son that 3PL go come

'the boys that came back' (Mottin 1978:139; my translation from the French)

According to Keenan (1985), this is rare for the functional reason that resumptive pronouns tend to be used to clarify the reference of NP gaps within relative clauses, but relative clauses on subjects are usually formed in such a way that the head NP occurs in very close proximity to the gap and thus no processing difficulty arises. I have found no cases in Hmong where a string which could be interpreted as a relative clause without *uas* also has a resumptive pronoun, which would make it syntactically indistinguishable from a main clause. Sentences with *uas* are not paratactic because *uas* is a subordinator, but *uas* sentences do bear a resemblance to the topic structure of left dislocation, in that a noun NP is followed (although not immediately) by a coreferential pronoun NP with the same semantic case role. As noted above, I believe that topic structures in general, including left dislocation, exhibit a paratactic quality.

Formality also plays a role in determining the presence of *uas*. Native Hmong speakers have frequently commented to me that in some cases of relative clauses, inclusion of *uas* is not required but makes the sentence sound more formal and makes it longer. The link between length and formality is found elsewhere in the language as well, in that it is considered stylistically elegant to lengthen utterances. The use of elaborate expressions is a good example of this, and as I have argued in Riddle (1990a,b), verb serialization performs this function in some cases as well. I suggest that another basis for the comments about formality can be found in a property called integration which Chafe (1982) claims distinguishes formal spoken or written language from informal spoken language. He argues that formal written and oral texts, in comparison to informal speech, tend to show a higher degree of syntactic integration, or the packing in of additional information into a single sentence via subordinating-type devices. Relative clauses and nominalizations are examples of integrative devices. I suggest that *uas* in Hmong is also integrative — it makes a clause appear more overtly subordinate than it might otherwise, especially in the case of relative clauses formed on subjects. Without *uas* some clauses which otherwise might be analyzed as relative clauses are syntactically indistinguishable on the surface from main clauses.

This links up with the existence of a semantic and pragmatic distinction mentioned earlier which I have found between certain types of sentences with and without *uas*. Depending on the context, the inclusion of *uas* serves to increase the level of specificity of the relative clause over what it would be without *uas*. For example, an indefinite without *uas* becomes definite with *uas*, as in 27, or an indefinite non-specific (as in 'I want to buy a book' where it can be any book) becomes specific (as in 'I want to buy a book, namely *Roots*.'), as in 28:

27. Yog muaj neeg tuaj ua phem rau nej
 be have person come do bad to 2PL

yuav tsum tsis txhob ntshai mus hais qhia
 must not afraid go tell explain
 rau lub tsev kav xum uas nyob ze
 to CLF house gov't that be at near
 ntawm nej
 at 2PL

'If someone does something bad to you, you must
 not be afraid to complain to the police station near
 you.' (Thoj 1981:7)

28. ...nws tau hu teem caij mus xyuas ib
 3SG past call settle ride go visit 1
 kem tsev uas muaj ob chav pw
 apartment that have 2 bedroom

'He called to make an appointment to go see an
 apartment that had two bedrooms.' (Thoj 1981:91)

In 27 the presence of *uas* signals that it is assumed that
 there is only one specific relevant police station near the
 reader. If *uas* is omitted, it sounds like there is more than
 one possible station to choose from and the reader is simply
 advised to go to any nearby police station. In other words,
 the difference in interpretation is conveyed in English by the
 use of the definite vs. indefinite article. (The presence of
 the classifier *lub* in Hmong probably also contributes to the
 definite sense.) (See Riddle 1989b for further discussion of
 this role of classifiers.)

In 28, *uas* is strongly preferred because a particular apart-
 ment rather than a particular type is being referred to and
 because the context highlights this in that a special appoint-
 ment was made to go see it. Thus, within the restrictive
 relative clause meaning, different levels of restriction can
 be expressed in Hmong, depending on the presence of *uas*
 and on the context. The connection between this mean-
 ing distinction and integration is that without *uas*, many
 clauses that translate as relative clauses into English have
 main clause syntax on the surface, and it is this same type

of clause that may have a more general reference than with *uas*, depending on additional contextual factors. Thus the more like a main clause a string is syntactically, the more it functions as a general independent assertion, since the prototypical main clause attributes some property to a referent rather than functioning to delimit that referent. In contrast, the presence of *uas* serves to overtly emphasize a relatively more restrictive reading.

In short, the relatively main clause-like structure is less integrative and therefore less formal than the same string with the addition of *uas*.

Finally, the fact that *uas* does contribute a specificity sense to relative clauses in certain contexts over and above the restriction contributed by the relative clause itself shows that it is not simply a grammaticized marker of syntactic structure. I suggest that this is another sign of the relative lack of emphasis Hmong places on indicating subordination in surface structure in favor of a tendency toward parataxis and underspecification in syntax and morphology.

Note

*I would like to thank my Hmong consultants and teachers Pheng Thao, Leng Xiong, Neng Her, Lopao Vang, and Lee Thao. All errors are my own responsibility.

Abbreviations

TOP	=	Topic marker
CLF	=	Classifier
SG	=	Singular
PL	=	Plural
NOM	=	Nominalizer
GRP	=	Group plural quantifier or classifier

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