

# Adjectives are not verbs in lu Mien

---

Low Saelee & Yining Nie

San José State University

LSA Annual Meeting 2025 @ Philadelphia

January 9–12, 2025

# Introduction

**Iu Mien** (ISO: ium) is a Hmong-Mien language spoken by the Iu Mien (also called Yao) people primarily in southern China and in Vietnam, Thailand and Laos



# Introduction

- Ratliff (2010) estimates 840,000 native speakers in the Lu Mien homeland and global diaspora, mostly in the US and Canada
- SVO word order, morphologically simple
- Most tones are marked orthographically with a final consonant
- Close and prolonged contact with Chinese, resulting in Chinese loanwords in all parts of speech

(1) Ninh oix naaiv yiemc lui.  
3SG like DEM CLF shirt  
'S/he likes this shirt.'

## Goals of the talk

- Like in many other Asian languages, words with adjective-like meanings in Lu Mien have been claimed to be lexicalized as verbs rather than adjectives (Court 1985, Arisawa 2016)
- We argue that Lu Mien indeed has true adjectives as a distinct lexical category
- We present evidence from word order, tone sandhi and exceptional adjectives

(2) Ninh oix [naaiv yiemc *lui-* **ndaauv**].  
3SG like DEM CLF shirt long  
'S/he likes this long shirt.'

## **Adjectives vs verbs**

---

Property concepts are meanings that are usually lexicalized as adjectives in languages that have adjectives as a lexical category (Dixon 1982)

- Property concept classes include: Dimension, age, value, colour, physical, speed, human propensity
- Semantically, adjectives and verbs both denote properties
- Syntactically, adjectives and verbs may differ

## Types of modification

We can distinguish two ways to modify nouns syntactically:

- **Direct modification** as part of the noun phrase (attributive), without any special morphology
- **Indirect modification** as part of the predicate (predicative)

(3) Ninh oix [naaiv yiemc *lui-* **ndaauv**].  
3SG like DEM CLF shirt long  
'S/he likes this long shirt.'

(4) [Naaiv yiemc *lui*] **ndortv** mi'aqv.  
DEM CLF shirt fall PFV  
'This shirt fell.'

- Adjectives canonically involve direct modification
- Verbs canonically involve indirect modification

## Types of modification

In many languages, property concept words can participate in both direct and indirect modification

- (5) Ninh oix [naaiv yiemc *lui*- **ndaauv**].  
3SG like DEM CLF shirt long  
'S/he likes this long shirt.'
- (6) [Naaiv yiemc *lui*] **ndaauv** nyei.  
DEM CLF shirt long AFF  
'This shirt is long.'
- (7) [Naaiv yiemc *lui*] maiv **ndaauv**.  
DEM CLF shirt NEG long  
'This shirt is not long.'



# Adjectives vs stative verbs

Iu Mien property concept words have been claimed to be stative verbs (Court 1985, Arisawa 2016)

- Adjectives are not a distinct lexical category
- Verbs and property concept words are both compatible with the perfective marker *mi'aqv*
- Property concept words with *mi'aqv* a change of state

(8) [Naaiv yiemc *lui*] **ndortv** mi'aqv.  
DEM CLF shirt fall PFV

'This shirt fell.'

(9) [Naaiv yiemc *lui*] **ndaauv** mi'aqv.  
DEM CLF shirt long PFV

'This shirt became long/lengthened.' (compare English *#longed*)

## Adjectives vs stative verbs

In Mien property concept words have been claimed to be stative verbs  
(Court 1985, Arisawa 2016)

- Bare nouns cannot be used predicatively and do not occur with perfective *mi'aqv*

(10) Ninh **lueic** mi'aqv.  
3SG lazy PFV  
'S/he became lazy.'

(11) \*Ninh **sic** mi'aqv.  
3SG problem PFV  
Intended: 'S/he became a problem/problematic.'

## Adjectives vs stative verbs

Iu Mien property concept words have been claimed to be stative verbs (Court 1985, Arisawa 2016)

- What appears to be direct modification actually involves indirect modification, e.g. in the form of a relative clause

(12) Ninh oix [naaiv yiemc *lui-* **ndaauv**].  
3SG like DEM CLF shirt long  
'S/he likes this long shirt.'

(13) Ninh oix [naaiv [**ndaauv** uOV]<sub>RC</sub> yiemc *lui*].  
3SG like DEM long REL CLF shirt  
'S/he likes this shirt that is long.'

We argue that adjectives are a distinct lexical category in Lu Mien

- Word order: Direct modification is postnominal, whereas indirect modification is prenominal
- Tone sandhi: Direct modification triggers tone sandhi, whereas indirect modification does not
- Exceptional adjectives: Some adjectives that are exceptionally prenominal can participate in direct modification but not indirect modification

## **Evidence for adjectives**

---

Like in other Hmong-Mien languages, noun phrase modifiers in Lu Mien are prenominal, with the notable exception of property concept words, which are (mostly) postnominal

- (14) Dem > Num > Classifier > *Noun* > **PC**  
naaiv    buo    yienc    *lui-*    **maeng**  
DEM    three    CLF    shirt    green  
'these three green shirts'

- If Lu Mien has stative verbs but no adjectives, then what appears to be direct modification actually involves indirect modification
- Direct modification: Postnominal
- Two strategies for indirect modification: Prenominal
  - Relative clauses, full and reduced
  - *Nyei* linker construction

## Direct modification: Postnominal

- (15) naaiv norm *don-* **mbuov-** **waaic**  
DEM CLF chair blue broken  
'this broken blue chair'
- (16) naaiv buonv *sou-* **siqv-** **nzueic**  
DEM CLF book red beautiful  
'this beautiful red book'

Relative clauses: Prenominal, between the demonstrative and numeral

- Reduced relative clause: Relativizer *uov* is omitted, also an adjacent classifier (if any)

(17) *naaiv [yie maaiz daaih (uov)]<sub>RC</sub> buo yiemc lui*  
DEM 1SG buy come REL three CLF shirt  
'these three shirts (that) I bought'

(18) [*zueiz jienv don (uov)]<sub>RC</sub> (dauh) *mienh*  
sit PROG chair REL CLF person  
'a/the person (who is) sitting in a chair'*



Relative clauses: Prenominal, between the demonstrative and numeral

- Property concepts in relative clause: Prenominal
- Reduced relative clauses with PCs are degraded

(19) naaiv [maeng ??(uov)]<sub>RC</sub> (yiemc) *lui*  
DEM green REL CLF shirt  
'this shirt that is green'

(20) [siqv ??(uov)]<sub>RC</sub> (buonv) *sou*  
red REL CLF book  
'a/the book that is red'

*Nyei* linker construction: Prenominal, between the classifier and noun

- (21) *Jorn nyei maa nyei a'nziaauc.doic nyei biauv*  
John LK mother LK friend LK house  
'John's mother's friend's house'
- (22) *naaiv buo yienc [yie maaiz daaih] nyei lui*  
DEM three CLF 1SG buy come LK shirt  
'these three shirts I bought'
- (23) *naaiv yienc maeng nyei lui*  
DEM CLF green LK shirt  
'this green shirt'
- (24) *siqv nyei sou*  
red LK book  
'a/the red book'

- Direct modification is postnominal, whereas indirect modification is prenominal
- Adjectives therefore cannot be analyzed as indirect modification of the noun within a reduced relative clause or linker construction

Tones in Iu Mien are marked orthographically with a final consonant

- Checked syllables end in an oral (*p, t, k*) or glottal stop (*q*)

(25) Iu Mien tone inventory (Purnell 2012)

Tone	Orthography	Example	
high-mid	unmarked	<i>zei</i>	'abstain'
low level	<i>c</i>	<i>zeic</i>	'self'
mid fall	<i>h</i>	<i>zeih</i>	'paddle'
high rise-fall	<i>v</i>	<i>zeiv</i>	'paper'
low rise	<i>x</i>	<i>zeix</i>	'coop'
low rise-fall	<i>z</i>	<i>zeiz</i>	'correct'
low level (checked)	<i>c</i>	<i>zepc</i>	'parboil'
high level (checked)	<i>v</i>	<i>zepv</i>	'stay'

# Tone sandhi

lu Mien exhibits tone sandhi within the noun phrase, triggered by a noun or adjective on a preceding noun or adjective

- Marked orthographically with a hyphen, unless there is no surface change

(26) Tone sandhi in nominal compounds

jae-      jaux      ‘chicken egg’

ndeic-    liuh      ‘field cabin’

hnoi-      hnoi      ‘every day’

(27) Tone sandhi rules

- a. Rule 1: checked syllables  $\rightarrow c$
  - b. Rule 2: all other syllables  $\rightarrow h$
- Direct modification: Tone sandhi
  - Indirect modification: No tone sandhi

Direct modification: Tone sandhi

- (28) naaiv yienc *lui-* **ndaauv**  
DEM CLF shirt long  
'this long shirt'
- (29) naaiv norm *don-* **mbuov-** waaic  
DEM CLF chair blue broken  
'this broken blue chair'
- (30) naaiv buonv *sou-* **siqv-** nzueic  
DEM CLF book red beautiful  
'this beautiful red book'

Indirect modification: No tone sandhi

- Property concepts in reduced relative clauses

(31) naaiv [**maeng** ??(uov)]<sub>RC</sub> (yiemc) *lui*  
DEM green REL CLF shirt  
'this shirt that is green'

(32) \*naaiv [**maeng-** (uov)]<sub>RC</sub> (yiemc) *lui*  
DEM green REL CLF shirt

Indirect modification: No tone sandhi

- *Nyei* linker construction

(33) naaiv yienc **maeng** nyei *lui*  
DEM CLF green LK shirt  
'this green shirt'

(34) \*naaiv yienc **maeng-** nyei *lui*  
DEM CLF green LK shirt

(35) **siqv** nyei *sou*  
red LK book  
'a/the red book'

(36) \***siqv-** nyei- *sou*  
red LK book



- Direct modification triggers tone sandhi, whereas indirect modification does not
- Adjectives therefore cannot be analyzed as indirect modification of the noun within a reduced relative clause or linker construction

Iu Mien has a handful of adjectives that are exceptionally prenominal

- Most of these exceptional adjectives were borrowed from Chinese (Purnell 1972, Downer 1973, Ratliff 2010, Arisawa 2016)

(37) Prenominal adjectives

- domh* 'big'
- fiuv* 'small'
- siang* 'new'
- loz* 'old'
- zien* 'real'
- hieh* 'wild'
- jaav* 'fake' (undergoing change in progress; Arisawa 2016, Saelee & Nie to appear)

## Exceptional adjectives

Iu Mien has a handful of adjectives that are exceptionally prenominal

- Prenominal adjectives participate in tone sandhi

- (38) naaiv norm **fiuv-** *sic*  
DEM CLF small problem  
'this small problem'
- (39) naaiv dauh **hieh** *dungz*  
DEM CLF wild pig  
'this wild pig'
- (40) naaiv norm **siang-** *don-* **mbuov**  
DEM CLF new chair blue  
'this new blue chair'

Iu Mien has a handful of adjectives that are exceptionally prenominal

- Despite these exceptional adjectives being prenominal, they should also not be analyzed as involving indirect modification
- Some exceptional adjectives cannot participate in indirect modification
- For those adjectives that can participate in indirect modification, we can nonetheless distinguish between the direct and indirect strategies

## Exceptional adjectives

Some exceptional adjectives cannot participate in indirect modification

- These adjectives cannot be used predicatively and therefore cannot be part of a relative clause

(41) naaiv norm **fiuv-** sic  
DEM CLF small problem  
'this small problem'

(42) \*[Naaiv norm sic] **fiuv** haic.  
DEM CLF problem small very  
Intended: 'This problem is very small.'

(43) \*naaiv [**fiuv** uov]<sub>RC</sub> norm sic  
DEM small REL CLF problem  
Intended: 'this problem that is small'

## Exceptional adjectives

For those adjectives that can participate in indirect modification, we can nonetheless distinguish between the direct and indirect strategies

- Direct modification: Classifier before adjective, tone sandhi
- Reduced relative clause: No classifier, no tone sandhi

(44) naaiv norm **siang-** *don*  
DEM CLF new chair  
'this new chair'

(45) [Naaiv norm *don*] **siang** haic.  
DEM CLF chair new very  
'This chair is very new.'

(46) naaiv [**siang** ??(uov)]<sub>RC</sub> (norm) *don*  
DEM new REL CLF chair  
'this chair that is new'

# Conclusion

- We showed that Lu Mien has distinct direct and indirect modification strategies for modifying nouns
- The existence of direct modification provides evidence for the status of adjectives as a lexical category, contra previous proposals that analyzed adjectives as stative verbs
- Our argument should extend to other Hmong-Mien languages, which have postnominal adjectives and prenominal relative clauses
- Next steps: Comparatives

Thank you! Laengz zingh camv!

Research reported in this presentation was supported by the Division of Research and Innovation at San José State University under Award Number 23-RSG-07-070. The content is solely the responsibility of the author and does not necessarily represent the official views of San José State University.

## References

- Arisawa, Tatsuro Daniel. 2016. *An Iu Mien grammar: A tool for language documentation and revitalisation*. PhD dissertation: LaTrobe University.
- Court, Christopher A.F. 1985. *Fundamentals of Iu Mien (Yao) Grammar*. PhD dissertation: University of California, Berkeley.
- Dixon, R.M.W. 1982. *Where have all the adjectives gone? And other essays in semantics and syntax*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Downer, Gordon B. 1973. Strata of Chinese loanwords in the Mien dialect of Yao. In W. Simon (ed.), *Asia Major: A British Journal of Far Eastern Studies* 18:1-33. London: Lund Humphries.
- Purnell, Herbert C. 1972. *Miao and Yao linguistic studies; selected articles in Chinese*, translated by Chang Yu-hung and Chu Kwo-ray.
- Purnell, Herbert C. 2012. *Iu-Mienh-English Dictionary: With Cultural Notes*. Silkworm Books.
- Ratliff, Martha. 2010. *Hmong-Mien Language History*. Canberra, Australia: Pacific Linguistics.
- Saelee, Low & Yining Nie. To appear. Adjective ordering in Iu Mien. *Proceedings of SEALS 33*.