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Couplets and Duplications in Mal

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Mal is a small, Mon-Khmer hilltribe language spoken in Pua and Chiang Klang Districts of Nan Province in northern Thailand. Along with Prai it is one of the two major dialects of the Tin language. Another term for these dialects and the people who speak them is Lua. This latter term is gaining in popularity as a tribal ethnonym among the people themselves and Thai government officials (Filbeck 1987).

I first began learning and collecting data on the Mal language in 1962. An early method used was recording (on a reel tape recorder) oral texts, e.g. life histories, business transactions, customs (birth, marriage, death, etc.) and stories. In recording these texts I made two observations. One, there was a reluctance on the part of many to make a recording of a text; they would beg off saying they could not tell stories as they should be told in Mal. I would then be told whom to interview if I wanted a story recorded in the Mal language. Second, in listening and later transcribing the texts I had recorded, I noticed a great number of what I soon came to call couplets and duplications.

It was easy to see that these two observations were related. But more on this below.

Definitions

The first phenomenon that came to my attention when I began transcribing oral texts was the presence of couplets, i.e. two words with exactly the same meaning except for their respective position of occurrence in relation to each other. Following is a short list of couplets, arranged in two columns, commonly found in Mal texts.

1)	Word 1	Word 2	Gloss
	phyam	mpyo?	'person'
	b?	læm	'good'
	niim	pii	'heart (emotion)'
	sɔy	nthuy	'spirit, demon'
	ŋɔn	ŋkhul	'angry'
	ay	t?	'not'
	so?	khay	'would like'
	luac	æc	'already'

The only difference between each word in column one and its couplet in column two, as was explained to me by native speakers of Mal, is that the word in the first column is spoken first and the parallel word in the second column is spoken second. It is wrong to switch them. For example, the combination */læm lɔ?/ is ungrammatical.

Some words in column two, if they occur at all, must occur in association with its couplet of column one. For example, /mpyo?/ never occurs by itself without /phyam/ being said first in the same sentence. Other words in column two, however, may occur independently of their couplets in column one. Indeed, /əc/ is really the preferred word for the final perfective “already” in a Mal sentence, occurring much more often than /luac/. On the other hand, should both be spoken they must be spoken in their prescribed order of /luac əc/.

Of interest here is that the Mal themselves have their own terms for this phenomenon. The words in column one are called

- 2) ηεεη ntəl
 word beginning “The first word...”

While the words of column two are called

- 3) ηεεη lɔc
 word end “The last word....”

I have listened to men sit around the camp fire at night discussing what words are /ηεεη ntəl/ and what words are /ηεεη lɔc/, which words might fit in either category, plus how many combinations they could think of or had heard. I have not heard women use many couplets, nor was I able to get any woman to volunteer to record a story in the Mal language.

After this initial observation I noticed that in addition to couplets, whole structures—noun phrases, verb phrases, clauses, etc.—were *duplicated*. Moreover, the first structure contained a /ηεεη ntəl/, a word from column one above, while the second structure contained its /ηεεη lɔc/, its couplet from column two. For example,

-) nam kayh phyam lɔ? phyam læm
 he be person good person good
 He is a perfect person.

The words /phyam lɔ?/ are a phrase which functions as a predicate adjective describing /nam/ which is the subject of the sentence. The next two words, /phyam læm/, are structurally a duplication of the preceding phrase and are also a predicated adjective describing the subject, i.e. as a phrase they function as a couplet.

In addition to phrases of noun-plus-adjective, other combinations are also possible.

5a) transitive verb plus object noun

εεm sεε εεm sa?
 make rice-field make forest
 to make rice fields in the forest

b) intransitive verb plus subject noun

cak khuan cak naay
 go younger sibling go older sibling
 [they] went both older and younger siblings

c) verb plus verb

le? mət le? phat
 seek massage seek squeeze
 seek [someone] to massage and give a rub down

d) adjective plus noun

sək sen sək lam
 big stem big stalk
 to cause both stems and stalks to be big

e) adjective plus verb

pəɔ ɔk pəɔ pəŋ
 enough drink enough eat
 to have enough to eat and drink

Indeed, grammatical structures of great complexity in the Mal language can be duplicated as long as a /ŋεεŋ ntəl/ occurs in the initial structure and a /ŋεεŋ lɔɔc/ occurs in its duplication.

In the combinations above, the first word of each pair remains constant and the second words, the /ŋεεŋ ntəl/ and /ŋεεŋ lɔɔc/ respectively, are different but yet similar in meaning to each other. There are several kinds of similarity in meaning and Mal makes use of all of them. For example, the two words may be synonymous as in /lɔ? læm/ “good” in (4) above, or they may be members of the same semantic domain as /khuan naay/ “younger, older sibling” in (5b), or components of a semantic hierarchy as in (a) where /sεε/ “rice field” is a part of the larger /sa?/ “forest”. A rice field is a small area that is cleared by the slash-and-burn method from out of the larger forest that forms the agricultural environment of the Mal people.

Another kind of similarity in meaning is that of categorization (Lakoff 1987). Humans have the capability to structure thinking by creating cognitive categories out of personal experiences and interaction with the cultural and material environment. It is an ability to organize and manage information. As such, categories are agendas for making one’s way through life. The couplet /...ɔk ...pəŋ/ “drink, eat” of (5e) above, while different activities, are members of a

category which we may call MEAL. This is because of the roles that drinking and eating play during mealtime among the Mal. During a meal, which usually consists of glutinous rice and a side dish, water is not drunk. But when one has eaten, a cup or glass of water is drunk signaling that the person has finished the meal. A glass of water also has the practical benefit of making one feel full after eating glutinous rice.

The words used above to illustrate couplets, the /ŋɛŋ ntəl/ and /ŋɛŋ lɔɔc/, with one exception have been native Mal words. Borrowed words and phrases from Thai are used in both positions of beginning or ending word of a couplet or duplication. Such words may be borrowings from ancient Thai (which are now fully assimilated into the Mal language), from the local Northern Thai dialect, or from Standard Thai. The combination may be Mal- Thai as in:¹

6) soʔ puay^v *
 sick sick
 “To be ill and sick.”

or it may be Thai-Mal as in

7) nhum^v klam^v
 teen-ager teen-ager
 “[To be a male] adolescent and teen-ager.”

The purpose of this paper is to provide a linguistic description of couplets and duplications of Mal, more precisely to show where and how couplets and duplications may fit in within a description of the Mal language. To accomplish this task I shall draw upon functionalist approaches to grammatical description. That is, I believe that grammatical function should be described, along with form or structure, as part and parcel of the grammatical system of a language. In this respect, however, because of the necessary brevity of this paper, only a brief overview of the functions of couplets and duplications shall be given first. Next will come an overview of Mal syntactic structure. Finally there will be a discussion of examples showing how both function and structure intersect in describing Mal.

By this order of presentation, however, I make no particular claim as to which, form or function, should theoretically have the priority in a description. That is, if form has priority, then function is defined in terms of and as derived from form. But if function has priority, then form is described as a grammaticalization of function. In language, more precisely linguistic structure, there is evidence for the independence of both; each one forms a system in its own right. On the other hand, there is evidence that one is systemically related to the other in the production of language. In this respect, the task in description is not the establishment of priority but the systemically relating of one with the other, of form with function and vice versa.

¹ The dialect of Mal which is described in this paper has a rising tone which stands in contrast to the various pitch levels and glides of Mal intonational patterns (Filbeck 1972). A raised “v” at the end of a word signals that the word is to be spoken with a rising tone.

But since we live in a world of time and space and do our scholarly writing in a linear fashion from beginning to end, we must have a starting point. Therefore, in the conundrum of where we should begin, a particular starting point is one of personal preference. The important thing is the end point: in this case, a grammar where form and function are integrated and described in tandem.

The use of function, indeed its very definition, in grammar derives its rationale from interpersonal communication by means of language. People communicate with each other, and they do it by means of linguistic structure. That is, the linguistic structures we observe over and over in communication are motivated. They are functional or meaningful. By means of its function structure carries information in addition to the content of words found in the structure. This additional information must be a part of a linguistic description of a language.

A Functional Overview

Couplets and duplications function on two levels in Mal communication. The first level we may term external and the second internal.

On the external level couplets and duplications function as sociolinguistic markers for what is considered highly valued in speech in certain circumstances. As was mentioned at the outset, a Mal person who has the capability to liberally sprinkle couplets and duplications throughout a story is considered socially valued as a good story teller. Consequently a story that contains numerous couplets and duplications is considered a good story. In either case, listening to a good story teller or hearing a good story, is /*lɔʔ muan^v*/ “fun”. For example, of the twenty-seven stories I recorded, eleven make extensive use of couplets and duplications, while five have only a few instances. Nine stories have no instances of couplets and duplications.

Consequently, speech that does not contain couplets and duplications, or only a few instances of them and of common variety, is considered ordinary speech. It is the style of speech that is used in everyday conversation to achieve basic communicative goals and purposes.

My impression from association with the Mal is that those in Mal society who have the capability to freely use couplets and duplications in speech, and hence are considered good story tellers, are few in number. Most people feel they do not have the capability to use couplets and duplications in sufficient detail and scope to tell stories. Or, as it was in my case above, to speak into a microphone and record a story or narrative describing some aspect of life.

On the other hand, extensive use of couplets and duplications do crop up in other areas of interpersonal communication. On one occasion a Mal man, who was telling me about his troubles in life, suddenly started using couplets and duplications to describe his woes (Filbeck 1976). He had problems because his wife had had six children who all died either at birth or a few days or weeks afterwards. In his case, because of his wife’s high social standing, divorce to marry someone else was out of the question. And since polygamy is a cultural taboo in Mal society, he could not take a younger minor wife to have children by her.

However, the need for a child to take care of him in old age overrode the taboo and he was encouraged to take a minor wife. His first wife agreed to the arrangement. But after a few weeks the first wife became jealous and made life miserable for the husband and the minor wife. The only decision left for the husband was to send the minor wife back to her parents. As he talked and became more agitated in describing these unfortunate developments, he broke over into using couplets and duplications.²

Couplets and duplications are also used in the prayers of Mal traditional religion. In fact, the recordings that contain the most instances of couplets and duplications are stories about traditional beliefs, ceremonies and customs. Christians similarly use couplets and duplications in prayer as well.

On the internal level couplets and duplications function as another means of lexicalization in the Mal language. That is, a couplet or duplication lexicalizes cognitive structure and functions as a lexical item in the language. The upshot of this function is that the meaning of a couplet or duplication is not to be described in terms of decomposition alone. If only this procedure is done, crucial information is lost, for the composite (a two-word couplet or a duplication of a whole syntactic structure) adds up to something more than what the individual words suggest.

For example, in the Mal language there are few words with broad meanings that function to classify or include a wide number of concepts, things or events into general categories. The vast majority of nouns refer to concrete and specific items in Mal material and nonmaterial culture, and most verbs refer to specific events and processes of living one's life within the environment where the Mal live. This is not to say, however, that there is no way of making and uttering statements that are general in meaning and include more than just specific items, events or processes. For this is where couplets and duplications come into play in the Mal language. When a concept of general meaning—one that is complete and includes everything from A to Z about a subject—needs to be verbalized, a couplet or duplication is used.

There is no better example of this than in the area of food. The daily staple of the Mal is glutinous rice which is eaten with a side dish of cooked vegetables, chilli peppers, fish or game meat from the forest, and on festive occasions, beef, chicken and pork. Of interest here is that there is no general word for food, i.e. a word that includes everything in one word that humans eat in Mal culture. There is only vocabulary that refers to specific items that are eaten.

There is even no general word for 'rice' (Filbeck 1973). Rather, there are five words with each word specifying a particular state in the process of preparing rice for human consumption.

² There is a happy ending to the story. Soon after this sad experience the man's first wife gave birth to a daughter who lived and grew up to take care of her parents.

- 8) /ŋuaʔ/ “whole grain rice (which is planted, harvested and fed to animals)”
 /mpaa/ “mixture of milled rice, husk and unhusked rice after it is pounded in a rice mortar”
 /ŋkhəʔ/ “milled rice separated from husk”
 /ŋkhuʔ/ “unhusked rice found in /ŋkhəʔ/ above and which is picked out and thrown back into the rice bin at which time it becomes /ŋuaʔ/ again”
 /saa/ “steamed, glutinous rice for human consumption”

However, when RICE as a general concept is required, the couplet /ŋuaʔ saa/ may be said.

The situation is only a little better for items eaten with rice. There is one word, /sul/, that refers to whatever is eaten with rice whether it is one dish or several as in a feast. It does not include rice. On the other hand, there is a compound, /maal pəŋ/ “essence to-eat”, that may be translated as food and which would include rice as well. But the compound refers not primarily to food in general but to basically having something to eat.

Yet there are couplets and duplications that refer to food in general. For example, the couplet /...ɔk ...pəŋ/ “drink...eat” (5e) refers to a meal, a word with a general meaning that is lacking in the Mal language. The duplication is another example.

- 9) lɛʔ mphaa lɛʔ sɛɛm
 seek to- feed (humans) seek to- feed (non-humans)
 to look for food to eat

The word /mphaa/ is used almost exclusively for feeding food to humans while /sɛɛm/ is used for feeding animals. When combined with the word /lɛʔ/ “to seek, look for”, they mean food. The duplication is inclusive of anything and everything that is edible.

A construction that is the result of a syntactic duplication may be duplicated again.

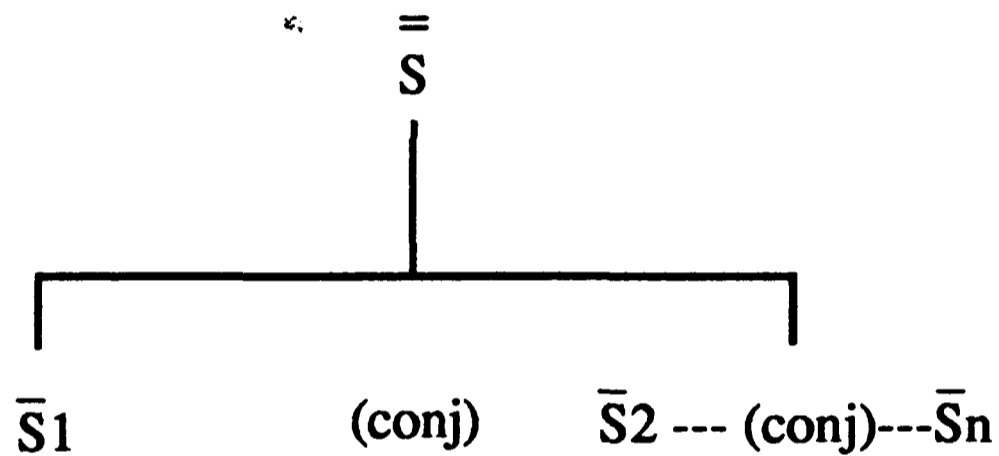
- 10) ah cak kuu ləŋ kuu naŋ kuu kiaŋ kuu puah
 they go every person every body every house every fireplace
 Each and every person even every house and abode went.

The words /kuu ləŋ kuu naŋ/ is a duplication. The next four words, /kuu kiaŋ kuu puah/, in this instance are a “duplication of a duplication”. A duplication of this type is rare and does not add any more information to the total construction than what has already been given. The addition serves mainly as a rhetorical device to emphasize and reinforce the inclusive meaning already contained in the original duplication.

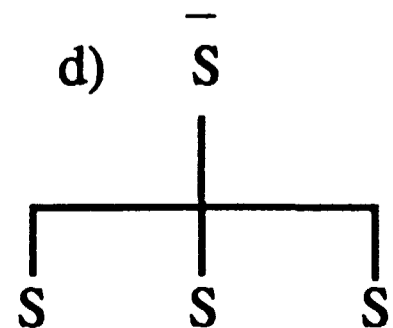
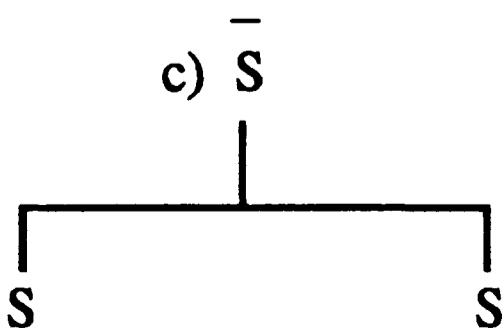
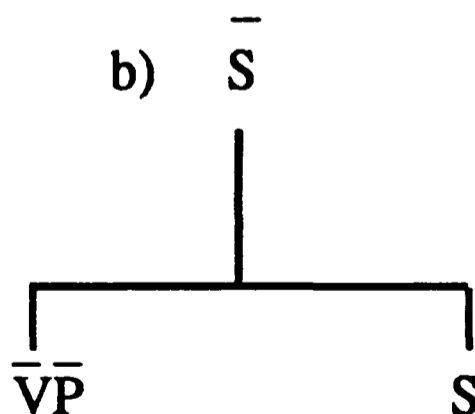
A Syntactic Overview

Following are six tree structures that give an overview of Mal syntax. The symbols and abbreviations follow the definitions traditionally given in linguistic descriptions. The trees represent the basic phrase structures available in Mal and as such form schemata for the grammaticalization and interpretation of language (Lakoff 1987). In the production and understanding of language, a basic cognitive mechanism used by speakers and listeners is the human capability to choose and switch among schemata in order to achieve various goals in communication.

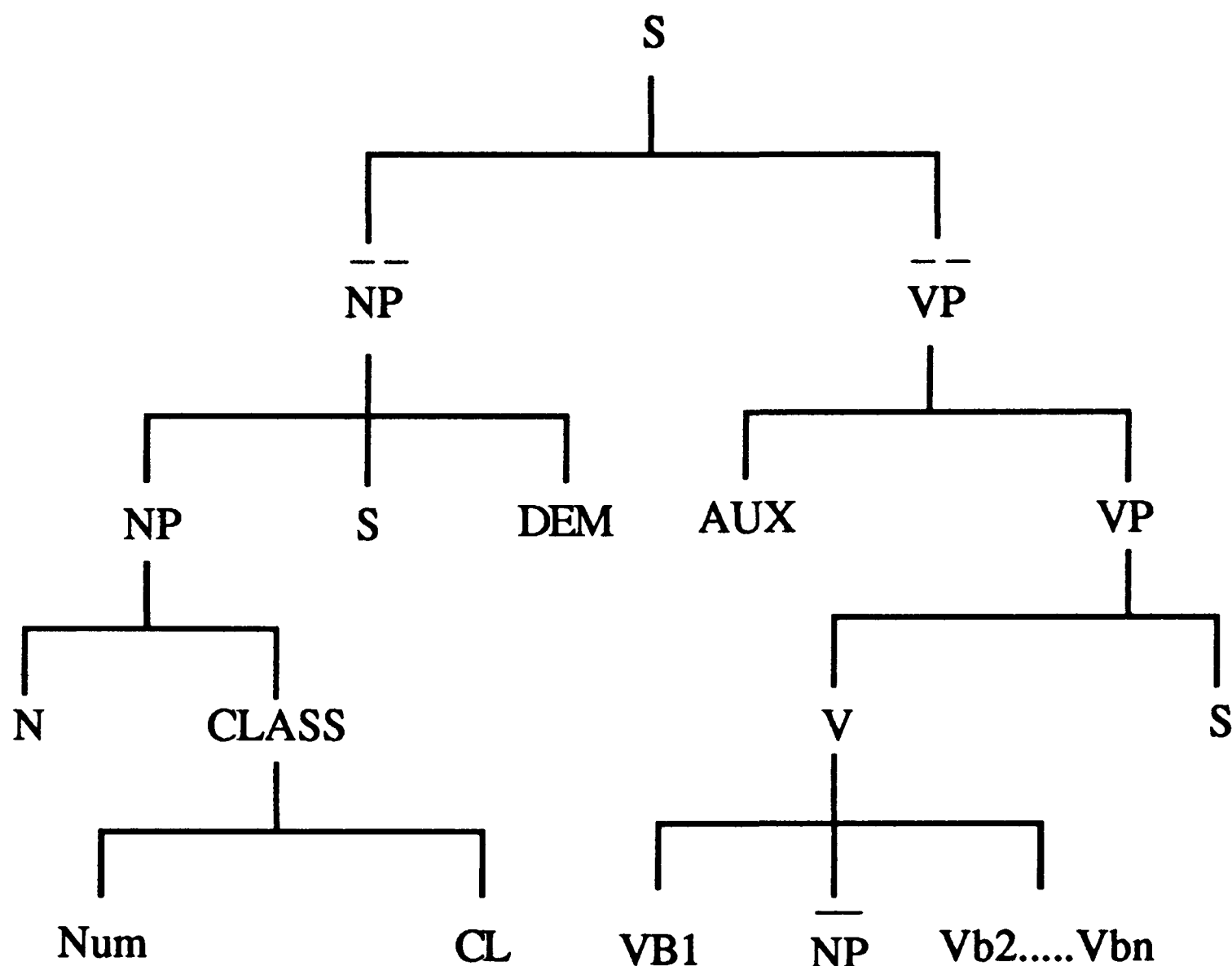
11)



12)



13)



The reason for displaying these structures is to establish the syntactic environment, i.e. the parameters or boundaries, wherein couplets and duplications occur and do not occur in a syntactic description of Mal. Not only is it necessary to know what couplets and duplications are syntactically, it is equally important to know what they are not. This is because different syntactic structures are paired with different functions to transmit information. It is this knowledge of how structure lines up with function that enables us to communicate in the way we intend. It also allows us to describe the structure of language in a way that will better meet the test of how language is used in life.

To display this distinction in a linguistic description we must describe not only the phrase structures involved but also their functions. For example, the five structures of (11-12d) transmit the following functions or pieces of information in communication.

- (11) is used for *conjunction*, which in Mal is often accomplished by simple juxtaposition of clauses in serial fashion;
- (12a) is used for a *declarative* statement;
- (12b) is used for pre-clausal existential, causative and some imperative constructions;
- (12c) is used for topic-comment;
- (12d) is used for alternation, as in “whether to go or not, I do not know”.

Functionally, content may be grammaticalized, depending on the intention of the speaker, as a statement, a conjunction of statements, an existential, a topic with an accompanying comment, etc. From this perspective a structure allows not only the grammaticalization of content but also an interpretation of the grammaticalization according to the functional information communicated by the structure itself. Other aspects, such as question, imperative/obligation, emphasis and temporals, are grammaticalized by adding the appropriate words to the above structures.

The tree structure (13), on the other hand, is an overview of the internal structure of a clause in Mal. This is the syntactic environment—the syntactic parameter—where couplets and duplications occur. In theory any category of any depth or detail within this environment may be duplicated. It is in this environment where the functions of couplets and duplications, as described in the previous section, are transmitted. They are not transmitted by the tree structures of (12a-d). In other words, the structures of (12a-d) and (13) stand in complementary relationship to each other with respect to the functions that are transmitted in communication.

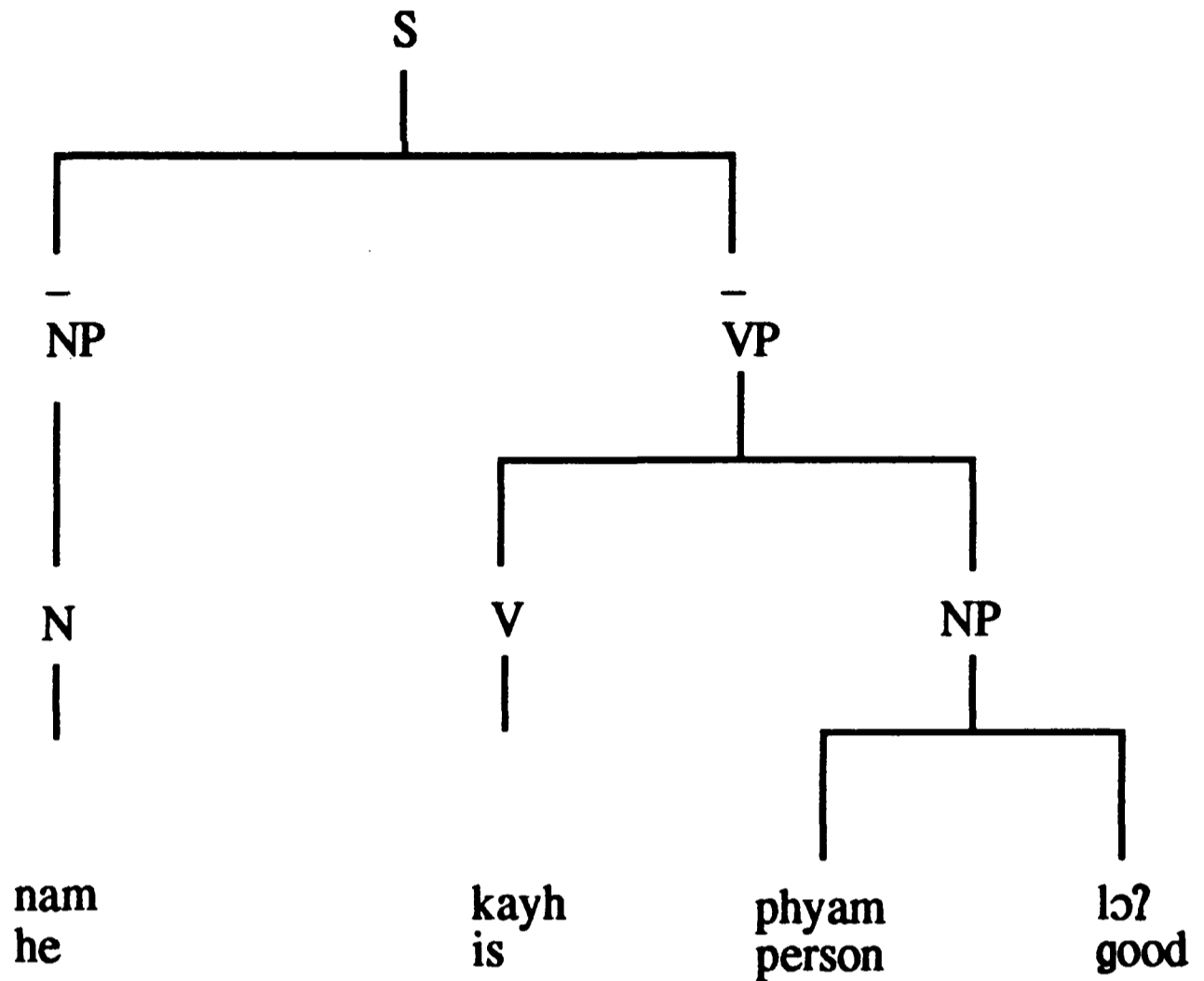
Production

Notice, however, that in the configuration of (13) no provision has been made for the production of couplets and duplications within the phrase structure of Mal. This is because I propose that couplets and duplications are not part of the basic phrase structure of Mal but rather are produced by *copying* the structure of an existing category or node and adding it on as an adjunct category or node to the structure from which it was copied. Of course, such copying is not a simple “cloning” or one to one reduplication. It is more complicated than that, for there are parameters within which copying must occur. To illustrate this consider again the sentence:

(14) nam kayh phyam lɔ? phyam læm
 he is person good person good
 He is a perfect person.

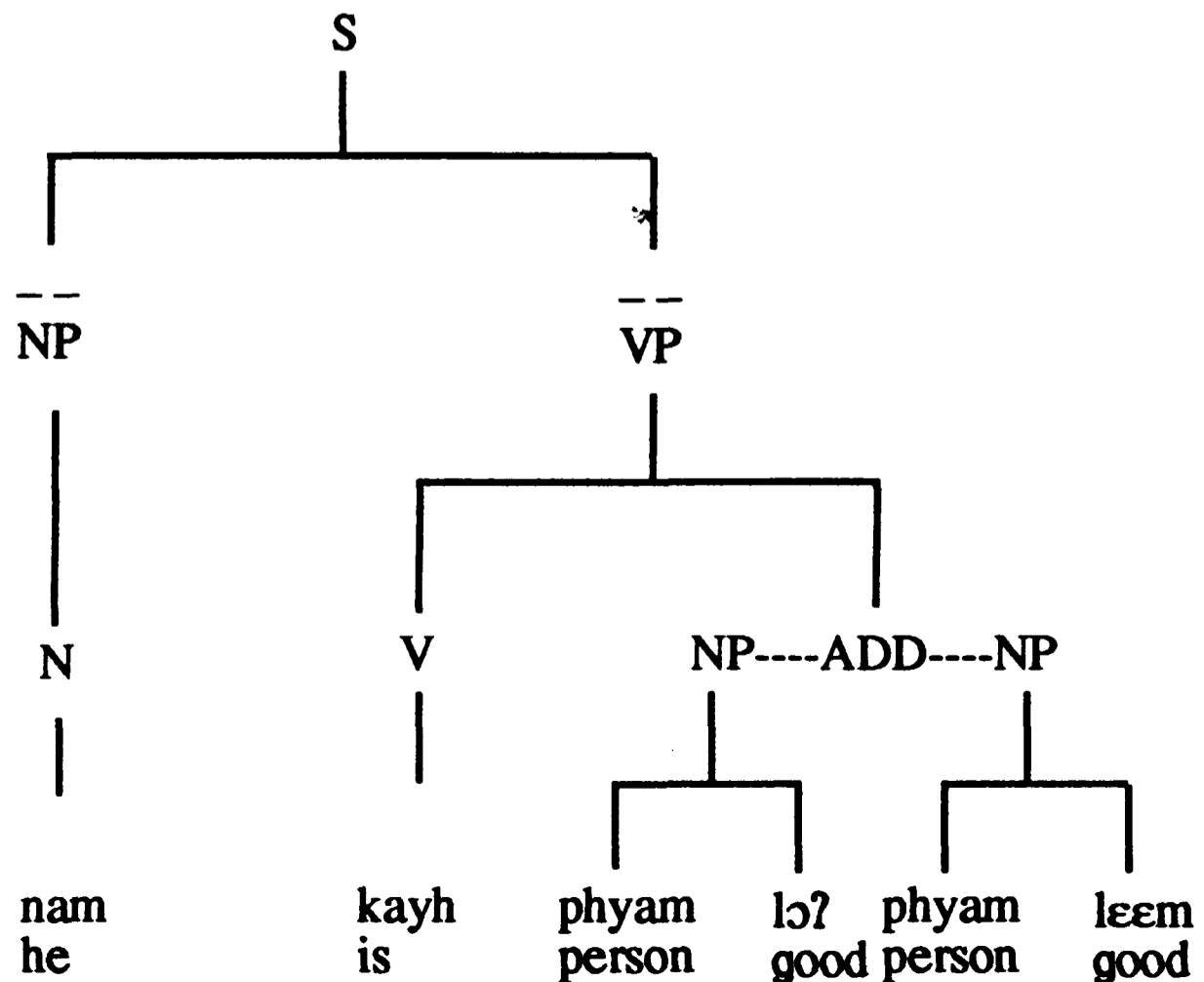
The basic phrase structure of this sentence is (here only relevant categories are selected to conserve space):

15)



To produce the duplication /phyam læm/ of (14), the NP contained under the VP of (15) is copied and added on, as shown in the following tree structure.

16)



During this process lexicalization is also operating: a / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ ntəl/ (a word of one meaning) is replaced by a / $\eta\omega\omega\eta$ ləc/ (a word with an identical or similar meaning) in the add-on category. In the case of (16) above, / $\omega?$ / “good” is replaced by / $\epsilon\epsilon\epsilon\epsilon$ / “good”. Functionally these two words add up to a more general or complete assessment of the person under discussion: he is “perfect”.

This process may be summarized by the following principle, schematic representation, and explanation of parametric settings involved in the production of couplets and duplications in Mal.³

(17) Copy X

$$X(L_i) + X(L_j)$$

X = syntactic category

L = lexicalization

Production Parameters

- a) X must be dominated by S, otherwise there could be a conflict with the functions of (11-12d). That is, (11-12d) and (13) are in complementary distribution to each other with respect to function.
- b) X is added on as adjunct category to the category from which it was copied.
- c) The resulting duplication must fulfill a communicative function in current use in the speech community. Many structural combinations or duplications are possible, but not all are realized functionally; if there is no communicative function to be realized, there is no grammaticalization.
- d) Lexicalization must follow the conventions established for assigning words to occur either as / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ ntəl/ or / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ ləc/ respectively.
- e) Lexicalization of the / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ ntəl/ and / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ ləc/ (the difference between L_i and L_j respectively) must follow traditional definitions of synonymity, i.e. be synonyms of each other, or be members of the same cognitive category, semantic domain or hierarchy, etc.

In a case where there is a “duplication of a duplication” (see (10) above), Principle (17) may be applied in a cyclic fashion up to four positions. The accompanying schematic representation may then be expanded in the following manner:

³ For this summary I freely extend the terms *principle* and *parameter* from their current usage in generative (universal) grammar to include production and performance. Otherwise, couplets and duplications in Mal cannot be adequately described. The parametric settings operate not as rules but in tandem, as a strategy for production. The schematic representation of (18,20-21) are strategies for producing couplets and duplications in Mal.

18) $X(L_i) + X(L_j) + X(L_k) + X(L_l)$

The above parameters of lexicalization may also be expanded to read that the / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ ntəl/ and / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ lɔɔc/ of each pair (L_{i-1}) meet the requirements of synonymy.

One more observation may be made at this point. In each pair, the / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ ntəl/ and / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ lɔɔc/ are closer in synonymy to each other than to the beginning and ending words of the other pair. Example (19) below illustrates what I mean.

19) maal η ua? maal saa, maal khaaw^v maal khɔɔŋ^v
 essence rice essence rice essence rice essence thing
 ...the life essence of rice whether in the Mal language or Thai language.

The couplet / η ua? η saa/ are native Mal words while / η .khaaw^v...khɔɔŋ^v/ are borrowed Thai words. The words of the first couplet are closer synonyms to each other than to the words of the second couplet which in turn are closer synonyms to each other as well. Yet all four words are members of the same cognitive category regardless of language.

In the Mal texts that I have transcribed, there are a few instances of what may be called triplets. That is, instead of two words or four words, three words of similar meaning occur performing the same functions as couplets and duplications. It is interesting to note that most of these triplets occur as either:

20) $O + X(L_j) + X(L_k) + X(L_j)$

or as:

21) $X(L_i) + X(L_j) + X(L_k) + O$

That is, the / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ ntəl/ of the first couplet is missing, or the / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ lɔɔc/ of the duplication is missing. Because of these facts and their rarity of occurrence in Mal texts, I interpret them as imperfect performances in the production of couplets and duplications by Mal speakers, especially as they were speaking into a microphone. Triplets appear not to be the ideal for grammaticalizing the communicative functions discussed above.

There is one tendency in the production of couplets that often shows up in Mal texts. In many instances there seems to be a preference for the / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ ntəl/ to be “lesser” by one definition or another than the / $\eta\epsilon\epsilon\eta$ lɔɔc/, which by comparison is “greater” by the same definition. In (5a-e), for example, we see this tendency at work /sɛɛ/ “rice field” is smaller in land area than /sa?/ “forest”. /khuan/ is “younger” than / η aay/ “older”. /mət/ “to massage” is a more specialized activity than the more general /phat/ “to squeeze”. /sen/ refers to long, thin objects from the size of a strand of hair to the tender stem of a young rice plant, while /lam/ refers to long, fuller objects from the size of a stalk (of a mature rice plant) to a tree trunk. Even the couplet / η ua? saa/ RICE follows this pattern. /saa/ “steamed glutinous rice” is of greater benefit to humans (which is the ultimate goal for planting rice) than / η ua?/ “whole kernel rice”, which is of lesser benefit since it is fit only for feeding animals.

The basic phrase structure for this type of conjoined sentence is shown in (11) above. Of more interest are the triplet and duplications in the two clauses. In each clause they are the property of an object NP similar to (15-16) above⁵. That is, in both cases the duplications are subject to a syntactic environment ultimately controlled by S (see 17a above). In the second clause there is a “duplication of a duplication” (see 10 above). The communicative function of the triplet and duplications is one of completeness (to make sure that everything from A-Z about RICE is included and that no spiritual power of the forest is overlooked), plus reinforcement of this completeness.

The second example is the sentence that immediately follows the one above. Within the context of the narrative itself, the function of this sentence is one of purpose, i.e. it explains why the spirits are invited. It is a sentence that also contains a triplet along with several duplications. The reason for its inclusion is that it is an example of a prayer for a good rice crop in Mal traditional religion. It is not an actual prayer. Rather, it is a report of what may be said when one prays during the Kyooc Festival.

23)	to?	nthεem ^v		sih			
	come	cause to increase		place			
	tasen	talam					
	in-stem	in-stalk					
	aŋ	lɔ?	kian	lɔ?	kayh	lɔ?	khluan ⁶
	To-give	good	kernel	good	be	good	seed
	aŋ	maak	muun	tun	taw		
	to-give	much	much	eat	not-all		
	aŋ	pɔɔn	ɔɔk	pɔɔn	pɔŋ		
	to-give	get	drink	get	eat		
	kuu	lɔŋ	kuu	naŋ			
	every	person	every	body			
	tiŋ	thiat	tiŋ	sək			
	even	small	even	big			

⁵ There is one structural difference between the first clause and the second clause of (22). This has to do with verb serialization and the placement of the object NP within this structure. But this placement plays no bearing on the duplication process and so will not be discussed in this paper.

⁶ This is an odd triplet because /kian khluan/ “kernel, seed” form the couplet proper (with /kian/ being the lesser by comparison with /khluan/). These two words ideally should occur next to each other instead of being separated by /kayh/ “to be, alive”. Nevertheless, these three terms are associated with various aspects of a young, healthy rice stem producing a good head of grain. In this regard they share a family resemblance in forming a cognitive category. That is, they are members of the same category and thus qualify to form a triplet.

“To come and give the increase in our rice stems and stalks so they will have excellent kernels, life and seed, so that each and every person, both young and adult, will not run out of anything to eat but will have plenty of food for every meal.”

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