Describing and Explaining Lai

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Most papers on Lai grammar (like those listed at the end of this discussion) are attempts to describe and explain its syntax and morphology using the concepts and techniques of modern linguistics. Regardless of how successful those papers may be, they assume familiarity with linguistics, and are difficult to follow without such background. The present discussion has both different aims and a different audience. Rather than trying to analyze Lai for linguists, it tries to introduce linguistic analysis to Lai speakers. My other papers address mainly those aspects of Lai which (I think) I understand. This paper mentions also aspects of Lai which I do not understand, in part to illustrate the complexity of the language, but also to solicit the efforts of Lai speakers in extending our understanding together. This paper was prepared for the 2nd Lai Linguistics Workshop, held in at the Lai Baptist Church in Yangon, November 1997, and a Lai translation ('Laiholh a Tawinak i Fianternak') appeared in in *Muko Magazine* (Special Centenary Issue 1998), pp. 146-57. I am grateful to Rev. Samuel Ngun Ling, Rev. Thang Hlun and Saya Trial Peng for sharing their knowledge of Lai with me, and to everyone who attended the workshop for their interest and reactions.

Linguistic Structure. Let us take as our text the following sentence from the 1978 *Lai Baibal Thiang* (The Holy Bible in Lai).

(1)   *Keimah pei nangmah nih tipilpek awk ka si cu, ka sin i nangmah lehtuk na rat.*
        (Mt. 3:14)

This sentence is a report of what John the Baptist said to Jesus when he came to the Jordan to be baptized. It is a significant sentence for Baptist Christians, and perhaps could serve as the text for a serious sermon or even a theological treatise. My focus is not on its religious or theological value, but rather on its structure as an example of Laica. It is a translation into Lai from the Greek original (2) written by Matthew some 1900 years ago. Probably the translators also had in mind the Latin and English versions (3) and (4).

(2)   *Egô khreian ekhô hupo sou baptisthênai, kai su erkhêi pros me?*

(3)   *Ego a te debeo baptizari, et tu venis ad me?* (Vulgate)

(4)   *I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?* (King James Version)
           I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me? (Revised Standard Version)
   *I ought to be baptized by you, and yet you have come to me!* (Good News Version)

John did not know any of these languages, and his original words have not come down to us. If the translations are accurate, the religious or theological meaning has been preserved throughout, but the linguistic structure is different in each case.

What is linguistic structure, and how do we determine it? In their written form, sentences like (1) to (4) appear as strings of words with a few punctuation marks. But it is easy to see that this is far too simple a view of sentence structure. The words of which a sentence is composed differ among themselves, and are related to one another in quite elaborate ways. In what follows, we will examine a few of the types of words, groups of words (phrases), and relations between words and phrases which make up syntactic and morphological structure. It is only in so far as we can clarify the structures composed of these elements that we can describe or explain any language.

Sentences and Clauses. Sentence (1) can be broken down into the two parts (5) and (6).

(5)   *keimah pei nangmah nih tipilpek awk ka si cu*

(6)   *ka sin i nangmah lehtuk na rat*

Each of (5) and (6) has a structure and meaning of its own, though they are also interrelated so as to compose the single sentence (1). Phrases like (5) and (6) may often function as sentences by themselves, and those that may not can be slightly reformulated to do so. This structure may be represented as in (a).

(a)

```
                          S
              _____/_____
             S                          S
            /\                          /\
   keimah pei nangmah nih      ka sin i nangmah lehtuk
   tipilpek awk ka si cu       na rat
```
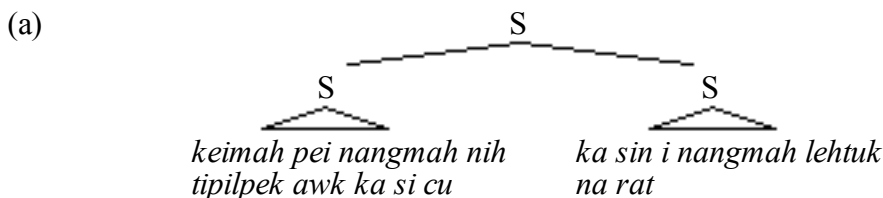
In diagram (a), the symbol S stands for a clause or sentence (a clause which is not part of any larger clause). The structure in (a) is represented indirectly by the comma which separates the two clauses in (1).

Words and Phrases. Usually a clause is composed of several words, and has its own internal structure. The core of a clause is a predicate, which may be accompanied by one or more arguments or adverbials. In the case of (6), the predicate is (7); (8) is an argument and (9) is an adverbial.

(7)   *na rat*

(8)   *nangmah lehtuk*

(9)   *ka sin i*

The structure of (6) may be represented as (b).

(b)
```
                      S
            ┌─────────┴─────────┐
          PP                    S
          △              ┌──────┴──────┐
       ka sin i         PP             S
                        △              △
                  nangmah lehtuk     na rat
```
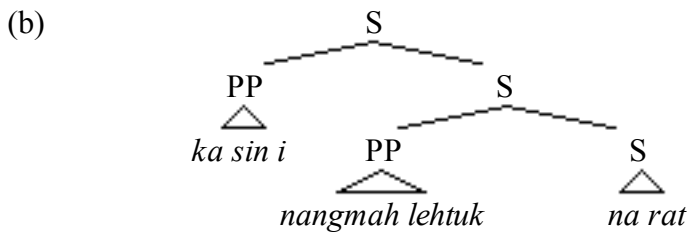
According to (b), (6) consists of a predicate (which is a minimal clause) which forms a larger clause together with the argument (8), which in turn forms a still larger clause with the adverbial (9).
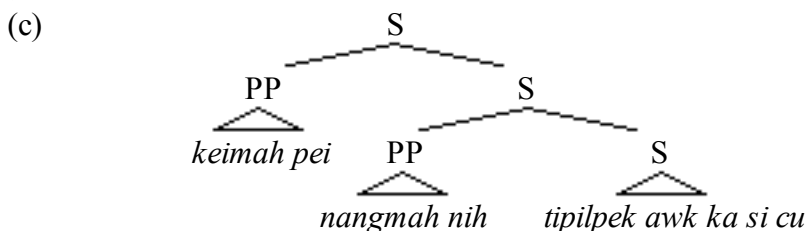
In the case of (5), the predicate is (10); (11) and (12) are both arguments.

(10)   *tipilpek awk ka si cu*

(11)   *nangmah nih*

(12)   *keimah pei*

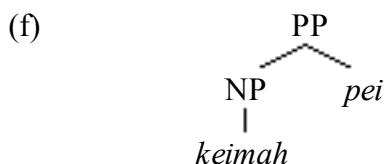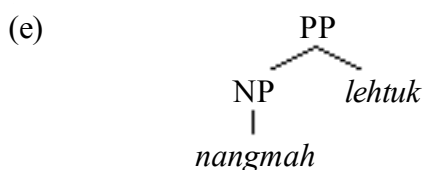The structure of (5) may then be represented as (c). At this level, the structure of (5) is the same as that of (6).

(c)
```
                       S
            ┌──────────┴──────────┐
          PP                      S
          △               ┌───────┴───────┐
      keimah pei          PP               S
                          △                △
                    nangmah nih     tipilpek awk ka si cu
```

Postpositional phrases. The symbol PP which appears in (b) and (c) stands for postpositional phrase, that is a phrase whose head is a postposition. A postposition is analogous to a preposition in English grammar, but in Lai such a word comes at the end of its phrase rather than at the beginning. Both arguments and adverbials are often (but not always) PPs. There are four PPs in (5) and (6): (8), (9), (11) and (12). (11) may be represented as (d).

(d)
```
              PP
          ┌────┴────┐
        NP          nih
         │
      nangmah
```
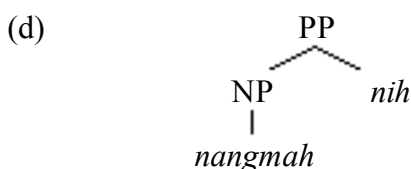
Here *nih* is a postposition which corresponds to the English preposition *by* in (13).

(13)   *by you*

The rest of (d) is an NP (noun phrase), a phrase whose head is a noun. In this case the noun *nangmah* comprises the entire NP. In a very similar way, (8) and (12) may be represented as (e) and (f). They have the same structure as (d), but the postpositions *pei* and *lehtuk* have a different type of meaning from *nih*.

(e)
```
            PP
           /  \
        NP    lehtuk
         |
       nangmah
```

(f)
```
            PP
           /  \
        NP    pei
         |
       keimah
```

The structure of (9) is more complex, and may be represented as (g).

(g)
```
              PP
             /  \
          NP      i
         /  \
      NP    sin
       |
       ka
```
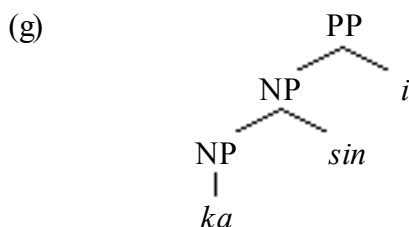
In this case the NP has additional structure: its head noun is *sin*, which is accompanied by a second NP *ka*. (9) corresponds to English (14), which has the simpler structure of (d), (e) and (f).

(14)   *to me*

The Lai PP (9) might correspond more closely to (15), but it is not idiomatic English in this context.

(15)   *?in my direction*

     Predicates. The predicate (7) consists of two parts, but it may be unclear how they are related. The head is the verb *rat*, but the remainder *na* is neither an argument nor an adverbial. I argued in 'Agreement in Lai' that it is an agreement marker attached to the verb. *Na* appears if (and only if) the subject is second person singular. In (6) the subject is the PP (8). Even though *na* is normally written as a separate word, it is in a sense part of the verb, and (7) should be represented as (h).

(h)
```
            S
            |
         na-rat
```

Here the verb stands alone as predicate, and *na* has no independent syntactic status.

     The predicate (10) is more complex than (7); it can be broken down into two parts.
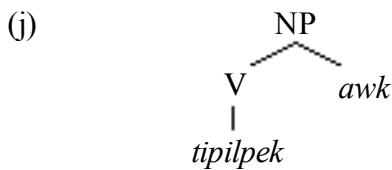
(16)   *tipilpek awk*

(17)   *ka si cu*

(17) is similar to (7) and may be represented as (i).

(i)   S
                   |
               ka-si-cu

The verb here is *si*, with the agreement marker *ka* and a second marker *cu* which follows the verb. (16) is harder to analyze, but I think it should be represented as (j).

(j)   NP
                     ╱   ╲
                 V   *awk*
                 |
              tipilpek

That is, *awk* (like *sin* in (11)) is a kind of noun, which combines with a verb to form an NP. The structure of (10) will then be (k).

(k)   S
                       ╱   ╲
                 NP   *ka-si-cu*
               ╱   ╲
           V   *awk*
           |
        tipilpek
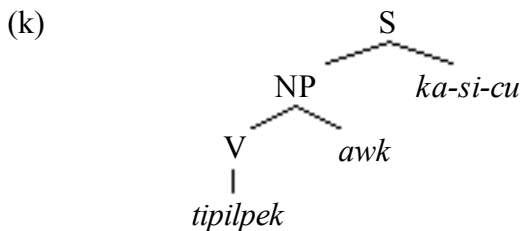
If (k) is correct, there is again a difference between (10) and the corresponding English (18).

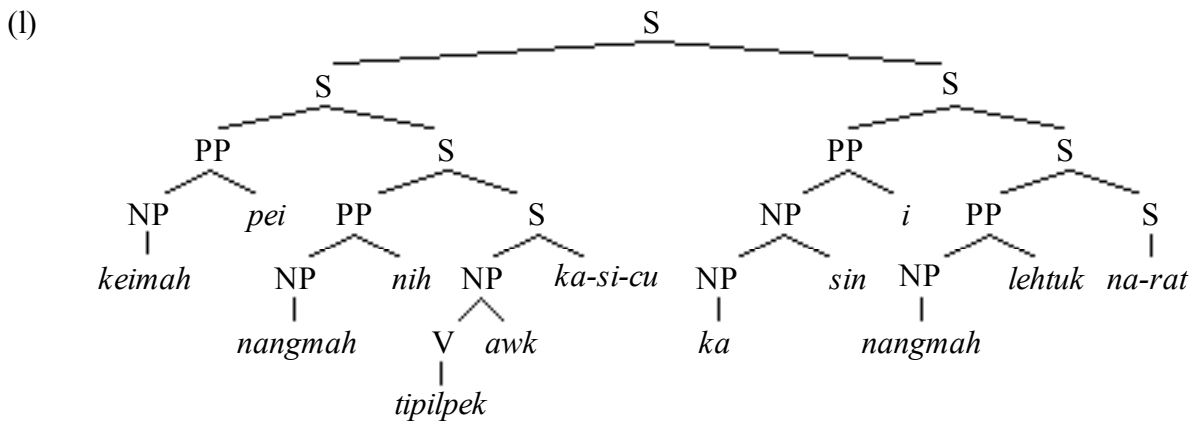(18)   *(I) need to be baptized* (by you)

In (18), *need* is a verb and there is a passive under it: *to be baptized*. The Lai structure in (10) corresponds more closely to the (non-idiomatic) English (19).

(19)   *?(I) am in need of baptizing* (by you)

In (19) *need* is a noun and parallel to Lai *awk*.

Verbs. In (10), the syntactic head verb is *si*, but the verb *tipilpek* is more salient in terms of the meaning. The PP (11) is the semantic subject of *tipilpek* rather than of *si*, and the PP (12) is the semantic object of *tipilpek* as well as the subject of *si*. (12) is also the semantic subject of *awk* even though it is syntactically a noun. In the syntactic structure, the main verb is *si*, with *awk* dependent on it, and *tipilpek* in turn dependent on *awk*. But semantically *tipilpek* is the main verb, with *awk* modifying it, and *si* serving only to allow *awk* to be used as a predicate. This is parallel to the relations between *am, in need of* and *baptizing* in (19).

Putting together (a) through (k), our representation of sentence (1), looks like (l).

(l)

S
├── S
│   ├── PP
│   │   ├── NP — keimah
│   │   └── pei
│   └── S
│   ├── PP
│   │   ├── NP — nangmah
│   │   └── nih
│   └── S
│   ├── NP
│   │   └── V — tipilpek / awk
│   └── ka-si-cu
└── S
    ├── PP
    │   ├── NP — ka
    │   └── i
    └── S
        ├── PP
        │   ├── NP — nangmah
        │   └── sin
        │   └── lehtuk
        └── S — na-rat

(l) shows the words and phrases, together with the relationships among them, which make up the linguistic structure of (1) according to this analysis. It remains to argue that this structure is the correct one by considering possible alternatives.

Agreement. On the other hand, (l) does not exhaust the syntactic structure of (1); there are relations among its components which are not represented there. The most obvious case is agreement, already mentioned in the discussion of the predicates (7) and (10). The agreement markers *na* and *ka* are related to the syntactic subjects of each of the clauses (5) and (6).

(5)   *keimah pei nangmah nih tipilpek awk ka si cu*

(6)   *ka sin i nangmah lehtuk na rat*

If the subject of *si* in (5) is *keimah*, then *ka* must appear, and if the subject of *rat* in (6) is *nangmah*, then *na* must appear, as part of the verbs. This is so even though the verbs are located in an independent part of the syntactic structure from their subjects. Though it is not illustrated directly in (1), Lai also has agreement between verbs and their objects.

Beginning in 'Clitic Climbing in Lai', I adopted an analysis of agreement which has the virtue of representing it as part of the syntactic structure. That analysis is rather abstract and will not be discussed again here; but it helps to explain why some Lai verbs show agreement but others do not. Sentence (1) contains an example of a Lai verb (*tipilpek*) which does not show agreement. As I discovered during the first Workshop, it is possible to have agreement (full or partial) in this case as well.

(20)   *Keimah cu nangmah nih tipil na ka pek awk ka si.*

(21)   *Keimah cu nangmah nih tipil na pek awk ka si.*

(22)   **Keimah cu nangmah nih tipil ka pek awk ka si.*

(23)   *Keimah cu nangmah nih tipilpek awk ka si.*

In (20) the verb *tipil na ka pek* agrees with both its subject and object; in (21) the verb *tipil na pek* agrees only with its subject. (22) is impossible because *ka* not preceded by another agreement marker is interpreted as marking subject rather than object agreement (and therefore conflicts with

the subject *nangmah*). Some Lai speakers do not accept partial agreement as in (21), and a complete account of when agreement is required, allowed or prohibited in Lai remains to be given.

Exclamations. A second case is the relation between the postposition *pei* and the marker *cu* which appears on the verb in (5).

(5)   *Keimah <u>pei</u> nangmah nih tipilpek awk ka si <u>cu</u>.*

(24)   *Keimah cu nangmah nih tipilpek awk ka si cu.*

(25)   **Keimah pei nangmah nih tipilpek awk ka si.*

If *pei* appears as in (5) then *cu* must accompany the verb and (25) is bad in comparison with (23); but this dependency goes in only one direction, since *cu* may appear without *pei* as in (24). The postposition *pei* contrasts the NP to which it attaches, and *cu* marks an exclamation. This may in fact account for the dependency.

(6) is also an exclamation; here the marker is the use of the verb form *rat* instead of *ra*, though *cu* can be added.

(6)   *Ka sin i nangmah <u>lehtuk</u> na <u>rat</u>.*

(26)   *Ka sin i nangmah lehtuk na rat cu.*

(27)   *?Ka sin i nangmah cu na rat.*

(28)   *Ka sinah nangmah lehtuk na ra.*

Though *lehtuk* resembles *pei* in contrasting the NP to which it attaches, it does not seem to require an exclamation marker; thus (28) is acceptable in comparison with (25). But some speakers feel that the use of *rat* without a contrastive postposition is dubious, as in (27).

***I* and *ah*.** There may also be a dependency between the postpositions *i* and *ah* in these examples and *ra* versus *rat*.

(29)   **Ka sin i nangmah lehtuk na ra.*

(30)   *Ka sinah cu lehtuk na rat.*

(31)   *Ka sinah nangmah lehtuk na rat.*

There is no obvious difference in meaning between *ka sin i* and *ka sinah*; and they have the same syntactic structure (g) in spite of *sinah* being often written as a single word. Some speakers feel that the use of *i* is restricted to the context of verb forms like *rat*, thus (29) is unacceptable in comparison with (28). Others seem to regard the two postpositions as merely stylistic variants.

The postpositions *pei* and *lehtuk* differ in that the former appears only in exclamations while the latter is not so restricted. They also differ in the order they take with respect to *nih*.

(32)   *Keimah cu nangmah nih pei tipilpek awk ka si cu.*

(33)   *Keimah cu nangmah lehtuk nih tipilpek awk ka si cu.*

(34)   **Keimah cu nangmah pei nih tipilpek awk ka si cu.*

(35)   **Keimah cu nangmah nih lehtuk tipilpek awk ka si cu.*

That is, when combined with *nih*, *pei* must follow but *lehtuk* must precede. It is unclear why this should be so.

    Passives. An interesting feature of (5) is that the syntactic subject of the verb *ka si cu* (with which it must agree) is the semantic object of the verb *tipilpek* (with which it may but need not agree). Thus it resembles Lai passive sentences as discussed in 'Passive and Clefts in Lai', which also contain two verbs, one of them being a form of *si*.

(36)   *Keimah cu nangmah nih tipilpek ka si.*

The only difference between (23) and (36) is the absence of *awk* in the latter. Not every Lai speaker accepts passives like (36), but those who do do not allow agreement of any sort on *tipilpek*.

(37)   **Keimah cu nangmah nih tipil na ka pek ka si.*

(38)   **Keimah cu nangmah nih tipil na pek ka si.*

(39)   **Keimah cu nangmah nih tipil ka pek ka si.*

    Awk. The Lai word *awk* is itself quite interesting syntactically. As represented in (k) it may be characterized as an auxiliary noun. As an auxiliary it requires a verbal complement, and as a predicate noun it must appear as the complement of *si*. English does not have auxiliary predicates which are syntactically nouns, though other languages (for example Japanese) do. A further feature of interest is that the syntactic subject of *si* may be an argument of the verbal complement or may be independent.

(40)   *Tipil na ka pek awk ka si.*

(41)   *Tipil na ka pek awk na si.*

(42)   *Tipil na ka pek awk a si.*

(40) to (42) differ in focus, but not in basic meaning; some speakers do not accept (41). As noted in the discussion of (20) (of which (40) is a part), agreement is optional on *tipilpek*.

(43)   *Tipil na pek awk na si.*

(44)   *Tipilpek awk na si.*

(45)   *Tipil na pek awk a si.*

(46)   *Tipilpek awk a si.*

But omission of agreement in (41) or (42) affects the meaning: (43) to (46) contain no reference to the first person singular.

Verb Stem Alternation. The verb form *rat* as opposed to *ra* was noted above as marking an exclamation. But this form is used in a variety of other situations which do not involve exclamation.

(47) *Ka sinah <u>rat</u> na duh.*

(48) *Ka sinah na <u>rat</u> duh.*

(49) *Ka sinah na <u>rat</u>nak sullam cu zeidah a si?*

(50) *Ka sinah a <u>ra</u>mi cu ahodah a si?*

(51) *Ka sinah na <u>rat</u> caah, ka lawm tuk.*

(52) *Ka sinah na <u>rat</u> ahcun, ka lawm tuk ko hnga.*

(53) *Ka sinah na hawipa na <u>rat</u>ter.*
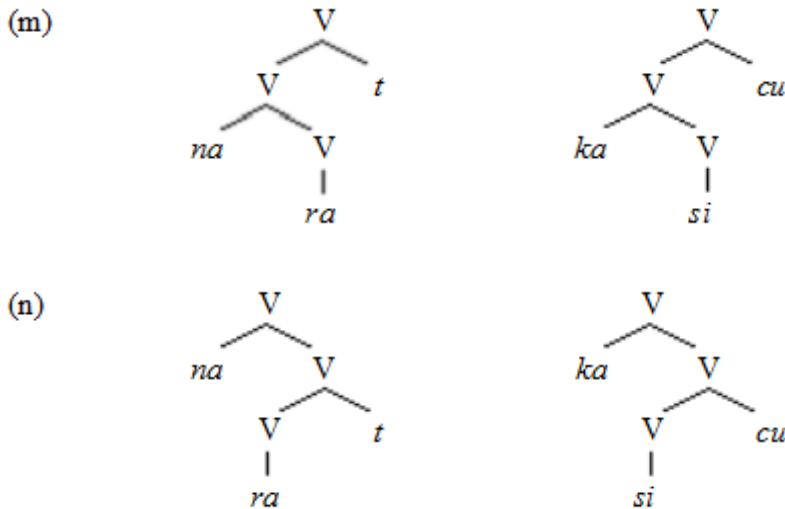
(54) *Ka sinah na hawipa na <u>rat</u>pi.*

Rat must be used in an infinitive complement as in (47); this construction is discussed in 'Clitic Climbing in Lai'. It must be used in a relative clause formed on an adverbial as in (49), though not in one formed on the subject as in (50). It must be used in adverbial clauses like those in (51) and (52). Finally, it must be used with transitivizing (or 'valence-increasing') suffixes as in (53) and (54). See the discussion of the causative suffix *-ter* in 'Causatives and Clause Union in Lai'.

The distribution observed in (47) through (54) has been explained by F. K. Lehman in 'Relative Clauses in Lai Chin' on the assumption that *rat* is (or was at one time) a nominalized form of *ra*. Infinitive complements as in (47) are plausibly nominalized; the transitivizing suffixes *-ter* and *-pi* in (53) and (54) reflect the same original phenomenon, with sentences like (48) perhaps in transition at the present time. Some speakers feel that sentences like (48) are 'incomplete' out of context, while others accept them freely. Conjunctions like *caah* or *ahcun* in (51) and (52) might also plausibly require their clause complements to be nominalized. A major problem for this proposal is the failure of *rat* to appear in relative clauses like (50). If it is on the right track however, the use of *rat* as an exclamation marker can be understood as a special application of nominalization. And it may help account for the appearance of *cu* as an exclamation marker. Not all Lai intransitive verbs have a distinct nominalized form. *Si* does not, but *cu* (if it is in fact the discourse demonstrative *cu*) should be attached to a noun phrase and thus may serve to nominalize a finite verb. Note that it cannot be attached to *ra*; (55) shows a clear contrast with (26).

(55) **Ka sinah nangmah lehtuk na ra cu.*

Verb Morphology. We left off our analysis with verbs such as *na rat* in (7) or *ka si cu* in (10) being syntactic units, despite usually being written as if they were two or three separate words. But they do have internal morphological structure. That is, *na rat* consists of a verb stem *ra* 'come' followed by the nominalizing suffix *-t* and preceded by the subject agreement marker *na*. *Ka si cu*

consists of a verb stem *si* 'be' followed by the nominalizing suffix *cu* and preceded by the subject agreement marker *ka*. It is not clear what (if any) further structure should be assumed; that is whether it should be as in (m) or as in (n).

(m)

```
        V                          V
       / \                        / \
      V   t                      V   cu
     / \                        / \
   na   V                     ka   V
        |                          |
       ra                         si
```

(n)

```
      V                          V
     / \                        / \
   na   V                     ka   V
       / \                        / \
      V   t                      V   cu
      |                          |
     ra                         si
```

More complex morphological structure is seen in the verb *tipilpek* 'baptize'. *Tipilpek* is a verb stem like *ra* or *si* with respect to agreement, but it has further internal structure. *Pek* 'give' is itself an independent verb, and *tipil* 'baptism' looks like an incorporated noun which in turn consists of the independent noun *ti* 'water' and *pil* 'sink'. *Tipilpek* then has the structure in (o).

(o)

```
            V
           / \
          N   pek
         / \
        N   V
        |   |
       ti  pil
```
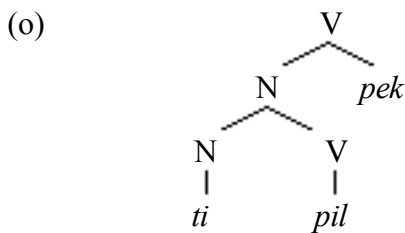
That (o) is word-internal (that is, morphological and not syntactic) structure is suggested by several things. *Ti* cannot be a syntactic argument of *pil*; an adverbial noun like *chung* is required to relate them.

(56)   *Tilawng cu ti chungah pil.*

(57)   *ti chung i pil*

Also, *pil* is an intransitive verb which requires the causative suffix to be used transitively.

(58)   *Tilawng cu ti chungah ka pilter.*

(59)   *ti chung i pilter*

Tipilpek is a transitive verb which corresponds to the intransitive *tipilin* 'be baptized'. Though *tipil* seems to be a semantic argument of *pek* or *in* 'receive' in these compounds, it cannot be topicalized or otherwise syntactically modified.

(60)   *_Tipil cu na ka pek._

(61)   *_Hi tipil hi ka in._

Tipil is not in fact the independent Lai noun meaning 'baptism', which is either _tipilpeknak_ or _tipilinnak_, derived from the verbs. That agreement markers are infixed with compound verbs like these is an additional point in favor of the morphological status of agreement.

Lai morphology is interestingly different from English with these words. English _baptize_ is a borrowing from Greek without internal morphological structure, and the noun _baptism_ is derived from it just as in Lai. _Tipilin_ must be translated as an English passive since _baptize_ is inherently transitive; its presence may account for the resistance of some Lai speakers to passives like (36). But sentences like (62) are not passives and do not allow an agent phrase with _nih_.

(62)   _Tipil ka in._

(63)   *_Nangmah nih tipil ka in._

(64)   _Nangmah in tipil ka in._

Note also that English _sink_, unlike Lai _pil_, can be used either transitively or intransitively with no morphological difference.

(65)   _The boat sank._   cf. (56)

(66)   _I sank the boat._   cf. (58)

In the preceding pages, we have explored a few aspects of syntax and morphology as they appear in Lai sentence (1). While we have only scratched the surface of the complex grammar of this language, it may be appropriate to observe that the goal of linguistic analysis is not confined to the description and explanation of any particular language, no matter how complex or rich it may be. Human language is a manifestation of human nature and the human mind. This nature is variable, as we know from the variety of cultures and societies to be found in the world, as well as from the variety of languages. But as we know equally well from the ability of a Lai child brought up in Japan to learn Japanese, or the equal ability of a Japanese child brought up in Chin State to learn Lai, there is a biological capacity for language common to all human beings. It is as important to investigate the similarities among languages as the differences between them. The work of describing and explaining Lai should be of value not only to Lai people, but to everyone who wishes to understand human nature.

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