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 coor-
dination, 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 hnub 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 in-
stances of a verb are simply strung together. NPs are also of-
ten 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   hnub
    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 txiag* '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   Isduscis (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 Isduscis (Indochinese)* [sic]
thiab Asmeslivkas 'who know Indochinese and American cus-
toms' has a relative sense and is translated into English as
a relative clause even though *uas* is not present. The sec-
ond 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 se-
quence 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 prefer-
ring 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 rel-
ativized, 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 infor-
mation 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 nonspecific (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 apartment rather than a particular type is being referred to and because the context highlights this in that a special appointment 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 meaning 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

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Abbreviations

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

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