A Description of the Theme Structure of Bai Clause

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Abstract

The Bai language (shortened as Bai) used in southwest China demonstrates a variety of typological facets in terms of the Theme structure. The usual Theme in Bai clauses is a nominal phrase, or a pronominal phrase. Bai clauses can often start with the Object being the topical Theme. It has low tolerance for multiple Themes. The subjectless clauses indicate richer possibilities in construing meaning than their counterparts with recovered Subjects.

Keywords

Bai, Types of Themes, Topical Theme Marker

1. Introduction

Making meaning is one of the major functions of semiotic signs. At the rank of clause, meaning is realized through the representation by words and phrases or groups, and being presented with various choices of the clausal configuration. Whether in the form of a dialogue, or a monologue, or a text of any genre, language users make meaning via choice in configuring the clause. The point from where to initiate a clause, which is called the Theme in SFL, can often suggest more than the literal meaning of the text or discourse. The linguistic unit at the clause initial place in the case of English or other languages is regarded as the THEME of the clause. Thematic system is universal in languages, but languages are diverse on the issue of Theme types, and the realizational features. In this paper, we try to display the structure and three features of the thematic system of Bai, one language in the Sino-Tibetan family used in southwest China.

1.1. About the Bai Language and Data Source

Bai nationality is one of the 25 officially recognized ethnic groups mainly living in Yunnan, a southwestern
province of China. Among the 2 million people who register to government record as Bai minority, about half can speak Bai language, or shortened as Bai. The next generation of Bai who move to cities can hardly speak or understand Bai. So the language is used in a shrinking population. Being a Sino-Tibetan language spoken by Bai nationality in China, Bai demonstrates a variety of typological facets in its grammar within Systemic Functional linguistic theoretical framework. Among them, the thematic system indicates a bunch of features.

Bai so far keeps in argument among scholars as to its genetic affiliation with century-lasting competing diverse hypotheses. As the grammar of Bai is highly assimilated by Chinese and 70% of the Bai vocabulary can be traced their source back to middle-ancient Chinese words, a competing view holds that Bai is a sister language of Chinese. The other prevailing point maintains that Bai is of Yi-Burma branch. A few scholars believe Bai should be a branch of language at the same level with Yi-Burma branch. Most of the studies on Bai languages are carried out from historical linguistic angles, specifically, at phonetic and phonological comparison or etymological levels, grammatical comparison with Chinese, with Yi-Burma languages, to look for its relationship between other Sino-Tibetan languages. In recent years, increasing typological evidences and findings from grammar studies support the second view that Bai is a language genetically belonging to Yi-Burma branch. (Zhao, 2009).

In the thematic structure analysis, a majority of the examples are cited from publication, with a few constructed by the author, a native speaker of middle dialect from Niujie, a town at the border between Eryuan county and Jianchuan county. The clauses are transcribed in International Pronunciation Alphabets (IPA), with syllable tone mark via pairs of figures like 33, 44, or 35 on the right side and lifted high as in te⁴⁴, li⁵⁵ ja⁴⁴.

1.2. Thematic Structure in SFL

Every clause is organized as a message—a quantum of information flowing from the author or speaker to the reader or listener as a text or discourse unfolds in its context of situation. The function of giving message or information is assumed a general role of a clause in all languages (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: p. 64). In a clause, the configuration of the clause indicates the three functions—textual, interpersonal and ideational functions, with other minor functions. They map on each other, and are realized with sets of choices respectively in Transitivity system, Mood system and Theme system as the core in each function. According to SFL views about potential resources of meaning creation, Theme system indicates the author’s choice of the departure point of his discourse. The remainder part after the Theme is named the Rheme following Prague school terminology. The Rheme part will tell more about the Theme, for instance, what happens to it or what it does to other participant(s) if there are some, etc.

Themes in a clause get finer classification in terms of the functions, which are subdivided as the textual, topical/experiential and/or interpersonal Themes. We take English as the background in this study. Three kinds of Themes interweave in a smooth way to develop the text. The thematic system in languages presents various features. English is positional in terms of the location of the three types of Themes coming from left to right. Themes in other language may present different features. In Bai clauses, less textual and interpersonal Themes precede topical Themes, and topical themes are mostly marked when the topical Themes are the Objects.

2. Types of Themes in Bai Clauses

Before we dig into the linguistic data and carry out the systemic and functional analysis, a brief introduction to the options of Themes in Bai in SFG will be necessary. Here we present clause analysis of several Bai clauses excerpted from the ballad Huangshinu Answering Diamond Sutra (Duan, 2011).

E.g. 2-1

1) a¹¹ to³¹ mi³³ khu³³ te⁴⁴ li⁵⁵ ja⁴⁴.

   who remember bring straw hat

   “Nobody remembers to bring a straw hat.”

2) ni⁴⁴ yi⁴⁴ ji³¹ xhi³¹ xhe⁵⁵ me²² pe⁴².

   daughter I everything hear clear

   “Your daughter I heard and made clear about everything.”
Themes are expressed by an interrogative a³¹-word (equivalent to WH-word in English), for instance, a³¹to³¹ (2-1-1), or a noun or a nominal phrase niv³³ with an apposition pronoun no³³ (2-1-2), or a circumstance sɿ³³lo³³ with a topical marker no³³ (2-1-3), or a modal verb nio³³ (2-1-4), or a complement nɯ³³tɯ³³ (2-1-5), or a verbal-phrase mia³³tɯ³³ (2-1-6) respectively. The first feature of Bai Theme is that most of linguistic units, particularly, the participants, the process and the circumstantial elements can function as the Theme, and the feature is common. Bai language demonstrates language-featured Theme choice, such as objects’ being the Theme for preposition of the prominence. We will exemplify the features below.

2.1. Thematic Potential and Analysis in Bai

Bai shares similarities with Chinese in terms of its grammar, as it has continuous contact with Chinese in depth early from Qin and Han dynasty (221BC-220AD). The impressive two-layer thematic analysis for Chinese long clause is to recognize differing degrees of thematicity, and include all experiential elements within the Theme up to the Process, or the minor Process represented by the coverb of a coverbal phrase (Cafferal, Martin, & Matthiessen, 2004). By this principle of theme identifying, everything up to the Process would have some degree of Thematic potential, with the initial group having the greatest. To illustrate the point, we cited the analysis example on Chinese by Halliday and McDonald (Halliday & McDonald, 2004: pp. 321, 322) and then translate it into its Bai equivalent and testify the applicability of the second principle of Theme identifying in Bai. For instance:

E.g. 2-2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>zhèi zhǒng shù</td>
<td>yě zhí xīn wēn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this type of tree</td>
<td>this kind of tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zhèi zhǒng shù yě zhí xīn wēn</td>
<td>zhèi zhǒng shù yě zhí xīn wēn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This kind of tree has big leaves, small flowers, slender branches and a thick trunk.”</td>
<td>“This kind of tree has big leaves, small flowers, slender branches and a thick trunk.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Being translated into English, the clause lost the second layer of theme-rheme structures. But in Bai equivalent version below, the two layers of theme-rheme structures remain quiet the same with that in Chinese.

E.g. 2-3 Bai version (translated from the Chinese clause in Example 2-2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tsu³³mu³³tsua³³mu³³sè³³xi⁴⁴dō³³</td>
<td>xo⁵⁵sè³³tʃi⁵⁵ma³³qua⁴⁴tsu³³μ⁵⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tree this type</td>
<td>this kind of tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tsu³³mu³³tsua³³mu³³sè³³xi⁴⁴dō³³</td>
<td>xo⁵⁵sè³³tʃi⁵⁵ma³³qua⁴⁴tsu³³μ⁵⁵</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This kind of tree has big leaves, small flowers, slender branches and a thick trunk.”</td>
<td>“This kind of tree has big leaves, small flowers, slender branches and a thick trunk.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Halliday’s suggestion, in the first layer analysis, the Theme zhèi zhǒng shù/tsu³³mu³³tsua⁵⁵ “this type of tree” has the greatest degree of thematic potential. The minor processes have less thematic potential.
At the second layer analysis, there are four minor clauses, in which the degrees of thematicity diminish gradually. When we compare the two thematic analyses in the two languages we believe that the two-layer analysis is suitable for Bai clauses. We accept this analysis as the better way of identifying Theme-Rheme in Bai language.

2.2. Three Themes

To get a general view of the thematic structure in Bai, in Graph 1 we analyze excerpt from a fable we⁵⁵a⁵⁵S⁵⁵th⁵⁵no³³pe²¹tsi⁵⁵f⁴⁴mu⁵⁵⁵⁵pe²¹“Why should people skin the palm tree off its frond?” (Zhang & Zhou, 2013).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textual</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Marked topical</th>
<th>Unmarked topical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>daw²⁴ma⁴⁴tsi¹²“long time ago”</td>
<td>ma⁵⁵kō¹⁴tsi¹²“they two”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td>phia⁴⁴tchi⁴⁴pia⁴⁴nua⁴⁴“in July and Autumn”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td>ciō²⁵tsi¹²“pine tree”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
<td>tvi⁵⁵nua⁴⁴“winter”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
<td>ma⁵⁵=ciō²⁵tsi¹²“pine tree”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
<td>tsu¹²“palm tree”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td></td>
<td>(ms⁵⁵=tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsi¹²)“he = palm tree”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td></td>
<td>xā²⁵tsi¹²tsu⁴⁴“every year”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td></td>
<td>mo³¹=tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsi¹²“I = palm tree”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td></td>
<td>tsi¹²“palm tree”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td></td>
<td>xē⁵⁵“the sky”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td></td>
<td>ma⁵⁵=they</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td></td>
<td>tsu¹²“have”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td></td>
<td>ciō²⁵tsi¹²“pine”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>a¹⁴⁴f⁵⁵tchi⁴⁴“my best friend”</td>
<td>mo²⁵=tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsu¹²“you = palm”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td></td>
<td>cui¹²“water”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td></td>
<td>jā⁵⁵=ciō²⁵tsu¹²+tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsu¹²“we”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td></td>
<td>ciō²⁵tsi¹²“pine”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td></td>
<td>cui¹²“water”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td></td>
<td>thu¹²tsi¹²“soil”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>ra²⁵xø⁵⁵tsi⁵⁵“otherwise”</td>
<td>jā⁵⁵=ciō²⁵tsu¹²+tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsu¹²</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>la²⁵“then”</td>
<td>(jā²⁵)=ciō²⁵tsu¹²+tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsu¹²</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>z°⁴⁴yes/ok”</td>
<td>tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsu¹²</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>pe⁴⁴tsu¹²g⁵⁵“before leaving”</td>
<td>ciō²⁵tsu¹²“pine”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>a¹⁴⁴f⁵⁵tchi⁴⁴“if”</td>
<td>no²⁵=tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsu¹²</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td></td>
<td>tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsu¹²</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>a¹⁴⁴mia⁴⁴“don’t”</td>
<td>no²⁵=tsi⁵⁵⁵⁵tsu¹²</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td></td>
<td>jō²⁵tsu⁴⁴“if”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td></td>
<td>jō²⁵tsu⁴⁴“if”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td></td>
<td>jō²⁵tsu⁴⁴“if”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td></td>
<td>jō²⁵tsu⁴⁴“if”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td></td>
<td>jō²⁵tsu⁴⁴“if”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph 1. Theme options in the Palm and Pine fable (Para.1-3).
Starting from left to right, the location of the three kinds of Themes is generally alike with that in English and Chinese. Textual Theme occupies the first place, coming before interpersonal Theme if there is one, and followed by ideational or topical Themes.

2.2.1. Textual Theme
Functioning as links, textual Themes make the text easy to follow and easy to understand. In Bai, jɔ°sua 44if”, la 4° “then”, xa 4° “otherwise”, la 4°rei 55“and then” are used as in continuatives and conjunctions. Compared with English, the function of cohesion is less played by an initial unit in Bai.

2.2.2. Interpersonal Theme
In the narrative text in Table 1, the discourse between the pine tree and the palm tree contain three repetitions of a vocative a 4° “my best friend”. This address is of the highest degree of intimacy between two adult men in Bai nationality, the intimacy degree being next to address for brothers by blood.

Other interpersonal Themes include the following possible options.
1) Vocatives. For example: a 4° “uncle” (for one’s father’s elder brothers or other elder men)
2) we 44-elements, a 5°na 44-elements, tɛ 55ku 44-elements, ……tshv 31sua 44 (equivalent to WH-phrase, How-phrase in English).
E.g. 2-4

| a)we 44a 5°na 44no 31pe 31tsi 55fj 55mu 55pe 31?  “Why should people skin the palm off its frond?” |
| b) a 3°na 44pe 44tsu 55 “Who is coming?” |
| c) cu 55li 44tɛ 55ku 44 “How much is one half kilogram of the pear?” |
| d) tɛ 55Suə 44je 44 “What’s wrong?” |

Other interrogative words include a 5°na 44tchi 55ja 55pa 31/ a 5°na 44tsu 55 “when/what time”; a 5°na 44 “who”; a 44ka 44 “where”; tọ 44khow 31sua 44 “how tall”, tso 31 tshv 31 sə 31sua 44 “how long”, tœ 44shv 31 si 31sua 44 “how far” etc.
3) Adjuncts: la 44sua 31 “hurriedly”, lu 44lu 44 “more and more”.
4) Interjections to convey feelings of approval, sadness, hatred or surprise etc. For instance:

| a) Surprise, approval: ji 35tsa 44tsa 44E.g.: |
| ji 55tɛ 55je 44phia 44li 44no 31ja 31 “Look nice to you” |
| b) Sadness, upset: le 4°joo 44mo 31E.g.: |
| le 4°no 31joo 44 “I’m sad” |

Other interjections include: a°tie 44tie 44 “surprise: a°pe 31ja 311; and anger: tso 6, tso 4tso 6.

2.2.3. Topical Theme
Bai is a topic prominent language like Chinese, Japanese, and Tagalog etc. The topic + comment structure is the usual analysis paradigm for Bai clauses. So we prefer to adopt the name “topical Theme” rather than “ideational Theme” for familiarity. The Theme analysis in Table 1 shows clear that in each clause there must be a topical Theme, whether marked or unmarked.

Generally, Topical Themes are realized mainly by Subjects, or Objects in Complements (nominal groups), and Adjuncts (adverbial groups), and sometime by Predicators. The four options of realization of Themes in Table 1 are listed in the decreasing frequency order below.
1) Nominal groups (14 times), e.g. eĩ 55tsu 51 “pine tree”, tsi 55fj 55tsu 51 “palm tree”, xe 55 “the sky”, cu 51 “water”, thui 53 “soil”, mu 55se 44rei 31 “its leaves” etc.
2) Pronominal groups (25 times), e.g. ma 5°koe 31tsu 51 “they two CLASSIFIER”, mo 5ks/hɛ “he”, no 31 “I”, ja 55 “we (including the listener)”, no 31 “you”, etc.
3. Marked and Unmarked Themes

When the Subject serves as the Theme, it is unmarked. But in most cases, to cater to a certain need of meaning expression, a speaker or writer tends to choose other grammatical part as the starting point of a clause. Other grammatical elements, such as circumstance, complement, and adjunct will be selected as the Theme, which is a expression, a speaker or writer tends to choose other grammatical part as the starting point of a clause. Other clauses it is the process which initiates the clauses when the understood Subject is.

In imperative clauses, with elliptic no\textsuperscript{31} “sgl. you” and no\textsuperscript{55} “pl. you”, the situation is quite alike with that in English and Chinese, in which the process serve as the marked Theme.

So far two major features might be safely summed up. The first feature is that in most of the declarative clauses it is the process which initiates the clauses when the understood Subject is no\textsuperscript{31}, or no\textsuperscript{55} “inclusive we”. In imperative clauses, with elliptic no\textsuperscript{31} “sgl. you” and no\textsuperscript{55} “pl. you”, the situation is quite alike with that in English and Chinese, in which the process serve as the marked Theme.

The second feature is that the Object can often be shifted to the initial location, that is, to the position of...
Theme in those clauses which have two or more participants, and most of the time marked by the auxiliary no³³. For instance:

E.g. 2-7

\[
\begin{align*}
a) \ & "it \ is \ a \ long \ way \ to \ the \ foregrounded \ complement \ to \ enjoy \ the \ prominence \ and \ to \ become \ the \ focus." \ \\
b) \ & "pear \ one" , \ meaning \ "pear \ (one) \ I \ really \ like \ to \ eat.".
\end{align*}
\]

As to the marked topical Themes, scholars have found some languages in which the users can represent Themes via topical markers, as in Japanese the particle—wa (Hu, 1992; Teruya, 2004), the ang phrase in Tagalog (Martin, 2004), Bai scholars sum up some topical markers in Middle and South dialects of Bai with topical markers, such as tsí⁵⁵ li⁵⁵ no³³ (Wang & Wang, 2013; Zhao, 2013).

Revisiting the tale analyzed, we notice that a group of particle words such as tsí⁵⁵ and li⁵⁵ are applied after the marked Themes. Here are some words which mark the Themes in Table 1. The part which is located before these markers often functions as the topical Theme.

In terms of function, tsí⁵⁵ is a topical marker used after nouns or subclauses to indicate a condition or a comparison. In the clause v⁵⁵ mu⁴⁴ yu⁴⁴ tsí⁵⁵ mo⁴¹ ta⁶⁶ muu⁵⁵ xu⁶⁶ tā³¹ pi⁵⁵ i⁵⁵ li⁵⁵ no³³, before the clause phi⁴⁴ tchi⁴⁴ pia⁴⁴ muu⁴⁴ v⁴⁴ yu⁴⁴, its function is to mark the Theme, particularly when the Theme is played by the Object of clause. We illustrate the point with a clause excerpted from Huangshinu Answering the Diamond Sutra. E.g. sɪ⁴⁴ ᵤ³³ ᵤ¹ i⁵⁵ no³³ muu⁵⁵ tsi⁵⁵ phi⁴⁴, topical Theme marker, circumstance element as Theme) meaning “it is a long way to Shilong Temple’s.” In the clause, the part which is marked by no³³ is actually a nominal phrase functioning as location to mean “the way to Shilong Temple”.

With the help of the topical Theme marker no³³, the second singular possessive pronoun nu⁵⁵ can be used as the foregrounded complement to enjoy the prominence and to become the focus. Compare the two clauses and we may observe the minute touch of meaning contrast in example 2-8:

E.g. 2-8

\[
\begin{align*}
1) \ & "You, what should I address?" \ \\
2) \ & "As to him, I call uncle."
\end{align*}
\]

In the first clause, the marker yu⁵⁵ makes the personal pronoun nu⁵⁵ a Theme. The second clause contains two Theme markers no³³ and tsí⁵⁵ no³³ is put after the personal pronoun muu⁵⁵ (“he”) to make it a Theme. tsí⁵⁵ is another Theme marker to indicate a weak meaning of contrast.

Due to the choice of a writer or a speaker for certain purpose of meaning making, a majority of Bai clauses could be arranged in OV order. According to scholars in Yi-Burma study and in typology, OV is a common order in Yi-Burma language family, with a few exceptions, for example, a majority of Chinese and a small portion of Bai clauses (Li, 2013). In OV, the object serves as the Theme, which is different from the normal order of declarative clauses.

2.4. Themes in Clause Complexes in Bai

Bai clauses could be combined in two ways—paratactic clause and hypotactic clause.

E.g. 2-9

\[
\begin{align*}
1) jio⁴⁴ ci⁵⁵ & pe⁴⁴ l³³ jio⁴⁴ ci⁵⁵ mi³¹, \ "When you hurry on you think carefully."
\ & Th₁ Rh₁ Rh₂
\ & Th₂ Rh₂
\ & V₁ NG₁ V₂ NG₂
\ & come back mother tell you.
2) pe⁴⁴ ta⁶⁶ & vi²⁰ mo³¹ tsi⁵⁵ kshi⁵⁵ no³³, \ "Come back and mother I tell you."
\ & V₁ NG₁ V₂ NG₂
\ & come back mother tell you.
\end{align*}
\]
In Example 2-9 (1) a conjunction la² is used as the nexus to link the two sub-clauses. In Example 2-9 (2), the imperative pe⁴la⁶ with an elliptical NG no³ is combined with the declarative ‘a²mo⁴ tsi²³shí²³ no³ without obvious nexus. A paratactic relation is observed between them.

The following examples present more features.

3) xe⁵²ká³⁵eui²⁴tai²⁴mo³¹. “It is dry and water is inadequate.”

NG₁ VG₁ (HCON) NG₂ VG₂
sky dry water not no

In clause 3), no explicit link word is found between the two sub-clauses. The two actions or Processes are combined in a seemingly paratactic relation. Still, at semantic expression layer, native speakers understand that there is a cause-effect hypotactic relation between the two actions or events. Because xe⁵²ká³⁵ “the sky is dry” (meaning the amount of rainfall is inadequate), eui²⁴tai²⁴mo³¹ “there is no water” (note: here tai²⁴mo³¹ seemingly double negation, but meaning negation rather than positive. tai²⁴ is put before verbs in polarity).

4) sɛ³⁵huɛ³⁵ŋo²¹tsi⁵⁵. “It is dry and water is inadequate.”

HCON NG₁ HCON AG VG HCON NG₂ VG₂NEG

Clause (4) illustrates the marked hypotactic ordering of a hypotactic clause nexus with overt conjunction tsi⁵⁵. More examples are given to demonstrate another feature of Bai clause complex below.

5) po²¹pe²¹tšw⁵⁴kė⁴⁴tšv⁵⁴tsi²⁵po²¹tšu²⁵ja⁴⁴kwt⁵⁴mu⁵⁴jv⁵⁴. “I go down to look for a nice place and then I immediately come back to fetch you.”

NG₁ VG₁ (PCONa) VG₂ NG₂ HCON NG₃ AG VG₃ (PCON b) VG₄ NG₄

In clause 5), Paratactic (a) and Paratactic (b) are implicit with no conjunctions to mark them. The explicit Hypotactic relation is marked by the particle tsi⁵⁵. The Verbal Group 1 and Verbal Group 2 make one serial verb construction, and the Verbal Group 3 and Group 4 make the second serial verb construction in the clause complex. The situation is quite similar to that in Chinese. Therefore the analysis is made in the model of Halliday for Chinese clause complexes and the naming “serial verb construction” is borrowed from him. We cite one Chinese clause complex example here (Halliday & McDonald, 2004): 314.

NG₁ HCON(a) AG PHR VG NG₂ HCON (b) “If you mend my bike for me at once,… nírúguǒmăshànggěiwǒxiūlĭzixíngchēdehua
you if straightaway for me repair bicycle if / (“say”)”

PCON (A) NG₁ PCON (B) AG PHR VG NG₂ náwǒjīyìdīngpéinĭmăidōngxi… I’ll definitely go shopping with you.”

In that case I then definitely with you buy things

In this complex, gěi wǒ and péi nĭ are prepositional phrases to refer to the receiver of the action. In Bai, similar constructions are frequent. See the words in bold print below:

The Prepositional phrase could be a non-continuous construction as ta⁴⁰+NG+ yu⁴⁺, ta⁴⁺⁺NG/PG +no⁵¹. Animate nominal groups or possessive personal pronouns can be inserted into the construction, such as in the interrogative ta⁴⁺⁺yu⁴⁺⁵⁺no⁵¹ pe⁴⁺ja⁴⁺⁺ ”Will you go with me?”

The last note to make is about the function of the nexus tsi⁵⁵. Contrast the following two clauses.
The two clauses have one difference in that the second clause has no comma after the marker *tsi*⁵⁵. In speaking, when there is no comma, a brief pause after the marker is discernible, whether it is after a nominal phrase, a pronoun or a dependent clause. The pause after *tsi*⁵⁵ in a dependent clause is longer than that after *tsi*⁵⁵ in a phrase or a single word.

Bai language has been found to be a Topic-prior language. “Topic-prior” means the topic of a clause is almost always put at the prior place, or the initial place in a clause. In Bai clauses, the situation is more likely that most of the parts of the clause can be chosen as the Theme for purpose of meaning expression and emphasis. Almost any content of the rest part could be chosen by the speaker or writer, except for the auxiliary markers like genitive case marker *no*³³, modal auxiliary marker *la*⁴², negation adverb *mu*³³.

### 3. Features Specific to Bai Thematic System

Possible word orders in Bai are SVO, SOV and OSV as in Example 3-1 below.

E.g. 3-1

| 1) *ŋa*⁵⁵ *jĩ*⁴⁴ *pẽ*³³ | (SVO) |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| 2) *ŋo*³¹ *a³¹pa*²¹ *pa*⁴⁴ *no*³³ *tu*²¹ *mi*⁴² | (SOV) |
| 3) *a³¹pa*²¹ *pa*⁴⁴ *no*³³ *ŋo*³¹ *tu*²¹ *mi*⁴² | (OSV) |

Among the three orders, SVO is dominant in most types of Mood. In SVO order the theme option and realization are similar to that in Chinese. In the two latter orders, Objects serve the function of the experiential Theme if there is no other experiential component before the Object. In addition, Example 3-1-2 and 3-1-3 show that SOV and OSV can switch to each other for certain functions such as emphasis or contrast. When it becomes an OSV order, the Object often functions as the Theme.

#### 3.1. Objects Being Themes in OSV Order

Bai clauses are mainly in SVO order like in Chinese, but there appear to have certain percentage of SOV and OSV when necessary. When the personal pronominal phrase or people names are Objects in clauses, they can be shifted to precede the verbal phrase, or the Process and then produce SOV. The two clauses are taken from *Baiyu Jianzhi* (Xu & Zhao, 1984: p. 77).

E.g. 3-2

| 1) *a³¹ne*⁴⁴ *su*ã ⁴⁴ *xo*⁴⁴ *no*³³ *li*²¹ *ko*²¹ | (OSV) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|

And when the Object is the prominence to stress, it moves before the Subject to create OSV order for prominence. In such case, the Object serves the marked topical Theme with the help of a marker *no*³³.

E.g. 3-2

| 2) *su*ã ⁴⁴ *xo*⁴⁴ *no*³³ *a³¹ne*⁴⁴ | (OSV) |

The particle *no*³³ cannot stand alone in making meaning. It serves as a suffix functioning and appearing after pronominal phrase or nominal phrase, or people names to mark their Object status.
3.2. Widening of Subject Options in Subjectless Clauses

In some cases, the Subjects of imperatives, declaratives and interrogatives can be omitted, which result in a widening range of the possible choice of Subjects if not recovered. For instance:

E.g. 3-3

1) sv⁵⁵ xu⁴⁶ ko⁵⁶ tei⁶⁶ wa⁴⁶: “Book has been read.”
   Book read finish   PERF ADJ
2) ŋëmɪigger⁵⁵ ɲa⁴⁶ mo⁴⁶ xo⁶⁶: “Have never been to Kunming.”
   Kunming go not   PST ADJ
3) ŋe³³ no³³ jwa³³ xo³³ ja³³: “Mustn’t eat fish.”
   Fish OBJ marker  eat   no   Modal ADJ

In the three seemingly Subjectless clauses above, the Themes are ŋëmɪigger⁵⁵, sv⁵⁵, ŋe³³ no³³ respectively. They are either Objects sv⁵⁵, ŋe³³ no³³ with or without marker, or the Circumstance of location ŋëmɪigger⁵⁵. The Subject is recoverable. When the context is not given for readers, there are several possibilities of the Subject before being given with it. Once the Subject is recovered, the addressee is explicit and specified. This is probably a language universal feature. As a general rule, the Subjects in passive voice can be omitted.

E.g. 3-4

mɯ⁵⁵ no³³ sua⁴⁴ ɲau⁴⁴ tuo⁴²: “Her/him, no one can win in argument.”
   Her/Him OBJ marker argue against not.

In this case, the clause is in OV order. The omitted Subject is infinite, making a claim a general judgment to assert that the man or woman is so eloquent that NOBODY could win him or her. Therefore, when the Theme is played by the Object, the omitted Subject is widened in terms of possible choice. It could be the addressee himself, or the third person not present, or anybody else. Once we switch the order to SOV no⁵⁵ mu⁵⁵ no³³ sua⁴⁴ ɲau⁴⁴ tuo⁴², or to SVO no⁵⁵ sua⁴⁴ ɲau⁴⁴ mu⁵⁵ no³³ tuo⁴², for instance. Or we simply fill in the blank for the Subject in its place in OSV order, e.g. mu⁵⁵ no³³ sua⁴⁴ ɲau⁴⁴ tuo⁴²; the possible choices are several, as tabulated below.

Any phrase in the table can be chosen to fill the blank in the clause mu⁵⁵ no³³ sua⁴⁴ ɲau⁴⁴ tuo⁴². Once fulfilled, the Subject becoming recovered, the meaning of the clause would be confined and it reduces the force of the claim in this case.

3.3. Low Tolerance for Multiple Themes

Clauses in Bai begin with or without textual Theme, with or without interpersonal Theme, but they must have topical Themes. The topical themes could be the Subject, the Object, the Process, or the circumstantial element. But the frequency of co-occurrence of the three kinds of Themes is quite low here. It is the same with other kinds of texts in Bai. Compared with English, Bai language is not rich in multiple Themes. Halliday comments that there are a group of languages with low tolerance for multiple Themes. Bai could be one of this kind.

4. Conclusion

The description of the thematic system of Bai indicates that Bai clauses are often started with the object being the topical theme. Bai clauses have low tolerance for multiple themes and the subjectless clauses indicate richer meanings than their counterparts with recovered Subjects as the recovering would confine the actor and narrow the meaning.

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