

**NOTES ON LAI CHIN PERSONAL PRONOUNS AND OVERT CASE
MARKING**

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Evidence is presented that the morphology of Lai Chin personal pronouns overtly and explicitly instantiates the proposition that personal pronouns in at least many languages are essentially demonstratives as Postal long ago argued with regard to English (1970). In the Lai Chin instance, furthermore, the (pro-)nominal element is shown to be an element, sometimes overt, sometimes empty, amounting semantically to arbitrary, non-specific *pro*. This leads in turn to some interesting results about the treatment of the so-called case markers in this (split-)ergative language.

I. We begin with the observation that Lai Chin seems, at least at first glance, an especially apt case in support of Postal's 1970 paper on English pronouns (now at least tentatively accepted by Chomsky 1995). That is, Lai pronouns seem to be morphological composites, in which the second element gives evidence of being nominal, whilst (certainly logico-semantically/indexically) the first is demonstrative — it certainly 'points', i.e., is a choice function on a set of possible persons). Thus we have (where syllable final *-h* serves to indicate a glottal stop)

	<u>singular</u>	<u>plural</u>
(1)	<i>kei+mah</i> I	<i>kan+mah</i> we
(2)	<i>nang+mah</i> you	<i>nan+mah</i> you
(3)	<i>a+mah</i> he/she/it	<i>an+mah</i> they

in which (cf. Lehman 1978) *mah* is clearly a nominal element roughly glossed in English as 'one'. This is further seen in the fact that *mah* alone can be used to express a third person singular pronominal reference (and marginally any singular person):

- (4) *mah fak a-si*
'he' braggart is
He is a braggart (marginally, 'one is/I am ...')

- (5) *mah le mah i kalh hlal uh*
 one & one refl cross do not you-pl.(obj.)
 Do not stumble over one another!

where 'one' (cf. Chomsky 1995:41) serves to express the overt equivalent of PRO(arb), namely, the arbitrary 'ith' or 'jth' member of a set of persons (Lehman 1985a, 1986).

Now, in this connection it is notable that *mah* can be replaced (somewhat offhandedly, by being deleted altogether — this option is more usual and acceptable in Mizo/Lushai) by the element *nih*, where the latter element marks the referent as in some sense focally contrastive (cf. Lehman 1973, on the force of the comparable Burmese element *ka. ၵ*). Thus,

- (6) *kanmah cu Laimi kan-si*
 we 'abs' Lai 2pl be
 We are Lai Chin people

- (7) *kannih cu Laimi kan-si*
 ditto

where the first is a plain statement of fact, whilst (7) contrasts being Chin (which 'we' are) with being, say 'vai' (Burmese or Indian), which *others* are. In a similar vein, we can consider

- (8) *kannih cu kan-kal lai*
 we go fut.
 We shall go [no matter who else may go/even though you do not]

- (9) *kanmah kan-kal lai*
 We are going to go [simple statement of a fact]

This is to say that *nih* replaces *mah* when the selection of a personal referent given by the first pronominal element is at least implicitly contrastively compared with a different selection. I shall deal later on with the absence of the post nominal element *cu* in (9). It is instructive to look at an additional example, an example more useful still because it concerns a non-subject DP:

- (10) *anmah (*nih) bantuk si kan-duh*
 they like be we want
 We would like to be like them.

We are, after all, already comparing (*bantuk*) ourselves with 'them', so that any contrast added by *nih* would be either meaningless or confusing. Marginally at least, we can, however get

- (11) *annih bantuk si kan-duh*
 We would like to be like **them** [rather than like those others].

Similarly, no doubt, possessive pronouns (see Van Bik 1986:320) seem ordinarily to require the use of forms in *-mah* and not in *-nih*:. e.g.,

- (13) *keimah ta/*keinih ta*
 mine

- (14) *kan tuh-mhui*
my hoe

And yet, when a contrast is entailed, forms in *-nih* are used, as in

- (15) *annih inn cu a-ngan, sihmanhselaw kannih inn / kannih ta cu*
their house Abs. it-big, however our house/ours Abs
a-hme
it-small
Their house is big but our house/ours is small.

It may be wondered whether this element *nih* is the same as the element *nih* used to mark ergative Case (see now Lehman 1996 SEALS VI for the question whether this is inherently a Case Marker or not). Etymologically it may well be, but synchronically the two are separate, as (12) shows.

- (16) *kannah nih cun kan-duh lo*
we erg. thus 1pl want neg.
We do not like it that way. [whatever you or others may like]²

2. Let me now take up the question why the 'Case marker' (actually a post-demonstrative deictic element, arguably specifier of DP — Lehman 1996) *cu* can be used or not used in different contexts. In particular, why is it necessary to omit it in (9), above, but perfectly fine, even necessary, in (6)? The answer seems to lie in the neighborhood, at least, of the following observations. (6) is an equational-copular sentence. As such it implicates an inherent contrastiveness: one cannot say that anyone or anything is a member of any one lexico-semantic category without implicitly invoking other categories by contrast. To categorize one thing contrasts with the categorization of different kinds of things or persons — as a matter of basic DEFINITION. (9) is quite different in just this regard. The element *cu* then is obviously compatible with the contrastive force of *nih* (as in (8), though not with the non-contrastive force of (8), whilst this fails just in case the contrast is inherent to the predication itself, (cf. (6) as against (7)). Similarly, in the case of adjectives of quality,

- (18) *amah a-ṭha*
he 1sg. good
He is good

- (19) *amah cu a-ṭha*
He is good [which those others are certainly not]

Assume then the aforementioned treatment of the so-called Case-markers, *cu* and *nih* as really (post nominal) specifiers of DP. To the extent that they are indeed deictic elements in this sense, *cu* in particular 'points' to an entity at least implicitly selected earlier on discourse context, reinforcing the sense of a particular selection as against others under the same choice function (demonstrative proper) over the same set or Proper Class. In the case of equational sentences and, to some extent at least adjectives of quality, contrast is more or less implicit, so that *cu* is compatible whether the pronoun ends with *mah* or with *nih*. The ergative use of *nih* presents more obscure problems. It is also contrastively deictic in

some sense, but in this usage the force seems to be to express the contrast between subject and object inherent in the Disjoint Reference Rule (DJR) and underlying the Ergative-Absolutive Case distinction in such languages. One is forcefully reminded, once again, of Burmese *ka*. (က), which serves to mark subjects contrastively with possible objects and also marks any non-subject and non-object nominal as focally contrastive apart from the DJR (Lehman 1973), and which clearly occupies the same slot as the post-demonstrative (spec of DP), as can easily be seen in literary form, where it commutes, more or less, with *thi* (သည်), itself overtly the same morphological element as the proximal literary proximal demonstrative (cf. Lehman 1985b) :

- (20) *di lu ha* / ဒီလူ ဟာ။
this person [-*ha*, a neutral, non-contrastive, non-focal specifier of DP,
often glossed otherwise as 'one' or even 'thing']
- (21) *di lu ka*. / ဒီလူ က။
this person [subject]
- (22) *thi lu thil* သည်လူ သည်။
this person [literary form — especially as a subject]

One obviously compares these to Lai Chin

- (23) *cu mipa cu*
such person 'abs.'
- (24) *cu mipa nih*
such person 'erg.'

3. One must therefore draw the conclusion that (a) Lai Chin pronouns have as their second element a nominal-referring element, which can be either contrastive with other elements (*nih*) or more neutral (*mah*), and (b) the specifier of a DP more generally, i.e., the so-called post-nominal demonstrative element, is always in some sense or other also contrastive: marking, in the case of *cu*, either an implicit contrast inherent in equational categorization or adjectival quality or an imposed contrast compatible with pronominal second-element *nih* but not with *mah*; in the case of the ergative use of *nih* in the specifier of DP, the contrast between subject and object is inherent under the DJR.

However, there is some evidence that seems to run counter to this proposal. The element *mah* (but never *nih*) can also occur in what appears to be the position of the demonstrative, head of DP. Thus,

- (25) *mah kep hi*
this button spec [prox]

and so on — examples of this usage abound in the exercises in Hays-Neave 1948. In the face of this evidence, one may suppose that the personal pronouns, however morphologically composite they obviously are, are entirely demonstrative. The absence of specific person elements (*kei*, *nang*, etc.) then simply leaves the pronoun non-specific, and, it is assumed, the nominal element is an EC, something on the order of **pro**.

The alternative hypothesis remains distinctly possible: that (25) is more adequately represented as meaning something like 'one's button', where the proximal reading is an implicature from the fact that the speaker is understood as the referent of 'one' — as in French, where *on* not infrequently is interpreted with a first person, singular referent, by pragmatic implicature, even though it actually means 'one' ('one', as **pro**_{arb}, ranging disjointly over all persons and numbers). On that view, it is the unspecified *demonstrative* element in (25) that is empty in such demonstrative 'adjectives'. This solution patterns with the fact (cf. (13) - (15)) that specified possessive 'adjectives' properly include *-mah* (or *-nih*).

Nothing much hangs on which of the two hypotheses one is forced to choose, and in fact the problem is rather general, if one considers, for instance, the fact that in English and many other languages demonstratives often surface as 'demonstrative pronouns', as in

(26) This is my theory.

NOTES

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² It is an interesting question well beyond the scope of the present note why we seem unable to have **keinih* accepted, whilst the first person plural contrast (12) is fine.

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