

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Research problem and paper background

If we look at the sun rising or setting in the horizon, it will appear much bigger than when it is high in the sky. Does it mean that our eyes deceive us? In fact, our eyes do not deceive us. To quote Immanuel Kant, 'this is not because they always judge correctly, but because they do not judge at all'. It is us who make a judgment, choosing to see a certain section of the world and filter out the rest. No one has a neutral "God's eye" view, as Langacker says (2002: 206). The way we see the world is motivated by our cognitive abilities since cognition and perception are parts of one interrelated system.

Our cognitive abilities are ubiquitous and real in our every day life not only in thought but also in language. That is to say, cognitive abilities are reflected in language. The question is how are they reflected in language, more precisely, in the Lahu Shi language? This paper is an attempt to show some of the cognitive abilities involved in Lahu Shi, particularly in Lahu Shi aspect.

CG is an approach that allows an expression's meaning to be treated as conceptual content which can be shaped and construed (i.e., conceptualized in alternative ways). This paper suggests that an expression that Lahu Shi speakers choose in order to linguistically encode a situation depends on the way in which the situation is mentally construed. This includes not only lexical expression but grammatical expressions as well. It is the latter (Lahu Shi aspect markers) that is the main focus. It assumes that the semantic and grammatical differences between aspect markers in Lahu Shi rest upon their distinct construals and semantic values. They will be analyzed along the lines of CG (1987a, 1991a, 1991b, 2000, 2002a).

Another topic in this study is about Lahu Shi evidentiality. If language is viewed only as a system of communication, we can say that all animals have some system for communicating with other members of their species. However, only humans can produce and understand ever-new messages and to do so without any outside stimulus. It is this stimulus-freedom that in part makes human language differ from animal communication system. Bees, for example, are able to tell other bees where a source of food is by doing a dance, but this has to take place on the spot or at the immediate present. That is, a bee is not able to report its yesterday's discovery of food today.

If human language is stimulus-free, how can we tell other people about, for example, our past experience, plan for future, or dreams; specify sources of information, then? I assume that each language has linguistic devices that allow the speakers to communicate in such way, and that evidentiality is one of those in Lahu Shi. The question is what is the nature of evidentiality that allows the speaker to specify sources of information?

I assume that although we do not communicate in response to some particular stimulus out there in the world, our communication needs to be in relation to a certain context of the speech event to some degree. In other words, in order to communicate the content of our thoughts to the others successfully, we (e.g. speaker and hearer) need to have, literally, a certain reference point which allows us to specify what kind of situation we are talking about by relating it to that reference point. This is made possible by our control of a symbolic system which allows us to communicate messages to others. CG is driven by this idea – language is inherently symbolic in nature. Since language is a symbolic system, it provides a set of resources that are available to language users to communicate a message with great cognitive and communicative utility. The set of resources which is deictic in nature and has certain

additional properties (e.g. epistemic status) is referred to as '**grounding elements**' by Langacker (1991a, 1991b, 2002a and b). My assumption, then, is that Lahu Shi evidentials allow the speaker to specify sources of information owing to their function of grounding.

This paper is an attempt to show that Lahu Shi evidentials are grounding elements. By describing evidentials as grounding elements, it helps us to understand not only why they enable language users to specify sources of information and their epistemic status (to indicate whether a process belongs to certainty), but also why omitting them results in an ungrammatical sentence. I also analyze the Lahu Shi evidentiality within the notion of grounding developed by Langacker (1987a, 1991a, 1991b, 2000, 2002a and b).

## **1.1 Objectives of the research**

There are three objectives in this study. First, I show how cognitive abilities are reflected in the Lahu Shi language. Second, I show that the meaning of an aspect marker in Lahu Shi, together with its grammatical behavior, is critically dependent on its nature of construal and semantic value. Finally, I show the nature of Lahu Shi evidentials from a CG perspective. That is, Lahu Shi evidentials function as grounding elements.

## **1.2 Methodology**

### **1.2.1 Data collection**

Two types of sources of data were used in this thesis, interviewing and data from published materials

The interview data was collected at two sites, the Linguistics Department, Payap University in Chiang Mai Province and the Lahu Shi Balan village, Nong Pham in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. Eight sessions took place at Payap University with help from two mother tongue speakers from the village. In Nong Pham village, the data was collected during two one-week periods and one-day trip<sup>1</sup>.

Seven texts were chosen to serve as the basis for grammatical investigation, five of which are folk tales, and the others are daily life stories.

### 1.2.2 The transcription system

The transcription system chosen was the Lahu Shi orthography developed by a group of Lahu Shi people and Arthur Cooper. The Lahu Shi writing system, using Roman letters, is based on a writing system in use by the closely related Lahu Na language group. See how phonemic sounds in Lahu Shi are represented in orthographic symbols in Section 2.1.1.

### 1.2.3 Procedure

I started off by doing library research. Linguistic books and articles in cognitive orientation and other topics related to the research were studied to gain more understanding of the subject. After library research, I culled some examples from the seven texts to serve as the basis for linguistic investigation. I also culled examples from conversations and observations during my village visits.

I built up this database by interviewing native speakers of Lahu Shi for the ways that they used aspect markers and evidentials. I explained to them what I was investigating so that they understood my goals.

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<sup>1</sup> The primary language assistants were Ehrsehnx Nazkhiri, and Edawx kehor Nazkhiri

The following are examples of questions used as a guideline for gathering the data and understanding them.

- Can you think of any sentences or clauses containing \_\_\_\_\_ (an aspect marker or an evidential)?
- What does it mean?
- Can you give an example of when you used it? Or, can you think of a situation where one would use it?
- What do you say in situation \_\_\_\_\_?
- How do you feel if I say a sentence or a clause containing \_\_\_\_\_ (an aspect marker or an evidential) to you?
- How do you feel if I say a sentence or a clause omitting \_\_\_\_\_ (an aspect marker or an evidential) to you?
- What is the difference between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_?

In order to get shades of meaning, I demonstrated to the language assistants the meaning and the use of Thai examples<sup>2</sup>, not only to help them understand what I was looking for but to help them be aware of linguistic nuances. I subsequently double-checked the meaning and the use of examples with them and other native Lahu Shi speakers.

After the data was collected, an analysis was done using the CG approach developed by Langacker (1987a, 1991a, 1991b, 2000, 2002a and b). The aspect

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<sup>2</sup> My informants are bilingual in Thai.

markers were categorized on the basis of construal; precisely, profiling. Then each aspect marker was analyzed to discover how its nature of profiling and semantic value influences its grammatical behavior. Finally, the evidentials were analyzed on the basis of grounding.

### **1.3 Limitations of the study**

I will ignore the precise contribution of the aspect marker *vehor*, that is its role of grounding, and focus only on how it makes a change in the nature of the profile of a process resulting in semantic and grammatical differences. Furthermore, owing to the large number of aspect markers in Lahu Shi, only five were chosen to analyze. A complete discussion of the Lahu Shi evidentiality system, together with the grounding system, is also outside the scope of this thesis.

### **1.4 Overview of the paper**

Chapter 2 gives an overview of Lahu Shi people and their language. Chapter 3 gives the literature review of some central concepts and assumptions of Cognitive Grammar used in the research as well as Lahu studies. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of construal: our cognitive abilities, that is, perspective and profiling reflected in Lahu Shi. Chapter 5 illustrates the evidential system as a grounding system. Chapter 6 is the conclusion of the paper.