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Parallelism in Kayah Li Discourse: elaborate expressions and beyond
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1. Introduction. Let us define parallelism as, roughly, the binary repetition of linguistic features for rhythmic, esthetic or other expressive effect. This definition intentionally covers a very broad range of linguistic phenomena: repetition of all features of an item covers (full) reduplication, repetition of only some phonological features covers alliteration and rhyme, repetition of only semantic features covers synonym compounding and poetic/rhetorical parallelism, and so on.

Although all languages probably exhibit parallelism in some form, it has a special prominence in the linguistic area consisting of mainland Southeast Asia and China. Below are some examples from various languages of the area.

Full and partial reduplication; synonym and antonym compounds

Thai ลำลำเทยเทย 'sleep+sleep+rouse+rouse: sleep fitfully'. Full reduplication, antonymy.
ลดหลาญ 'deceive+dupe: deceive, dupe'. Partial reduplication (alliteration), synonymy.
สัญญา 'shirt+lower-garment: clothes'. Quasi-antonymy.

買賣 máimài 'buy+sell: business, commerce'. Antonymy.
左右 zūoyòu 'left+right: approximately'. Antonymy.

4-syllable Elaborate Expressions

Thai มูห ห่ด ค่ำก 'pig+mushroom+duck+chicken: various meats'. ABCD, B and C rhyme.

Chinese 乱七八糟 luàn qī bā zāo 'disordered+seven+eight+wretched: all messed up'. ABCD, A-D and B-C linked semantically.
天南地北 tiān nán dì běi 'heaven+south+earth+north: poles apart'. ABCD, A-C and B-D quasi-antonyms.

Lahu chi mù chi mì 'this+heaven+this+earth: this land of ours' (Matisoff:82). ABAC, B-C quasi-antonyms.
Larger structures

Thai  
\(aw\ huu\ paj\ nua\ aw\ taa\ paj\ rai\)
'take+ear+go+field+take+eye+go+dry.field: pretend not to see'

Yu Mien  
\(dja^3\ dzwe^2\ fim^1\ nau^3,\ mien^2\ dzwe^2\ nau^1\ tsha^3\)
'tree+beautiful+core+twist, person+beautiful+heart+mean: a beautiful tree with a twisted core; an attractive person with a mean heart' (Lombard:336).

Vietnamese  
khôn bả năm đái mốt giờ 'wise+one+year, stupid+one+hour: a year's wisdom can be ruined by an instant's foolishness' (Nguyen:70)

Chinese  
7-syllable regulated verse of the Tang dynasty

In the river the moon is but a few feet from the onlooker
The hurricane lamp shines in the night's third watch
On the sandbar the roosting heron in sinuous stillness
At the boat's stern the jumping fish plip-plop echoes.

poem by Du Fu (712-770), display by W.H.Baxter, free translation by DBS
Languages outside of the mainland Southeast Asia-China area

English  buy now pay later; garbage in, garbage out; pots 'n pans; shoes 'n socks.

Tagalog  original ang sarap, original ang sangkap 'the flavor is original, the ingredients are original' (D. Gil)

Hebrew  al tikah čans, kah alians 'don't take a chance, take Alliance [brand of tires]' (D. Gil)

I leave the reader to explore the many types and levels of parallelism in the Tang poem; note that the phonological parallelism extends to the four tones of Middle Chinese, which are for this purpose grouped into two types, one 'level' versus the three 'oblique'. Note also that the roosting heron is parallelistically opposed to the jumping fish, not only by stillness versus motion, but also by predator versus prey.

The preceding examples provide only a cursory survey of the range of parallelism in the mainland Southeast Asia-China area. The four-part structures known as Elaborate Expressions (the term was first applied by Haas (1964:xvii) to Thai) are perhaps the most distinctive, and the most characteristic of the area. The Kayah Li version of these falls into the type of parallelistic expression that is our main concern in this article.

2. Parallelism in Kayah Li. Kayah Li is a language of the Karen group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan, spoken in Kayah State of Burma and in adjacent parts of Thailand. This article deals with the Eastern dialect, as recorded by me in the vicinity of the capital of Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand.¹

Before proceeding to our main concern, I will list the various types of parallelism found in Kayah Li.

We begin with two types of simple repetition or full reduplication: first, a sentence-final morpheme of reduplication, meaning 'also, in response'.²

(1)  vē ma ʔe kā phē thē ja  ja
    1s be.so eat COM simply pig flesh [redup]
    I ate only pork, too (as did he).
(2) ʔa cwá kā kā
3 go com [redup]
He went along too.

There are also classifier constructions of the type pwā nā pwā nā 'every+day+every+day: every day, day in day out'.

Parallel expressions involving less-than-full repetition fall into two types.

Type 1: unstructured, derived. This type may be represented by kēkikēkwa 'V something long so part remains'. Its two main characteristics are:

a. Four-part structure with the pattern ABAC, either four full syllables (as in the above example) or two prefix+syllable pairs, e.g. topłotopjā 'hurried'.

b. No internal syntactic structure, hence 'unstructured'. The whole expression is either a Verb or a Verb Particle.

Of the parts ABAC, the last part C or AC is in many cases also an independent morpheme of related meaning. In kēkikēkwa, relevant items are kwa 'half' (Classifier) and kēkwa 'be in half crosswise, on short axis'. This fact, plus some phonological patterning, suggests that most or all of this type can be analyzed as derivationally related to the part C morpheme; hence the description 'derived'.

Type 2: Grammatically-structured, non-derived.
This type comes in all sizes, and is the primary focus of this article. Below are a few examples indicating the range of possibilities.

disyllabic words. ha 'pants' + ca 'shirt' haca 'clothes'; sūsā 'complicated' (not analyzable)
two disyllabic compounds. ʔeho ʔehi 'steal+steal(cp): steal and pilfer', ʔokhrē ʔotē 'orphaned+orphaned(cp): orphaned'
four full syllables. ha le ca le 'pants+warm+shirt+warm: warm clothes', thā sū kē sā 'water+com+-land+-plicated: country is complicated' (thākē 'water+country: country, land'; sūsā 'complicated')
six full syllables. khē sā pā sā pō sā 'shot to death, cut to death, collided to death' (256.4)
two full clauses. mò le hé ʔa domê lū ?ipli sō sō, mò le tā dome lū ?imū sō plō 'at evening they showed him a greenwood whip, at sundown they showed him a seedwood switch' (450.4).
Characteristics of Type 2 expressions.

a. They are of all sizes, from disyllabic words to paired clauses.

b. Those of four syllables or more have grammatical structure. For four syllables ABCD, the first two items AB bear a grammatical relation to each other, such as Verb-Object or Modifier/Head, and that relation is repeated between the third and fourth items CD.

c. There may or may not be phonetic parallelism.

d. The whole expression may be nominal, verbal or clausal.

3. Place of these expressions in the grammar. Type 1 parallel expressions are lexical items, in many cases derivationally related to some base morpheme. Type 2 expressions are not derived in the usual sense, but arise from the interaction between two mechanisms:

a. parallelism as a relation between morphemes, marked in the lexicon in the same way as the relation between nouns and their associated classifiers.

b. parallelism as an attribute of syntactic structures.

To illustrate some of the consequences of (b), consider the following examples of special behavior of syntactic structures within the scope of parallelism.

(a) Free occurrence of Boun morphemes. *thu 'bird' in jò bá dô thu bá be 'rats how many CLF, birds how many CLF* (B. 3 below). *thu ordinarily does not occur on its own; cf. thu tô 'drongo', thu thwā 'bulbul', thuú 'bird in general' (with suffix ū).

(b) Intrusion of Noun into Verb Complex.

(3) [ʔiswá li ʔiswá lā n₅]ᵥc to

study book study book(cp) at.all NEG

not study at all

Ordinarily the Verb Complex cannot contain any Noun, with highly restricted exceptions. But this Verb Complex, terminated by the Verb Particle n₅, contains two: li 'written matter' and lā the Bound couplet-partner of li.

The two mechanisms (a) and (b) suffice to account for the entire range of Type 2 expressions. There is no basic form from which all others are derived, i.e. the disyllabic compounds are not reduced forms of the larger expressions, and the larger expressions are not expansions of the disyllabic forms. See Solnit forthcoming for arguments for this analysis.
4. Parallelism in discourse. Although extensive study of Kayah Li discourse genres remains to be done, there is a very obvious difference between more or less ordinary conversation and narrative on one hand, and two specialized genres known as donê and ?îrî. donê recounts legendary history, is largely or completely memorized, contains many archaic or obscure words, and makes use of a high degree of parallelism. ?îrî is chanted; beyond that I can say very little and will not deal with it here.

Parallelism is highly characteristic of donê, but it also occurs freely in ordinary conversation. Speakers vary in the degree of parallelism they use in conversation. My impression is that older speakers use more, but I also know certain younger people who use as much as any older speaker.

We proceed to examine three examples of discourse, one from donê and two from conversation. The examples are displayed in a format that indicates which portions consist of parallelistic structures and which do not, with parallelistic forms on the left half of the page and non-parallelistic stretches on the right. The parallelistic structures are arranged so that each element is aligned vertically with its parallelistically-linked counterpart. Within such parallelistic structures, a stray element that lacks a parallelistically-linked counterpart is vertically aligned with a blank. Consider for example segment (A.3) below, here reproduced without glosses:

(4)  ¿e nò to mò du dî bò
     ¿e nò pa to mò li jî da

Here the second occurrence of ¿e nò to 'not eat at all' is modified by the insertion of the durative particle pa, which is therefore shown as corresponding to nothing on the upper line. mò du 'great sky' and mò li 'bright sky' correspond parallelistically, as do dî bò 'umbilical cord' and jî da 'monkey testicle(?)'.

Example A: donê. Context: long ago the sky was rooted in the earth, as a mushroom by its stem (cf. Maspero 1950:185, and Chamberlain 1993 on this motif among Tai-speaking peoples). The stem put forth fruit every day. Bachelor (and other people?) get up early every day and obtain ripe fruit to eat; Lazy Man always arrives late and finds only unripe fruit. Lazy Man is angry and decides to cut the sky stem, wanting to harm Bachelor and his people.
PARALLELISM

(1) ?a pā ʌ mɔ du dibô
3 cut ns sky big umbilical.cord
pā ʌ mɔ li jɔ dʌ
cut ns sky bright monkey testicle
He cut the Great Sky's umbilical cord; he cut the Bright Sky's monkey-testicle

(2) je to-je ?a tuu sɔ bɔ
brandish one-clf 3 severed three-clf
?a pə to-pə ?a tuu bɔ sɔswa təpjə dy mɔ lɛ
3 cut one-clf 3 severed clf six rebound at sky base
With a single sweep three cords were severed; with a single cut six cords were severed; they sprang back up to the sky.
?ɔ cwɔ cɛ
exist go investigate

(3) ?e nɔ to mɔ du dibô
eat at.all neg sky big umbilical.cord
?e nɔ pa to mɔ li jɔ dʌ ledɛ ?e sɔ che pa
eat at.all dur neg sky bright monkey testicle starve eat die food dur
They went to look; they ate nothing of the Great Sky's umbilical cord; they ate nothing of the Bright Sky's monkey-testicle. They were starving.

(4) dɔ phû dî phêle
at child unmarried unmarried
phû se ʔɔ pɔlæŋ
child unmarried exist unmarried
As for the bachelor, the unmarried one
(5) déhâ mé mé mò phrè dō kū
    ask look look old.one aged village in

déhâ mé mé mò bù dō chá na
    ask look look old.one white village nearby
    He asked to find out in the old one's village, he asked to find out near the white
    (-haired) one's village

The clear majority of this passage is in parallelistic form. Especially characteristic of the genre is the preponderance of full clauses in the parallelistic structures, although there are also smaller structures, as in segment (A.4), which is a parallelistic Topic expression followed by the parallelistic Comment clauses of (A.5). Parallels are strictly binary.
Example B. Monologue during conversation. The speaker is lamenting the poor harvest of the season just past, blaming it on the degradations of animal pests. This section is partly a tirade, partly a plea to the pests to not damage his crops so much. It may also be construed as pronouncing a curse on the pests, which runs the risk of retaliation; hence the first segment, implying that others may caution the speaker against cursing, but he is not to be deterred.

PARALLELISM

(1) Ḫchā ṭokhē ma Ḫchā me me ṭā ḥē
berate PTC be.so berate don't don't they say
Ṭiba ma Ṭiba me me ṭā ḥē na
scold be.so berate don't don't they say PTC
'Don't berate,' they say, 'Don't scold either;' they say

(2) kāš: lā becā
cliff master
cho bece
mountain master
jōkhrō becā
rat master
jōkhrō bece
rat master

Ah.. lord of cliffs, master of mountains, lord of rats, master of rats

ve ħē kūkē rūsēlē khā tê-na
ls go swidden [place] apex one-year

I worked the fields at the headwaters of Rusoleh for a year

(3) jō bā dō
rat how.many CLF
thu bā be tē ma
bird how.many CLF PTC
be.so

How many rats, how many birds
(4) hē ʔe tu
    go    eat   in.group
ka ʔō plō  lēkhē lū bā
    come  drink piled.up    PTC    plural.ly here
    they went and ate in herds, came and drank in heaps here

(5) ʔā tōna  vē lū
    this one-year 1s luck
    vē bwī
    1s merit
    vē lū
    1s luck
    tōrā  tā pōhē nē
despite fortune             fall ahead front

This year my luck, my merit, my luck and fortune are going downhill

(6) na  be
    year manifest
lē  lī
    moon bright
    ma jā jā te me nī
    be.so go.and go.and PTC don't PTC
    me pēh  ʔā tō-na ma po  nā nī
do  simply this one-year be.so enough NS PTC

Next year, next time, don't do it! Do it just this year, that's enough!

(7) dā  ma ʔe  dā
    Cucurbita  be.so eat       Cucurbita
lū  ma ʔe  lū
    Momordica  be.so eat      Momordica
kho  ma ʔe lū  kho  nā hō
    yam  be.so eat use.up yam   PTC PTC
The cucumbers they ate, the melons they ate, the yams they ate up.
(8) de kē pē vē ma vē hē phjā rā
put leave BEN 1s be.so 1s go take PTC
ma ?a sûre pa
be.so 3 grueling PTC

What was left for me, I went to get it, but it was grueling.

Here parallelism is employed for eloquence, and possibly also for supernatural effect, suggested by the opening segment's allusion to others warning him against berating. Compared to Example A, the parallelistic structures include far fewer full clauses and more Noun Phrases, such as jò bá dō thu bā be 'how many rats, how many birds', or vē lū vē bwî vē lū tɔrɔ 'my luck, my merit, my luck and fortune'. There are also several non-binary structures, such as the last-cited (unclear whether it is three parts or four), or the three-part expression in (B.7) 'the cucumbers they ate, the melons they ate, the yams they ate up'.

Example C. Conversation. Early in the cool season, local officials have been distributing blankets and warm clothes. The speaker's husband acted as spokesman for some especially poor people seeking these handouts.

PARALLELISM

(1) hū lū pē sī, phēa sī,
like L. mute and.them P. and.them
thérú pē nā ma
T. mute PTC be.so

NO PARALLELISM

(2) kajê mō ?o to
person mother exist NEG
phē ?o to
father exist NEG

People without mother or father
(3)  kajë  ?o  khrë
person  exist  orphaned
  ?o  tië
exist  orphaned(cp)
  ?o  hë
exist  extra
  ?o  klë
exist  extra(cp)

?ë  hé  pjë  ?a  na

People who are orphaned, outcast, abandoned; he spoke on their behalf

(4)  ?ë  dë  kë  ?a  na  ?a  ré  jë

and they [officials] gave them [poor people] things, it was good

(5)  ?ë  ma  ?ë  bë
this  be.so  3i  have.resources  NEG
  ?ë  chë
  to
  ?ë  ?ovë  dë
3i  have.resources(cp)  NEG  3i  be.out.of cooked.rice

This is those without resources, with no wherewithal, without food

(6)  ?ë  phri  bë
  ?ë  ha
3i  buy  have.resources  they  pants
  ?ë  ca  to  jë  hé  pë  ?ë  na
3i  shirt  NEG  go.and.speak  BEN  3i  PTC

They don't have the means to buy clothes; he spoke on their behalf

As in the preceding example of conversation, fewer of the parallelistic structures here cover a full clause; also clauses in general are shorter than in the donë example A. The parallelistic structures of segments (2) and (3) are simply a list of possible descriptions of the category of people in question. Unlike example B, there are no three-part parallel structures; all are binary.

Finally we may note that parallelism is not confined to monologues. Here is an exchange from the same conversation excerpted in Example C, with the interlocutors notated (K) and (P): (K)  ?ë  dë  ré  kë  ma  bëse  ?o  to  to  na  (P)  ë,  ?ë  sëjo  jë  ?a  na,  ?a  bëse  ré  kë  to ... (K)  ?ë  twë  ?ë  ré  na  hë  ?ë  jë  dë  pë  cë,  ?ë
mé cè ?ū ré ?u twà ' (K) Who they give better to is the blind. (P) Mm, they care for them, the ones with bad eyes/faces ... (K) Good-looking ones, they might not give them anything, they might not pay much attention to the good-looking ones.' The highlighted expressions combine ?ū 'they', twà 'beautiful', and ré 'good', in two different orders, to mean 'good-looking ones'.

5. Conclusions. Parallelism is native to all levels of linguistic structure in Kayah Li. Grammatically, it reaches from word formation to text level. In discourse, all genres evince it, although in different form and to different degrees. One of the distinguishing marks of the donè genre is its high frequency of long clauses in binary parallelism. Conversation for its part has a varying frequency of parallel expressions, which include fewer full clauses and more Noun Phrases.

1Further details on Kayah Li grammar and dialectology may be found in Solnit forthcoming. My research on Kayah Li was supported by two Fulbright research grants, and by a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship.

2The transcription has IPA values. Tone marks, exemplified with the vowel /a/, are á mid level, à (no mark) low level, á high level, à low falling. Low level and high level end with glottal stop before pause, low falling ends with creaky voice. Abbreviations used in glosses are: BEN = benefactive, CLF = classifier, COM = comitative, cp = couplet-partner (occurs only in parallel expressions), DUR = durative, i = indefinite, NEG = negative, NS = new situation, p = plural, PTC = unspecified particle, s = singular.

3The actual meaning of this expression remains unclear. da is also 'egg', but 'testicle', as a body part, would be more appropriate in parallelism with 'umbilical cord'. Unfortunately I was unable to question the actual narrator of this donè about this point; the gloss 'monkey testicle' was provided by a different informant. This sort of semantic uncertainty is typical of the donè and ?irò (song) genres.
References


