Directional pre-verbal particles in Hakha Lai

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ABSTRACT
This paper investigates the function of pre-verbal particles in Hakha Lai. It describes how the five pairs of these morphemes show the "where" of the participants and the "how" of the actions involved, indicating the position, distance, and movement of the interlocutors. It also discusses the possible diachronic origins of these preverbal particles.

KEYWORDS
deitics (deixis), interlocutors, verbal stem alternation, diachronic linguistics, grammaticalization

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1 Introduction

Hakha Lai (henceforth: H. Lai, or Lai) is mainly spoken in Hakha and Thantlang areas, and their vicinities in Chin State, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma). It is also spoken in the adjacent areas of India and Bangladesh. There are about 100,000 Lai speakers. Lai is also used extensively as a second language by speakers of other Chin languages in Chin State, Myanmar.

The data in H. Lai are transcribed in both standard orthography as well as a phonemic orthography developed when the first author was a consultant for a two-semesters long field method class (Fall 1997 – Spring 1998) conducted by Prof. James A. Matisoff at UC Berkeley.

There are five pairs of pre-verbal particle in H. Lai. Table (1) introduces these particles with abbreviations, DIR (Direction), S (Speaker), L (Listener), and A (Angmang), the name of the main actor who is also the A (Agent) in all of the model sentences. Other abbreviations include $LV$ for Level, $DNW$ for Downward, and $UPW$ for Upward.

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<td>LV DIR (S &amp; L &amp; A), A moves towards P</td>
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<td>DNW DIR (S &amp; L with A), A moves towards P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. hun</td>
<td>UPW DIR (S &amp; L with A or P), A does not move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. hung</td>
<td>UPW DIR (S &amp; L with A or P), A moves towards P</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. H. Lai pre-verbal particles
This paper analyzes these deictic phenomena in terms of how the participants behave in relation to position, distance, and movement. An investigation of the diachronic origins and analysis of the other functions of these pre-verbal particles is also included in this paper.

2 Directional pre-verbal particles

Directional pre-verbal particles are morphemes which occur before main verbs. They are also considered a sub-class of verb since many of them still function as independent verbs. (1) is a basic sentence to which the directional markers can be added, and therefore serves as a model sentence in describing the functions of these deictics.

(1) Angmang nih vok a cheh
   /ʔâŋməŋ  niʔ  vok  ?a-tsheʔ/
   Angmang ERG pig 3SG.S-throw.II
   ‘Angmang stones a pig.’

The incident in (1) describes a generic scenario where Angmang stones a pig. It does not tell us the relative distance between Angmang and the pig nor the relative position of the two, that is, if Angmang is at a higher or lower level. This is where the role of pre-verbal particles comes into play. In the following sections, the use of each directional pre-verbal particle explains the “where” of the participants and the “how” of the actions involved.

2.1 hei and va

This pair of particles is used when the interlocutors are on relatively the same spatial level. As indicated in Figure 1, S and L must be on the A side. If A stones P from where he is, S will use sentence (2a), as illustrated by a long arrow, but if A moves towards where the P is and stones the pig, the speaker will use sentence (2b) as shown by a short arrow.

(2) a. Angmang nih vok a hei cheh
    /ʔâŋməŋ  niʔ  vok  ?a-hây-tsheʔ/
    Angmang ERG pig 3SG.S-Lv.DIR(S&L with A)-throw.II
    ‘Angmang stones a pig from afar.’

1 II represents Form II verb in Lai. VanBik (2002) provides a detailed description regarding the rule for the verbal alternation of Form I and Form II. Generally speaking, the test sentence for Form I is a matrix negative sentence (Angmang does not kill a pig) whereas Form II occurs in subordinate clauses (When Angmang does not kill a pig ....).
b. *Angmang nih vok a va cheh*
   /ʔâŋmâŋ niʔ vok ?a-va-tsheʔ/
   Angmang ERG pig 3SG.S-Lv.DIR(S&L with A)-throw.II

   ‘Angmang moves towards a pig and stones it.’

2.2 rak and ra

The function of the pair in 2.2 is the reverse of the pair in 2.1 in that S and L are on the P side. As indicated in Figure (2), these verbal particles *rak* and *ra* are used when the ground levels of the locations of the agent and the patient are equal, or at least the difference is so minimal that it can be disregarded. The use of *rak* (3a) is similar to *hei* (2a) in that A does the action to the pig from where he is standing. Similarly, the verbal particle *ra* (3b) functions like *va* (2b) where the A moves towards the P and stones it.

![Figure 2](image_url)

(3) a. *Angmang nih vok a rak cheh*
   /ʔâŋmâŋ niʔ vok ?a-rak-tsheʔ/
   Angmang ERG pig 3SG.S-Lv.DIR(S&L with P)-throw.II

   ‘Angmang stones a pig from afar.’

b. *Angmang nih vok a ra cheh*
   /ʔâŋmâŋ niʔ vok ?a-ra-tsheʔ/
   Angmang ERG pig 3SG.S-Lv.DIR(S&L with P)-throw.II

   ‘Angmang moves towards a pig (and us) and stones it.’

2.3 vun and vung

The pair *vun* and *vung* in 2.3 is used, as indicated in Figure (3), when S and L are with A somewhere in a higher place elevation-wise while P is down in a lower place. The particle *vun* is used when the A throws a stone downward at the P (4a) whereas the particle *vung* is used when A moves down and stones the P (4b).
2.4 run and rung

The function of the pair run and rung is the reverse of the pair vun and vung of section 2.3, in that run and rung are used when S and L are with P in a relatively lower place compared to the position of the agent A. As indicated in Figure (4), the action must be in a downward direction, with run being used where A stones P from afar (6a), but with rung where A moves towards the pig (P) and stones it (6b).
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(5) a. Angmang nih vok a run cheh
/?āmāŋ nīʔ vok ?a- rūn-tsheʔ/?
Angmang ERG pig 3SG.S-Dnw.DIR(S&L with P)-throw.II

‘Angmang stones a pig downward from afar.’

b. Angmang nih vok a rung cheh
/?āmāŋ nīʔ vok ?a-rūn-æng-tsheʔ/?
Angmang ERG pig 3SG.S-Dnw.DIR(S&L with P)-throw.II

‘Angmang moves down towards a pig (in our direction) and stones it.’

2.5. hun and hung

In using this last pair hun and hung, as indicated in Figure (5), the location of the P must be higher or assumed to be higher, than where A is. The action also needs to be in an upward direction, with hun if A stones the pig from afar (6a) but with hung if the A moves towards the P and stones it (6b). With these particles hun and hung, the interlocutors S and L are not assumed to be at one particular side. They could be either higher (with the P) or lower (with the A).
3.1 hei and va

The pre-verbal particle hei is a bound morpheme across all Lai dialects and does not seem to have any cognates beyond the Lai group. This particle hei sometimes accompanies a wish or dream. As illustrated in (7), with the presence of hei, this possibility seems less likely.

(7) zaban ka mang ah khoabawi ka hei si
/za-hân ka-mâŋ-ʔaʔ khoûa-bûoy ka-hêy-sîi/
yesterday 1SG.POS-dream-LOC village-chief 1SG.S-DIR-COP

‘I was a chief in my dream last night.’
The pre-verbal particle \textit{va} is still used as an independent verb in many Lai dialects (e.g. Khualsim, Mi-E, Khuahlun, Zokhua). However, it has lost its independent status among many speakers of the cosmopolitan town of Hakha, and this particle \textit{va} sometimes accompanies an exclamatory utterance, as in (8), perhaps as an emphatic marker.

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Aw! a va nuam ee!}  
\textit{/oo! ?a-va-nūam ?ēe!/}  
\text{Excl! 3SG.S-DIR-be pleasant.I Excl!}  
\text{‘Oh my God! It's so pleasant!’}  
\end{enumerate}

It appears that the particle \textit{va} is reconstructible at the level of Proto Central Chin as PCC $^*\text{va} \text{ ‘Directional Pre-verbal Particle for ‘going’ generally on level ground’}$. According to Lorrain (1898: 220), Mizo has a similar particle \textit{va} which is a “verbal prefix signifying ‘going’ generally on level ground, or from one place to another of equal elevation.” Perhaps, this verb \textit{va ‘go’} is cognate to Written Burmese \textit{swa ‘go’}, both descended from Proto-Tibeto-Burma (PTB) $^*\text{s-wa}$ (Matisoff 2003: 173).

\subsection{3.2 \textit{rak} and \textit{ra}}

The pre-verbal morpheme \textit{ra} is still used as a Form-I independent verb with \textit{rat} as Form-II with the meaning ‘come’. Its counterpart \textit{rak} is a bound morpheme, and both morphemes do not seem to have any cognates among other Chin languages. One other function of the particle \textit{rak} is that it implies the absence of the speaker when the verbal action is supposed to be carried out, as exemplified in (9).

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Nan rak i daw lai}  
\textit{/nān-rak-i-dōo láay/}  
\text{3PL.S-DIR-RFL-love.I FUT}  
\text{‘You will love one another.’}  
\text{Implication: ‘after I am gone.’}  
\end{enumerate}

\subsection{3.3 \textit{vun} and \textit{vung}}

The pair \textit{vun} and \textit{vung} are still independent verbs with the meaning ‘go down’, \textit{vung} as Form-I and \textit{vun} as Form-II, as shown in (10a) and (10b).

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{kuhabawipa khuahlun ab a vung}  
\textit{/khuā-bōy-pāa khu-ā-hlūn ?ə? ?a-vūŋ/}  
\text{village-chief-male village-old LOC 3SG.S-go down.I}  
\text{‘The chief goes down to the old village.’}  
\text{‘The chief is in a higher place with the speaker, and goes down towards the village’}  
\end{enumerate}
b. khuabawipa khuablun a vun blan ab rawl ei hna usih
/khúa-bóoy-pāa khua-hlūn ?a-vūn hlān-a?
village-chief-male village-old 3SG.S-go down.II before-LOC
rōol ?āy hūāa ?usīʔ/
food eat.I PLU HORT

‘Lets eat before the chief goes down to the old village.’

These independent verbs *vun* and *vung* as well as their function as preverbal particles are found in Zahao (aka Falam) (Osbourne 1975: 169-170).

### 3.4 *bun* and *bung*

Similar to the pair *vun* and *vung* of section 3.3, the pair *bun* and *bung* are still independent verbs with the meaning ‘go up’, *bung* as Form-I and *bun* as Form-II, as shown in (11a,b).

(11) a. khuabawipa khuablun ab a bun
/khúa-bóoy-pāa khua-hlūn ?aʔ ?a-hūŋ/
village-chief-male village-old LOC 3SG.S-go up.I

‘The chief goes up to the old village.’

b. khuablun i a bun tikab a bawile nih an don
/khúa-hlūn ?iiʔ ?a-hūŋ tikʔaʔ/
village-old LOC 3SG.S-go up.II when

?a-hōoy-lēe niʔ ?ān-dōn/
3SG.POS-friend.PLU ERG 3PL.S-meet.II

‘When he goes up to the old village, his friends welcome him.’

The Form-I verb *bung* ‘come’ is reconstructed as Proto-Kuki-Chin (PKC) *huŋ* (VanBik 2009: 191 # [706]).

### 3.5 *run* and *rung*

Similar to the pair *vun* and *vung* of section 3.3 and the pair *bun* and *bung* of section 3.4, the pre-verbal pair *run* and *rung* are still independent verbs, with the meaning ‘go down’, as illustrated in (12a,b). Note that *rung* is Form-I and *run* is Form-II.

(12) a. khuabawipa khuablun ab a run
/khúa-bóoy-pāa khua-hlūun ?aʔ ?a-rūŋ/
village-chief-male village-old LOC 3SG.S-go down.I

‘The chief goes down to the old village.’
b.  
\[ \text{kbua} \text{hlun i a run tik ahawile nih an don} \]
\[ /\text{khua-hlu} \text{n } ?\text{	extperiodcentered i a-r\textperiodcentered n} \text{ tik?a?} \]
\[ \text{village-old LOC 3SG.S-go down.II when} \]
\[ ?\text{	extperiodcentered a-h\textperiodcentered ooy-\textperiodcentered l\textperiodcentered e} \text{ ni? ?\text{\textperiodcentered an-d\textperiodcentered n}}/ \]
\[ 3SG.\text{POS-friend.PLU ERG 3PL.S-(3SG.O)-meet.II} \]

‘When he goes down to the old village, his friends welcome him.’

Interestingly, the pre-verbal particle \textit{run} has a similar and interchangeable function with the pre-verbal particle \textit{rak} (cf. (9)), that is, the use of the pre-verbal particle \textit{run} implies the absence of the speaker when the verbal action is supposed to be carried out, as shown in (13).

(13)  
\[ \text{Nan run i daw lai} \]
\[ /\text{n\textperiodcentered an-r\textperiodcentered n}\text{-i-d\textperiodcentered o} \text{ l\textperiodcentered ay}/ \]
\[ 3PL.S-\text{DIR-RFL-love.I FUT} \]

‘You will love one another.’

Implication: “after I am gone.”

4 Conclusion

In the above discussion, we hope to have shown that while the functions of these particles are different, there is similarity among them in terms of how the interlocutors behave in relation to position, distance, and movement.

The preverbal particles in Lai displayed various stages of grammaticalization: \textit{hei} and \textit{rak} are fully grammaticalized while \textit{va} appears to be in transition towards a bound morpheme in cosmopolitan Hakha, and the rest still function as preverbal particles in addition to being independent verbs. Given their deictic nature, it would not be surprising if these particles function differently even among the Lai dialects. These particles also show a propensity towards extension into non-spatial domains, including time, modality and emphatic discourse markers. In any event, these directional verbal particles seem useful for the Lai people since their habitat is mostly hilly and mountainous. The misuse or the absence of these particles could cause misunderstanding in the discourse.

ABBREVIATIONS

| 1 | First Person | ERG | Ergative |
| 2 | Second Person | FUT | Future |
| 3 | Third Person | HORT | Hortative |
| I, II | Verb Form I and II | LV | Level |
| A | Agent | LOC | Locative |
| COP | Copula | O | Object |
| DIR | Directional | PKC | Proto-Kuki-Chin |
| DNW | Downward | PL | Plural |
REFERENCES


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