Chapter 6
Conclusion

This thesis has given a brief description of Tai Dam phonology and grammar. It has compiled an inventory of referring expressions and examined their various functions in identifying referents and signaling thematic salience. This chapter summarizes the findings of the study, evaluates the methodology used and considers the significance of these findings with suggestions for further research.

6.1 Summary of findings

The texts included in this study revealed a variety of referring expressions available to a speaker of Tai Dam. These referring expressions include NPs with restrictive and non-restrictive modifiers, possessive phrases, NPs with CLF, NPs with DEM, proper nouns, kin terms, pronouns, topicalized constructions, CLF phrases, demonstratives, zero anaphora and constructions using the particle b^{21}. Each of these referring expressions is used to signal the identifiability, activation status and thematic salience of referents in a Tai Dam discourse.

Based on topic-continuity measurements the texts in this study were found to have major participants, minor participants and peripheral participants and props. Major participants tend to be introduced with an existential verb followed by background information about that participant. This is not the case for all the major participants in the texts and more data is needed to provide a clearer depiction of the system of introducing participants.

The texts in the study follow a participant identification system that is primarily sequential, with occasional presence of a local VIP. Participants are generally coded according to their context, as a reflection of Givón's iconicity principle, which states that "the more disrupting, surprising, discontinuous or hard to process a topic is, the more coding material must be assigned to it" (1983: 18).

More coding material tended to appear at thematic boundaries and other text discontinuities, and was also used for the purpose of peak-marking or indicating the

salience of a participant in some segment of the discourse. Likewise, less coding material was used when there was no risk of ambiguity in identifying the correct referent. Default encoding patterns accounted for a total of 90% of the referents.

6.2 Evaluation of methodology

As the inventory of referring expressions was compiled, it was helpful to look at each referent in terms of its identfiability and activation status. This helped in determining the discourse function of each type of referring expression as patterns emerged in the analysis.

To use Givón's (1983) methods of measuring topic continuity as a means for determining participant rank was also helpful, but as the analysis in chapter 4 revealed, the methods can at times be misleading as well. The initial results of the simple count of activations, the referential distance value and the persistence value would rank participants differently. On the one hand, this could be somewhat corrected by adjusting the referential distance scores to reflect the number of activations in the text as whole. Doing this caused the results to come closer together. In the end, it was seen as a helpful method but the researcher must pay attention to factors that can affect the results of a particular measurement, such as the number of episodes in which a participant is present or the number of participants with which he or she shares the stage. Ranking the participants according to the number of episodes they appear in appears to be worth considering as a fourth method to add to the three from Givón.

Using Dooley & Levinsohn's (2001) method was beneficial for identifying default encoding values. Decisions had to be made about how to categorize a group that was split into individuals or individual referents that were combined into a group. Various researchers who have dealt with this issue have resolved it differently. In this case, treating these as S4/N4 seemed to be the most helpful way to deal with the text. There were also questions about what to do with summary statements that were present in the text but which seemed so skew the results of the analysis. It was determined not to include these when determining the context for a particular referent. The tentative rules for each context deal with the highest percentage of encoding for that context, and resolving the rules to incorporate patterned exceptions accounted for the majority of the referents. It was not possible in every case to suggest a motivation for deviations from the proposed defaults.

6.3 Significance of findings

The findings of this analysis add to the knowledge of the Tai Dam language and the Tai language family, as well as the body of research dealing with discourse analysis and participant reference. The texts that make up the corpus for this study can be a source of study for other aspects of Tai Dam grammar and discourse.

6.4 Further research

There is still much work to be done in studying the Tai Dam language. Further research in other areas of discourse analysis is needed to have a clearer picture of Tai Dam discourse. This could include analysis of other aspects of fiction or folktale texts such as macrostructures or notional and surface structure. Analysis of non-fiction narrative texts is also needed, along with other genres of Tai Dam discourse, such as expository and hortatory texts.

There are also specific areas of further research relating to difficulties that were encountered in this study. One such area of further research relates to the difficulty in determining the difference between direct and indirect speech. The factors governing the selection of demonstratives (particularly when used for tracking participants) also merit further research. Relating to the participant identification system, it would be helpful to have a larger corpus with an adequate number of referents to allow further investigation of each of the eight contexts.

Additional research could be done to better understand aspects of Tai Dam grammar. One particular area of research needed would be the use of Tai Dam particles in general, or the topic-marking or contrast-marking particle b^{21} in particular. Other areas for grammatical exploration include the sequential indicators $jiən^{55}$, $tɕaŋ^{45}$ and $kɔ^{21}$, the possible analysis of $niŋ^{44}$ 'one' or $diəw^{22}$ 'only one' as determiners instead of quantifiers, and a comparison of the syntax between the Tai Dam in Laos and Thailand with the Tai Dam in Vietnam.