Modification in Tai Ahom

Stephen Morey
Centre for Research on Linguistic Diversity
La Trobe University

Contents

1. THE TAI AHOM ...................................................................................................................... 1
2. MODIFICATION ..................................................................................................................... 1
  2.1 MODIFICATION IN AHOM .......................................................................................... 2
3. DISCONTINUOUS MODIFICATION ..................................................................................... 3
  3.1 CONTINUOUS STRUCTURES ...................................................................................... 4
  3.2 DISCONTINUOUS MODIFICATION .............................................................................. 6
4. ADDITIONAL TOPIC ............................................................................................................. 9
5. CONCLUSIONS .................................................................................................................... 10
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 10

1. The Tai Ahom
   • The Ahom Kingdom and the conquest of the Brahmaputra valley
   • The current status of the Ahom language
     o Ahom Ritual
     o Ahom Manuscripts
     o Revived Ahom
   • Translating Ahom manuscripts

2. Modification

   Modification is defined by Matthews (1997:229) as “Type of syntactic construction in which a head is accompanied by an element typically not required by it: E.g. nouns not in general require an accompanying adjective: therefore, in I like white chocolate, the construction of the object, white chocolate, in one in which white modifies chocolate. Also called ‘attribution’; the accompanying element (in this example white) is a modifier (or ‘attribute’)”

   In this paper, following on the presentation by Barry Blake on ‘Discontinuous constituents or distant dependents’ (20th April 2012), we will look at the case of the Tai Ahom. Unlike in the Latin and Kalkatungu examples given by Barry, there is no case marking in Ahom to indicate which elements are to be related to others. We use the term modify which implies a relationship of dependency between the head and its modifier, but no requirement for the modifier to be present.

   We will also suggest that the patterns we see here are likely to represent the spoken form of the language and are not necessarily just ‘poetic’ forms expected to be found only in writing. We will also suggest that modification is perhaps the best term for this phenomenon after all, even although it seems at first to be a rather simple term.
2.1 Modification in Ahom

We will use the term modification in Ahom to refer to several situations, implying dependency, as follows:

1) where a subordinate element modifies a head within a contiguous phrase, such as the possessor, adjective, relative clause, quantifier or demonstrative modify the head noun:

A noun phrase in Tai Ahom is headed by noun (N) which is the first element in the phrase. There are five modifiers,
- Adjective
- Possessor,
- Relative Clause,
- Quantifier (numeral and classifier).
- Demonstrative,

When more than one of these occur in a noun phrase, the ordering of them usually follows that in (1)

1) N ADJ POSS REL DEM

There are no examples in the texts with all four of these modifiers. The following examples, however, demonstrate the use of two or more of these modifiers. The order N ADJ POSS is illustrated in (2):

2) sing mvng sa kau vi
   [holy spirit country [famous]ADJ [1SG]POSS VOC
   ‘Oh my famous holy spirit of the country’.

*Ming Mvng Lung Phai*, owned by Tileswar Mohan, 1r2

The structure of this example is that the head noun is *sing mvng*, a compound meaning ‘holy spirit of the country’. This is modified first by an adjective *sa* ‘famous’ (a word which has only been recorded in attributive but not predicative function). The second modifier is the 1st person singular pronoun *kau* ‘I’.

The order N POSS REL is shown in (3):

3) tai k(a)w moO t(a)k ma kU sing chaM
   tai kau mo tak ma ku sing cham
   near 1SG learned FUT come sing voice NFIN

   lv ch(a)w khai A k(a)w pE miung p(a)k
   lau chau khai pha kau pe mvng pak
   speak [RESP king [1SG]POSS [beam country hundred]REL
   ‘I the learned one will come and speak to my great king who is the support for a hundred countries.’

*Ming Mvng Lung Phai*, owned by Tileswar Mohan, 1r2
In this example, the head noun is also a compound *chau khaipha* ‘the great king’. This is modified first by the 1st person singular pronoun *kau* ‘I’ and then by a clause *pe mvng pak* ‘to be the support for a hundred countries’.

2) Certain types of compounds where one element may be said to be dependent on another, such as the head nouns in both (2) and (3) above, some further examples of which we find in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type No. and description</th>
<th>Ahom example</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 “suffixing words meaning ‘male’ and ‘female’ to class names of living beings”</td>
<td>.wp phu nying</td>
<td>woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 “by combining two unrelated single-word nouns in a sense of some relationship, or in a possessive form, the possessor following the thing possessed”</td>
<td>.wp svng chang</td>
<td>elephant stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “by combining a noun and verb”</td>
<td>vr nam tuk</td>
<td>waterfall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “by combining a verb and noun; the verb preceding and acting on the noun”</td>
<td>r kin mvng</td>
<td>ruler, governor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) Discontinuous ‘structures, where one or more of several constituents interact with each other, which will be discussed in detail in section 3.

Modification in Ahom has already been studied in some detail by Tabassum (2011), who identified the basic order of head modifier in modification but also gave examples where this order is not observed. She further discussed the phenomenon of elaborate expressions, which we will treat further in Section 3 below.

3. Discontinuous modification

Consider (4), which describes the possible location of the ‘spirit of the country’.

4)  wp vr  ur  us  vn
    sang kong tai men khang
    stay hill near Hill Tribal shut in
‘a. (If) it stays shut in by the Hill Tribals near to the hills.’ or
‘b. (If) it stays near the hills where the Hill Tribals are shut in.’
*Ming Mvng Lung Phai*, owned by Tileswar Mohan, 6r7

Two translations are possible here, depending on whether the word *khang* ‘shut in’ is analysed as ‘modifying’ the verb *sang* ‘stay’, as in translation (a); or whether it ‘modifies’ / ‘goes with’ the noun *men* as in translation (b).

In our translation, done by a Tai scholar from Thailand, Chaichuen Khamdaengyodtai and then revised together with Stephen Morey. Chaichuen uses the term ‘modify’ to describe the situation in (4), and that terminology appears apt. He also observed that the modifier is often separated from the element it modifies (the head).

In this example the unstated topical element is the spirit (*khon/khwan*) which is the topic not only of this line but of the whole text. We find that the where there is a final element like *khang* in (4), it is usually found to modify this topical element, even though the structure *men khang* would be a fully grammatical one, and both translations are contextually possible.
3.1 Contiguous structures

Let us have a look at some examples of modification in Ahom, where phrases are more or less contiguous (configurational). Ahom texts are made up of short phrases, some of which modify earlier phrases that they are not necessarily adjacent to. Consider (5), from a prose text, Nemi Mang, which tells the life of a former Buddha.

5) kw
[cw]

nang
[kw]

khra
[kw]

chi
[kw]

pin
[kw]

thui
[kw]

chau
[kw]

siu
[kw]

sik
[kw]

si
[kw]

[1SG lady] [rust full] [be extract mind] [chisel tear] SEQ

chau
[kw]

khai pha
[kw]

ka
tu

paai
[kw]

[RESP king] [as body tame]

’sMy (the lady’s) mind is full of rust, sighing, like a chisel tearing at me, (in a sorrow) for the king that is (as great) as a tamed elephant.’

The structure of this example is:

6) [kau nang] khra chi pin thui chau [siu sik] si
[chau khaipha] [ka tu paai]

The example is separated into two sections by the sequential marker si. In this case, at least, the modification does cross the si.

The main clause is khra chi pin thui chau ‘my mind is full of rust, sighing’ – not an easy translation into English. The line is full of similes and metaphors that do not transfer well into English.

One example where the final does modify differently is in (7). Here it isn’t kun but rather nang that is modified, and this is shown / made explicit by the repetition of nang.

7) kun
[kw]

phrang
[kw]

nu
[kw]

nang
[kw]

cham
[kw]

nang
[kw]

tak
[kw]

khon
[kw]

person
[kw]

rush
[kw]

look
[kw]

lady
[kw]

(lnear)

lady

lose balance

balance

‘The people rushed to look at the lady and be near the lady, and the lady lost her balance.’

Nemi Mang 4r2

Here cham could also be the non final particle, the translation given here relies on the idea that nu nang cham nang is an elaborate expression.

In (8), we see there is a head noun, oi ‘sugar cane’, which is modified by two other noun phrases, kap ngvn ‘silver sheath’ and lam song ‘bright stem’. The important point here is that the phrase lam song modifies the ‘sugar cane’, not the ‘sheath of silver’
The schema for this example is given in (9):

9) \[ oi \quad kap \quad ngvn \quad lam \quad song \]
\[ \text{[HEAD MODIFIER]} \quad \text{[HEAD MODIFIER]} \]
\[ \text{[HEAD MODIFIER MODIFIER]} \quad \text{MODIFIER} \]

The phrases \textit{kap} \textit{ngvn} and \textit{lam} \textit{song} are not possessors, but are describing attributes of the head \textit{oi}. In this function they share some of the properties of adjectives, though both are clearly nominal. Their internal structure in each case is that of noun attribute, with both \textit{ngvn} and \textit{song} behaving in this case like attributive adjectives.

Sometimes the modification can be ambiguous. Consider (10):

10) \[ khop \quad nvn \quad dau \quad tam \quad pha \]
\[ \text{edge} \quad \text{moon} \quad \text{star} \quad \text{there} \quad \text{sky} \]
‘The halo of the moon and stars in the sky.’

We have read the word \textit{khop} as ‘edge, border’, which would be \( \text{opsis} \), \textit{khop}, in Shan. By this reading, the meaning is the ‘halo of the moon and stars’; \textit{nvn dau} is a compound and that compound modifies the head noun \textit{khop}, as in (11a). It is also possible that \textit{khop} should be read as ‘circle’, which is \( \text{circop} \), \textit{khop}; in Shan, and that whole phrase would mean ‘the disk of the moon, and the stars’, as suggested by the schema in (11b).

11) a. [\textit{khop} [\textit{nvn} + \textit{dau}]] ‘halo of the moon and stars’
   b. [[\textit{khop} \textit{nvn}] + \textit{dau}]] ‘the disc of the moon, and the stars’

The (a) reading is preferred because it corresponds to the structures we have seen above in (8) and (9), and also gives equal status to the words ‘moon’ and ‘star’.

The order of elements is usually head modifier, but in (12) and (13) we see two phrases with very similar examples but apparently different ordering. In both of these examples the phrase we are looking at has the same meaning, ‘lower county’.

12) \[ po \quad la \quad mvng \quad mav \quad chau \quad ja \quad pang \]
   \[ \text{if} \quad \text{lower country} \quad 2SG \quad \text{RESP} \quad \text{PROH} \quad \text{invite} \]
‘Do not (come) by the lower country, oh you my (Lord).’
The second of these examples, (13), follows the expected pattern of head-modifier, where *mvng* ‘country’ is the head modified by *tav* ‘under’, the whole thing meaning ‘lower country’.

On the face of it, the phrase *la mvng* in (12) appears to violate this order, in that the head appears to be the modifier position. When discussing this example, Nabin Shyam made the point that *la mvng* in Tai Aiton refers to the south. Medini Mohan made the point that *ru pi* ‘head year’ and *la pi* meant the head and the end of the year respectively. In other words it seems that *la* is probably a noun meaning something like ‘the bottom’, and *la mvng* is ‘the bottom which is a country’, a quite different form of modification with a very similar meaning to that in (13).

Perhaps the clearest example of modifier-head order is (14), which has an NP in which the relative clause precedes the head:

(14) *The lineage of those who use the pen, are called elephants.*

The pre-head relative clause, *tv svng lang* ‘who use the pen (i.e. place where elephants live)’ is marked by the article *cham*, which is something which we have not seen with the post head relative clauses. The reason for this is probably pragmatic. This is perhaps a kind of cleft construction, literally: “It is those who use the pen, as for their lineage, they are called elephants.”

### 3.2 Discontinuous modification

Having surveyed the various structures that we find in Ahom with contiguous modifier and head, we will now look again at the discontinuous examples. Consider (15), which relates to the birth of a daughter to a very rich man.

(15) *And you have a child who has come out of the womb, she who is the beautiful lady*.

Nemi Mang, 8v4
The phrase ok tong means ‘come out of the womb’, and it is possible that the phrase nang ngam ‘beautiful lady’ could be the modifier (possessor) of the noun tong, with a meaning ‘come out of the womb of the beautiful lady’. However in this case, our translation is that the beautiful lady refers to the child, not the mother, and nang ngam modifies the earlier element luk ‘child’. The context of this line is that the Queen of a certain country is talking about a potential bride for her son (the bride being the luk in this example). So the final element nang ngam is modifying a topical element, luk.

Another example of a similar type is (16):

\[ \text{sa thi chum khom khun mvng nyav si chang} \]

Rich joy word prince country big SEQ elephant

‘The rich man is joyful at the words of the prince of country, (words that are) greater than an elephant.’

Nemi Mang, 10v4

In this example, the phrase yav si chang modifies khom ‘word’, where the sequential marker si is marking the comparison. It would certainly be possible for the prince of the country to be described as being ‘greater than an elephant’, but following the principles we have already indicated, this translation is not proposed.

Consider (17), spoken in a context where a king of a foreign land has met up with a woman who is dressed as a man.

\[ \text{tau ba bau ka bau tuk phai pha} \]

Wish say young man trade young man fall side sky

‘Believing that this young trader in various things, a trader who had fallen from the side of the sky, would be a man.’

Nemi Mang, 32v5

In this example, the phrase pin chai modifies the head bau ka, as does the phrase bau tuk phai pha; the phrase lak khvng modifies ka. The overall structure of this example is as in (18):

\[ \text{tau ba [bau ka bau tuk phai pha lak khvng]} \text{NP pin chai} \]

The NP itself contains a complex structure, where lak khvng modifies an element that it is separated from. All of the information about the trader is topical information, the focus is a predicate focus, pin chai.

In (19), the word non has double function, one referring back to the topic, khup mv ‘when the time was complete’, and one relating to the prince.
When the time was complete for sleeping, she had not reached the sleeping hut of the prince.'
Nemi Mang, 27r2

Chaichuen Khamdaengyodtai said that in modern spoken Shan, the word for ‘sleep’ would be repeated, as in (20):

> When the time for sleeping came, she had not (yet) reached the sleeping hut of the prince.'

The fact that the original Ahom text only requires the word non once, and that at the end of the utterance, seems to be further evidence for the general contention of a structure where the final element(s) refer back.

Sometimes this modification can extend across several lines of text, as in (21) and (22), where the words khrat jav in (22) modify chvk in (21).

‘A swarming group of 100,000 men stretch out the sails and put in the ropes

‘And moreover the rich prince set out on foot to search for the eldest child, with (sails) bound like a spider’s web.’
Nemi Mang, 28r1
4. Additional topic

The phenomenon of a final element of an utterance modifying not the element immediately before it, but rather some earlier topical portion, could be regarded as a poetic device, given that these are written texts with poetic features. However, it may also represent the way that Ahom was spoken.

When making a study of the Turung variety of Singpho (unrelated to Ahom) I suggested that the pragmatic ordering in the language as that given in (23): (from Morey 2010)

23) (TOPIC) FOCUS (ADDITIONAL TOPIC)

An example of this structure is given in (24).

24) si wa gai yown hah khi ♪
   sii³ waa² gai³ yoon³ haʔ¹ khi³
   [die COS]TOP [very mourn DECL]FOC [3SG]ADD
   ‘After her death he was in severe mourning.’
   SDM07-20050703-013, told by Phonidhar Shyam (Doga), (17)

This example was taken from a story of a devout man who was newly wed, and whose wife died on the 7th day of their marriage. At the point at which (24) was spoken, we have already been told that the wife has died, so the initial bracketed section is the topic of this example: the focus is the mourning itself, and the agent argument, khi is in what we are terming the additional topic position. This last position is used for afterthoughts, but not all of the elements found in this position are afterthoughts.

Another example is (25):

25) ntheyng he rai hah i na ♪
   n³theeŋ³ hee¹ rai¹ haʔ¹ i³ na³
   [these STILL be DECL]FOC [1PL POSS]ADD
   ‘This much is ours.’
   SDM07-200304-005, told by Muhidhar Shyam, (128)

This example consists of a focal section, literally ‘this much it is’, and an additional topic ‘ours’. The splitting of what would be a single NP i na ntheyng he licenses the presence of rai.

In (26) we see a clause, marked with the topic marker, in the additional topic position. The literal translation of this would be ‘the being lit caused everything to be finished up.’

26) yong he sthum hah khat nga na Go ♪
   yon⁲ hee¹ sthum² haʔ¹ khat³ nga² na³ Go¹
   group STILL CAUS-finish DECL [burn HAVE SEQ TOP]TOP
   ‘Everything is destroyed by that burning.’
   SDM07-20050705-013, told by Prabin Shyam, (16)

This example is perhaps clearer in showing the relationship between the final element, khat nga na go and the elements from earlier in the clause.

Examples from spoken Tai:

a) The quantifier separated from the topical element, luk nai.
27) em mnq woa lukq en kW ta AW sogq tuwq /
mE2 mvn2 wA5 luk4 nai4 kau2 ta1 au2 sauN6 to2
wife 3sg say child that 1SG will take two CLF
“The wife said: ‘I'll take two of the children.’”
(Phake Story, Story of dogs dividing up their children, No. (7), told by Sam Thun Wingkyen)

b) The additional topic position for the agent

28) lik4 tF kJw ftD ep ka sahpq
lik4 tjm3 kz4 phat1 phat1 pj4 kA1 sA1 hAp1
book write LINK read can GO Sahib
‘He can read the books when they are written, the Sahib.’
(Explanation of Phake text. Poem in the khe2 khyän2 style: How Stephen Morey came to the Tai Phakes. No (90.1), read by Aije Let Hailowng)

5. Conclusions

- Discontinuous modification is a pervasive feature in the Ahom manuscripts
- There appears to be some pragmatic foundation for it; the final elements in utterances being related back to the topical elements at the beginning of the utterance
- This has some similarity with the ‘additional topic’ position as described for the Turung variety of Singpho, and possibly also present in some spoken Tai.
- Since Ahom is not ‘case marked’, other methods than case marking have to be used to disambiguate the meaning
- A ‘dependency’ analysis, following Barry Blake’s seminar and van Valin 2001, would work much better than a ‘constituency’ analysis.
- We concur with Barry’s analysis that the structure of the clause appears to be flat because, as in Kalkatungu, “apparent modifiers (are) regularly separated from their apparent heads”.

6. Bibliography


