CHAPTER 57

'CASE RELATIONS' IN LAO, A RADICALLY ISOLATING LANGUAGE

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57.1 INTRODUCTION

By definition, a language of the isolating type (Sapir 1921: 126) entirely lacks explicit morphological marking of grammatical relations or other formal linking of predicates and arguments, whether this marking be on clausal heads (agreement) or dependents (case marking). This chapter looks at data from Lao, a radically isolating Southwestern Tai language spoken in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, and asks how speakers of such a language might cope without case. Does it find alternative means to the same functional ends? Does it simply leave these problems unsolved? Two points are made here from the Lao data. First, the informational problem of disambiguating role and reference of arguments hardly needs a formal solution – that is, there need be no formal alternative to case marking in languages which lack case. Where case marking simply distinguishes who from whom, it is

mostly dispensable, thanks to the richness of pragmatics. A second finding is that for more 'expressive' functions of case marking, where features of transitivity are manipulated for expressive or information-structural effect,[1] Lao finds constructional means to treat certain arguments in special ways, thereby explicitly marking non-redundant semantic information in case-like ways.

57.2 Pragmatically oriented grammar: Context as the main referential guide

As defined by its isolating morphological profile, Lao lacks both case and its functional cousin, agreement. Lao is like Mandarin, Thai, Vietnamese, and Riau Indonesian in exemplifying the extreme of pragmatically oriented grammar (cf. Gil 2005a). With argument–predicate relations marked neither on heads nor dependents, how to tell who from whom? A widely presumed answer is that hearers of languages like Lao are forced to rely on strict constituent order to maintain informational coherence in predicate–argument relations. This claim is, however, weak at best, since extensive ellipsis and movement create widespread surface ambiguity, without compromising communication. Accordingly, for Mandarin, Li and Thompson (1981: 26) state that 'no basic word order can be established'. On Riau Indonesian, Gil (2005b) shows that there are 'no distinctions between major syntactic categories'. He argues that observed word order patterns in the language are 'epiphenomenal' (cf. also LaPolla 1993). With this in mind, consider the Lao A/S-V-O constituent order pattern, perhaps the closest to a 'pragmatically unmarked' pattern:[2]

[1] I distinguish here between 'disambiguating' versus 'expressive' functions of core case marking. Disambiguating functions serve the resolution of referential ambiguities in communication, most importantly helping hearers to track protagonists through discourse, and to map event/discourse participants onto distinct semantic roles or grammatical relations. Disambiguating functions distinguish who from whom, and little more. Expressive functions of core case, by contrast, signal distinctions in conceptual representation or construal of events, marking constructions which may signal special distinctions in aspect, agentivity, responsibility, involvement, and effect. An example is from Finnish, where partitive instead of accusative case marking on an undergoer signals that the undergoer is 'only partially affected by the action' (Comrie 1989: 127). Expressive case functions tend to be optional, as distinct from the typically obligatory nature of disambiguating case marking.

[2] By 'unmarked' I mean that speakers may report an impression that the S/A-V-O pattern is somehow basic in status. A consultant will likely supply the S/A-V-O pattern when asked to compose sentences of the variety *The farmer kills the duckling*, i.e. decontextualized structures of the sort which seldom actually occur (Du Bois 1987). The impression of basicness to this word order arises not from an asemantic structural default, but from the normal discourse asymmetry inherent in argument structure (e.g. one argument will, all things being equal, be higher on the scale of animacy, agency,

(1) NP_A V NP_O
kuu3 jaan4 mùng2
1SG.B afraid 2SG.B
'I was afraid of you.'

(2) NP_A V NP_O
phuø-pên3-mia2 khòòng3 thaaw4 nan4 hên3 qavaj2ñavaq1
person-be-wife of young.man DEM.NPROX see organ
khòòng3 faaj1 coon3
of side bandit
'That young man's wife saw the bandit's genitals.'

(3) NP_S V
saam3 khon2 taaj3
three person die
'Three people died.'

Departures from the A/S-V-O pattern are common. 'Movement', for example, may see a subject argument in a post-final position (examples 4 and 5, where the back slash represents the onset of a prosodic mark-off, with lowered amplitude and pitch), or an object argument in initial position (example 6, where the forward slash represents the syntactic border between a left-positioned topic and a grammatical subject). It is important to note that while it is formally apparent that something has been 'moved', there is no information about the semantic/functional role of the moved argument.

(4) V NP_S *taaj3 lèèw4 \ phòò1 hanø*
die PRF father TOP.DIST
'(He)'d be dead, the father.'

(5) V NP_O NP_A *qaw3 mia2 \ haw2 niø*
take wife 1.FAC TOP
'Took a wife, I (did).'

(6) NP_O NP_A V *lot1 / haw2 laø bòø mii2*
vehicle 1.FAC PRF NEG have
'A car, I didn't have.'

Another reason surface strings might not show canonical constituent order patterns is ellipsis. Arguments may be freely ellipsed in Lao when contextually retrievable (or 'definite'), leaving literally zero material for the mapping of arguments onto predicates, and no coherent way of determining 'constituent order'. This is perhaps the most important challenge to a claim that without case or agreement, word order is crucial for maintaining role and reference relations:

topicality, than the other; cf. Comrie 1989: 127 on this as 'natural information flow'; cf. Hopper and Thompson 1980, Langacker 1987, LaPolla 1993, Croft 2003).

(7) *ñaaw2*
long
'(It was) long.'

(8) *lùùm2*
forget
'(I have) forgotten (it).'

(9) *hên3*
see
'(I) saw (it).'

The referential resolution of ellipsis in Lao is in general completely open to pragmatic interpretation since there are few strict grammatical constraints on the interpretation of unexpressed nominal material. Consider the following example of 'gapping' (constructed, modelled after a Thai example in Foley and Van Valin 1984: 194):[3]

(10) *tam3* *khuaj2* *taaj3*
crash.into buffalo die
i. '(S/he) crashed into a buffalo and died.'
ii. '(S/he) crashed into a buffalo and (it) died.'
iii. '(S/he) crashed into a buffalo and (the car) died (i.e. stalled).'

When we combine ellipsis with movement, further structural ambiguity arises (as pointed out for Mandarin Chinese by Chao 1968; cf. Gil 2005a):[4]

(11) Surface sequence: **NP $V_{bivalent}$**
Structural analysis 1: **NP_O $V_{bivalent}$** (NP_A ellipsed)
Structural analysis 2: **NP_A $V_{bivalent}$** (NP_O ellipsed)
e.g. with bivalent verb *qaw3* 'to take':
phuak4 *juu1* *nam2* *thaang2* *kaø* *qaw3*
group be.at accompany road TLNK take
i. 'Those$_i$ along the road, (they$_j$) took ø$_i$.' (actual reading in original context)
ii. 'Those along the road took (them/it).' (possible reading)

[3] The only case of strict referential control of a 'zero' element is in same-subject readings of 'want' complements (e.g. *man2 jaak5 khaa5* [3sg want kill] 'S/he wants to kill (it/them)'; cf. *man2 fan3 vaa1 khaa5* [3sg dream COMP kill] 'S/he$_i$ dreamt s/he/it/they$_{i/j}$ killed her/him/it/them$_{j/i}$.'). Because of this syntactic control constraint in 'want' complements, it is necessary to explicitly mark switch-reference in such constructions with a dummy causative in *haj5* 'give':

(a) *man2 jaak2 paj3*
3SG.B want go
'S/he$_i$ wants ø$_{i/*j}$ to go.'

(b) *man2 jaak2 haj5 paj3*
3SG.B want give/cause go
'S/he$_i$ wants ø$_{*i/j}$ to go.' (i.e. 'S/he wants him/her/them to go.')

[4] For clarity of presentation, I do not include in the example structure's schematic representation the various particles which appear in the actual examples. In neither case does the presence of the particle bear upon the mapping of arguments to one or another semantic, grammatical, or discourse function.

(12) Surface sequence: NP $V_{bivalent}$ NP
Structural analysis 1: NP_A $V_{bivalent}$ NP_O (NP_O postposed)[5]
Structural analysis 2: NP_O $V_{bivalent}$ NP_A (NP_A postposed)
e.g. with bivalent verb *mak1* 'to like':
tamluat5 / mak1 dêj2 \ phuø-saaw3 tòòn3 nan4
police like FAC CT.HUM-girl time DEM.NPROX
i. 'Police$_i$, (they$_j$) liked (them$_i$) you know, girls$_j$ back then.' (actual reading in context) [i.e. girls liked police.]
ii. 'Police liked (them) you know, girls back then.' [i.e. police liked girls.]

These everyday Lao examples show variable or indeterminate constituent order. Such patterns are readily analysed as arising from movement and ellipsis, though note that these are merely descriptive: nothing in the form of these examples serves to disambiguate. That these ubiquitous relaxations of the 'word-order patterns' co-exist with a total lack of morphological marking of semantic roles or grammatical relations might suggest chaos. But in real contexts of usage, Lao speakers have no difficulty in communicating.

The conclusion is that Lao and other radically isolating languages (Gil 2005a; Enfield 2005) demonstrate that the merely disambiguating functions of case are so redundant as to be almost entirely dispensable. When core referential information is not symbolically encoded in grammar, potential ambiguities in role/reference relations are readily resolved by features of context. Within 'context' here we may include, on the one hand, selectional restrictions of verb/argument semantics (e.g. if I give you a predicate 'eat<x_{eater},y_{eaten}>' and two arguments 'John' and 'an apple', chances are you will correctly guess the argument–role mapping), and, on the other hand, the pragmatic constraints of expectation supplied by any given active discourse world (and following informational principles of topic continuity, etc.). With these semantic and pragmatic devices alone, speakers of Lao can readily distinguish who from whom in the absence of the kind of unambiguous marking which morphological case might otherwise provide. The surface ambiguities just outlined are normally unproblematic when there is a full discourse context. Importantly, however, the same surface strings which are easily understood in situ may, if taken out of context, be impossible to interpret with referential certainty.[6]

[5] We are justified in saying that the NP is postposed, since it appears after the sentence-final particle *dêj2*, and thus in a prosodically marked-off right-position to the clause. But its postpositioned status has no bearing upon a hearer's interpretation of its semantic role or grammatical relation.

[6] A good example is (12), above. I presented an audio recording of this utterance alone, out of context, to a number of Lao speakers, and asked them to explain their interpretation of the sentence. In all cases, they understood the utterance to have the opposite mapping of actor and undergoer to what was intended by the speaker in the original context – i.e. all hearers assumed the initial noun phrase to be the A.

57.3 ARGUMENT–PREDICATE RELATIONS: SOME PATTERNS

I have stressed the lack of dependable formal marking of predicate–argument relations in Lao, but this does not imply a lack of systematicity in the mapping of arguments to predicate roles/functions. There are underlying classes of argument structure pattern which constrain the possibilities. The key patterns turn on distinctions in the semantics of verbs – that is, patterns of argument (a)symmetry and aspectual structure inherent to the semantics of distinct (classes of) verbs.

57.3.1 Monovalent predicates

For monovalent predicates, disambiguating who from whom is not an issue. There are, however, a range of different possible conceptual/semantic mappings of the relation of argument to verb for monovalent (single-argument) predicates, and hearers must be able to determine which from among a number of possible roles an argument may have. Here are some basic types of relation between a predicate and its single argument in Lao:

(13) *Active monovalent relation* (single argument S = agent/theme)
Meaning: 'S does V'; includes typical active monovalents (e.g. *caam3* 'sneeze', *lèèn1* 'run', *san1* 'shake').

(14) *Inchoative-stative monovalent relation* (single argument S = theme)
Expresses the meaning 'S enters into and/or is in state V'; typical stative 'property concept' monovalents (e.g. *laaj2* 'striped', *hòòn4* 'hot', *dii3* 'good'); inchoative reading is encouraged by irrealis or progressive marking.

(15) *Resultant state monovalent relation* (single argument S = patient/theme)
Telic agent-controlled verbs with patient/theme as subject and where agent is unexpressed and indefinite/non-retrievable (e.g. *kaang3* 'to be hoisted', *pia3* 'to be platted', *tom4* 'to be boiled').

Verbs encoding these three types of argument–verb relation differ in grammatical behaviour, notably in terms of permissible alternations. For example, for (13), no transitive alternation is possible; for (14), a caused state alternation is possible (see below); for (15), negation requires *dajø*; a transitive alternation is possible (see below). (For full details on these alternations, see Enfield 2007) Of more direct relevance to case marking as a device for dealing with referential ambiguities are patterns of relation between *two* arguments and a single predicate. We turn now to those.

57.3.2 Symmetric and other non-oriented bivalent predicates

When a bivalent predicate is symmetric, in the sense that its two arguments are involved in the event in the same way and to the same degree, there is (perhaps trivially) the possibility to allow any argument in any position, without (truth-conditionally) affecting predicate–argument mapping. Take verbs of likeness: *John resembles Bill* entails *Bill resembles John* (while *John scratches Bill* does not entail *Bill scratches John*). There are also asymmetric predicates like *khaat5* 'lacking (sth.)' and *têm3* 'full (of sth.)' which show similar variability. This is because, despite being asymmetric, they are 'non-oriented', that is they do not show an obvious DIRECTION of figure/ground asymmetry (as distinct, say, from the inherent orientation of more prototypical active verbs such as 'hit'; Langacker 1987: 209ff; Comrie 1989; Croft 1991: 184ff). Diller (1997) has pointed this out for Thai, and the same kinds of examples work in Lao too (reminiscent of celebrated English 'case alternations' like *the garden is swarming with bees* versus *Bees are swarming in the garden*; Levin 1993; Levin and Rappaport Hovav 2005, among many others). Importantly, the Thai/Lao cases are distinct from 'swarm' type examples because the alternations do not involve any kind of morphological marking, as non-core or otherwise, on arguments. With non-oriented predicates of this kind, a single truth-conditional situation may equally well be describable by expressions of opposite constituent ordering (16a, b; 17a, b), or a single expression may have two very different truth-conditional interpretations (as in (18)):

(16) (a) *còòk5 têm3 law5*
cup full liquor
'The cup is filled (with) liquor.'
(b) *law5 têm3 còòk5*
liquor full cup
'Liquor fills the cup.'

(17) (a) *sùa4 nii4 tit3 namø-mùk2*
shirt DEM touch/attach CT.LIQUID-ink
'This shirt has got ink on it.'
(b) *namø-mùk2 tit2 sùa4 nii4*
CT.LIQUID-ink touch/attach shirt DEM
'Ink has got on this shirt.'

(18) *man2 bang3 hùan2*
3SG.B block.from.view house
i. 'He's blocked from view by the house.'
ii. 'He's blocking the house from view.'

Alternations such as (16–18) are conditioned primarily by information structural considerations (i.e. responsive to dimensions of focus, topic, presupposition, as roughly captured in the different English translations). These are good illustrations

of the lack of relation between any available form of explicit coding (i.e. constituent order) and any particular type of grammatical relation (e.g. subject, object) or semantic role (e.g. theme, location).

57.3.3 Asymmetric bivalent predicates

There is greater variety in asymmetric bivalent relations, which map two arguments onto a predicate where the argument asymmetry has a straightforward directionality:

(19) *Transitive relation* (A=agent/effector, O=patient/theme)
Expresses the meaning 'A does V to O (which causes O to be in a certain state)' (e.g. *tom4* 'boil', *pia3* 'plat', *khaa5* 'kill', *puk2* 'waken').

(20) *Experiencer subject relation* (A=experiencer, O=theme)
Expresses the meaning 'A has the experience of V as a result of the stimulus O'; includes 'applied stimulus' expressions (e.g. *sèèp4* '(find something) delicious', *nak2* '(find something) heavy', *tùùn1* 'be startled (by something)'). There is an animacy constraint on the A.

(21) *Caused state relation* (A=effector, O=theme)
Expresses the meaning 'O comes to be in state V because of A'; includes 'caused state' expressions (e.g. *laaj2* '((cause to) become) striped', *dam3* '((cause to) become) black', *hòòn4* '((cause to) become) hot'). (Usually not agentive, although there are exceptions; e.g. *qun1* 'to warm something up'.)

(22) *Applied effector relation* (A=theme, O=effector)
Expresses the meaning 'A is in state V because of O'; includes (e.g. *vaan3* 'be sweet (because of something, e.g. sugar)', *phêt2* 'be spicy (because of something, e.g. chili)', *taaj3* 'die (because of something, e.g. sunlight)').

These patterns are interrelated in various ways. (The details are beyond our present scope.) While a few Lao verbs are relatively restricted in their argument structure (e.g. *tèèk5* 'to be broken, to break [intr.]' and *fot2* 'to be boiling' are both strictly monovalent), most verbs are versatile. To take one example, the verb *nak2* 'heavy' appears in four of the expression types listed above, one exception being the transitive relation:

(23) *kapaw3 nii4 nak2*
bag DEM heavy
'This bag is heavy.' (Inchoative-stative monovalent)

(24) *khòòj5 nak2 kapaw3 nii4*
1SG.POL heavy bag DEM
'I find this bag heavy.' (Experiencer subject)

(25) *kapaw3 nii4 nak2 law5*
bag DEM heavy liquor
'The bag is heavy from the liquor (inside it).' (Applied effector)

(26) *law5 nii4 nak2 kapaw3*
liquor DEM heavy bag
'This liquor makes the bag heavy.' (Caused state)

With the ever-present possibility of ellipsis in Lao, multiple interpretations become more likely. Thus, *khòòj5 nak2* [I heavy] could be a monovalent expression meaning 'I'm heavy' or an experiencer subject expression meaning 'I'm finding (it) heavy' (i.e. where the object argument is ellipsed). Only context will tell which it is.

A further confounding parameter for referential interpretation is 'ambi-valency', that is the possibility of a predicate entering into either a monovalent or a bivalent relation. The correct referential analysis (i.e. the one intended by the speaker) is only resolved by consulting the discourse record of a given usage:

(27) Surface sequence: NP $V_{ambivalent}$
Structural analysis 1: NP_S V
Structural analysis 2: NP_A V (NP_O ellipsed)
Structural analysis 3: NP_O V (NP_A ellipsed)
e.g.
(a) *paa3 kin3 lèèw4*
fish eat PRF
i. 'The fish has been eaten.'
ii. 'The fish has eaten (it).'
iii. 'The fish, (they) have eaten.' (constructed example; cf. Chao 1968: 75)
(b) *khèèw5 bòø than2 mii2*
tooth NEG be.on.time have/there.is
i. 'There were not yet any teeth.' (possible reading)
ii. 'The teeth didn't yet have (it/them).' (possible reading)
iii. 'Teeth, (it/they) didn't yet have.' (actual reading in original context)

57.4 Expressive case functions: construal in event representation by marked construction

We have so far mostly been concerned with the disambiguating function of core case marking – that is, the function of linking arguments to roles and/or indices. We

now consider the expressive functions which case marking might perform, that is where special treatment of one or another argument serves to manipulate semantic distinctions in the construal of event structure (e.g. more versus less complete, aspectually), and participant involvement (e.g. more versus less involved, more versus less responsible). These kinds of distinction relate to transitivity in the sense of Hopper and Thompson (1980).

A key example in Lao is the 'handling-verb construction' (Enfield 2007), illustrated in (28b) as an alternative rendition of (28a).

(28) (a) *man2 thim5 pùm4*
3SG.B discard book
'He discards the book.' (Transitive construction)
(b) *man2 qaw3 pùm4 thim5*
3SG.B take book discard
'He takes the book (and) discards (it).' (Handling-verb construction)

Both (28a) and (28b) involve the same two arguments ('he', 'book'), and the same bivalent transitive verb ('discard'). The difference is that in (28b), the undergoer is expressed as a direct complement of an added verb of manipulation, with at least two effects. The first effect of this extra verb is to construe the event as bifurcated, breaking it down into two phases: 'coming into control of the undergoer' followed by 'despatch of the undergoer'. (In (28a), by contrast, the actor's prior control over the undergoer is presupposed.) The second effect is to change the relative order of the undergoer and the main content verb: in the marked construction, the undergoer is brought forward (if expressed; cf. (29) below), and the verb goes to a clause-final position. Much has been made of the possible long-term historical effects of such a construction taking hold in Sinitic languages such as Mandarin (e.g. the creation of object case marking, and associated change of word order from SVO to SOV; Li and Thompson 1981: 26, 463ff).

It has been said in the Sinitic context that the added element which hosts the undergoer (here the verb 'take') is equivalent to a case marker, explicitly marking the semantic role of the undergoer (e.g. theme). In Lao it cannot be regarded as a case marker, for at least two reasons. First, the element is not an affix or other bound or dependent morpheme type. The item *qaw3* 'take' is a regular verb with regular verb trappings. For instance, it may ellipse its arguments if they are contextually retrievable, thus appearing with no dependent material whatsoever, as in this recasting of (28b):

(29) *qaw3 thim5*
take discard
'(He) takes (it and) discards (it).'

Second, 'object marking' by means of the handling-verb construction is not obligatory. It is a marked alternative to a single-verb transitive construction, whether this

be an AVO structure as in (28a) above, or some version of it (with movement and/or ellipsis), as in the following:

(30) (a) *pùm4 man2 thim5*
book 3SG.B discard
'The book, he discards.'
(b) *thim5*
discard
'(He) discards (it).' (or: '(It) is discarded.')

If the function of the Lao handling-verb construction is at all comparable to that of case marking, it is an expressive function, not a disambiguating function.

The handling-verb construction represents one possibility in an isolating language such as Lao to achieve an equivalent of one type of case-marking function, that is by singling out an argument for some sort of special treatment, as a way of manipulating the understood construal of the event predicated, where the relevant parameters of meaning typically relate to some or other of the ensemble of transitivity features (Hopper and Thompson 1980), including 'definiteness' and 'control'.

57.5 Conclusion

The formal organization of predicate–argument relations in a radically isolating language illustrates that the disambiguating functions of core case marking need not be marked at all. In lieu of such case marking, or any other unequivocal form of argument–role marking (agreement marking, strict/unambiguous interpretation of word-order patterns), reference is well handled by the sheer pragmatics of context. The key source of information may be in the linguistic context (a hearer's constrained expectations about role and reference given selectional restrictions of predicates), or may be in the discourse/situational context (given the facts of particular discourse trajectories on particular occasions of language use). Grammarians of such languages have noted these problems, for example Thompson writing on Vietnamese: 'the familiar dichotomy of English verbs between those which "take objects" and those which do not is absent' (Thompson 1987: 220). Or as Gil puts it, writing on Riau Indonesian, languages of this kind are 'without distinct construction-specific semantic rules, compositional semantics relying instead on the association operator, which says that the meaning of a composite expression is associated with the meanings of its constituents in an underspecified fashion' (Gil 2005a: 1). Core grammatical relations are open to construal according to context. In actual language usage, rampant argument–role–reference ambiguity seldom poses communicative problems.

Like speakers of other languages, Lao speakers have grammatical resources for the optional expression of special construal of event–participant relations, similar to the kinds of function which might be performed by certain uses of case marking in other languages. To reverse the perspective, such expressive functions might not be central functions of case anyway. That is to say, an expressive case-marking alternation (e.g. Finnish partitive marking on an undergoer) might just as well be viewed as a functional equivalent to a constructional alternation in a language like Lao. Perhaps when case marking performs such expressive functions, it, too, is being appropriated, extended beyond its merely disambiguating prototype function to meet more expressive communicative goals.