

Adjectives are not verbs in Iu Mien

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Abstract. In Iu Mien (Hmong-Mien; ISO: ium), adjective-like or property concept words such as ‘long’ and ‘green’ have been claimed to be lexicalized as verbs rather than adjectives (Court 1985, Arisawa 2016). We argue that Iu Mien indeed has adjectives as a distinct lexical category. We present evidence from word order, tone sandhi, and a class of exceptional adjectives, showing that adjectives differ in their syntactic and phonological behavior from verbal modifiers.

Keywords. Adjective; lexical categories; syntax; word order; tone sandhi; Iu Mien; Hmong-Mien

1. Introduction. Dixon (1982) identified several classes of meanings, called PROPERTY CONCEPTS (PCs), that are typically lexicalized as adjectives in languages that have adjectives as a lexical category. Dixon’s PC classes included dimension, age, value, color, physical property, speed, and human propensity. Languages may use a diverse range of morphosyntactic strategies to express PCs; see Francez and Koontz-Garboden (2015, 2017) for a prominent recent treatment of this variation. In this paper, we examine PCs in Iu Mien, which have been claimed to be encoded as verbs (Court 1985, Arisawa 2016). Contra previous work, we argue that Iu Mien PCs are indeed adjectives, by distinguishing direct and indirect nominal modification strategies. We demonstrate that verbs only modify a noun indirectly in Iu Mien, while PCs can participate in both direct and indirect modification. The availability of a direct modification strategy for PCs strongly indicates that adjectives are a distinct lexical category in Iu Mien.

1.1. LANGUAGE BACKGROUND. 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 (Barker & Saechao 1997). Ratliff (2010) estimates 840,000 native speakers in the Iu Mien homeland and global diaspora, mostly in the US and Canada. Like other Hmong-Mien languages, Iu Mien is a morphologically simple tonal language with SVO word order. In writing, most tones are marked orthographically with a final consonant (<*c*, *v*, *h*, *x*, *z*> and unmarked). An example transitive sentence is given in (1).¹

- (1) Ninh oix naaiv yienc lui- ndaaiv.
 3SG like DEM CLF shirt long
 ‘S/he likes this long shirt.’

The language also had close and prolonged contact with Chinese, resulting in Chinese loanwords in all parts of speech (Purnell 1972). Data for this project come from elicitations with two Iu Mien speakers also fluent in English, including the first author, in Northern California.

Like in many other Asian languages, PCs in Iu Mien have been claimed to be lexicalized as verbs rather than adjectives (Court 1985, Arisawa 2016). We argue in this paper that Iu Mien

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¹ Iu Mien examples in this paper employ the “Unified Script” or “New Roman Script” orthography (Arisawa 2016), which was standardized in the 1980s (Purnell 1987).

indeed has true adjectives. In section 2, we introduce two indirect modification strategies that allow verbs to modify nouns: relative clauses and the *nyei* linker construction. While PCs can be deployed in both of these indirect modification constructions, in section 3, we present evidence from word order, tone sandhi and a class of exceptional PCs that PCs can additionally participate in direct modification of the noun, a strategy which is not available for verbs. We conclude in section 4 that adjectives are a distinct lexical category in Iu Mien.

2. Direct and indirect modification. While PCs are identified based on their semantic content, they can be encoded in a host of different ways lexically and morphosyntactically across languages; properties are commonly expressed either as adjectives or as verbs cross-linguistically. Court (1985) and Arisawa (2016) have taken PCs in Iu Mien to be stative verbs rather than adjectives due to their very similar clausal syntax. For example, properties expressing typical verb meanings and PCs are equally compatible with modifiers that typically modify verbs/events cross-linguistically, such as the perfective marker *mi'aqv*, as shown in (2) and (3). PCs with *mi'aqv* convey a change of state meaning. *Ndaauv* 'long' with *mi'aqv* thus means 'became long' (3) without any additional morphosyntactic embellishment; compare English *#longed* vs *lengthened*, which requires additional verbalizing morphology (*-en*) on the adjective *long* to convey the intended change of state meaning.

- (2) [Naaiv yienc lui] **ndortv** *mi'aqv*.
 DEM CLF shirt fall PFV
 'This shirt fell.'

- (3) [Naaiv yienc lui] **ndaauv** *mi'aqv*.
 DEM CLF shirt long PFV
 'This shirt became long/lengthened.'

Similarly, both verbs (5) and PCs (6) are compatible with clausal negation *maiv*, again without additional morphology.² Previous work has thus taken the parallel clausal syntax between sentences with typically verbal predicates and PCs to indicate that PCs are in fact stative verbs in Iu Mien.

² Bare nouns, by contrast, cannot be used predicatively and do not occur with perfective *mi'aqv* or *maiv* clausal negation.

- (4) a. Ninh **lueic** *mi'aqv*.
 3SG lazy PFV
 'S/he became lazy.'
 b. *Ninh **sic** *mi'aqv*.
 3SG problem PFV
 Intended: 'S/he became a problem/problematic.'
 c. *Ninh *maiv* **sic**.
 3SG NEG problem
 Intended: 'S/he is not a problem.'

- (5) [Naaiv yienc lui] *maiv ndortv*.
 DEM CLF shirt NEG fall
 ‘This shirt did not fall.’

- (6) [Naaiv yienc lui] *maiv ndaauv*.
 DEM CLF shirt NEG long
 ‘This shirt is not long.’

However, just because PCs *can* behave like verbs in some contexts does not mean that they always do. We can distinguish two ways to modify nouns syntactically: DIRECT MODIFICATION and INDIRECT MODIFICATION. Direct (or attributive) modification occurs as part of the noun phrase, while indirect (or predicative) modification occurs as part of a predicate. As shown in the above examples, verbs participate in indirect modification. Adjectives, on the other hand, can participate in direct modification, as in (7).

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

If PCs in Iu Mien are indeed verbs rather than adjectives, then what appears to be an instance of direct modification in examples like (7) would actually involve indirect modification, whereby the PC modifies the noun in the form of, for instance, a relative clause. Indirect modification via a relative clause is shown for a verbal predicate in (8) and a PC in (9).

- (8) Ninh oix [naaiv [yie maaiz daaih uov]_{RC} yienc lui].
 3SG like DEM 1SG buy come REL CLF shirt
 ‘S/he likes this shirt that I bought.’

- (9) Ninh oix [naaiv [**ndaauv** uov]_{RC} yienc lui].
 3SG like DEM long REL CLF shirt
 ‘S/he likes this shirt that is long.’

Iu Mien also has another indirect modification strategy: the *neyi* linker construction. Similar to Mandarin *de*, *neyi* is used for possession (10) but can host wide range of modifiers, including verbs (11) and PCs (12).

- (10) Meix neyi maa neyi a’nziaauc doic neyi biau
 Meix LK mother LK friend LK house
 ‘Meix’s mother’s friend’s house’

- (11) naaiv yienc [yie maaiz daaih] neyi lui
 DEM CLF 1SG buy come LK shirt
 ‘this shirt I bought’

- (12) naaiv yienc **ndaauv** nyei lui
 DEM CLF long LK shirt
 ‘this long shirt’

If Iu Mien PCs are truly stative verbs as was claimed, then they should only be able to modify nouns indirectly. This means that what might initially appear to be a direct modification of the noun in actuality involves a potentially reduced form of indirect modification, like a reduced relative clause or *nyei* construction.

However, as we will show, Iu Mien does have a direct modification strategy, one that is available for PCs but not verbs. Thus not all uses of PCs can be analyzed as involving indirect modification. Rather, PCs behave syntactically differently from verbs, indicating that they form a unique lexical and morphosyntactic class.

3. Evidence for direct modification. In this section, we argue that unlike verbs, PCs can modify nouns directly in Iu Mien. We present evidence for indirect modification from three domains: word order, tone sandhi and a class of exceptional PCs.

3.1. WORD ORDER. Like in other Hmong-Mien languages, all noun phrase modifiers in Iu Mien are prenominal, with the notable exception of PCs, the majority of which are postnominal. Word order within the noun phrase is shown in (13).

- (13) Dem > Num > Classifier > Noun > **Property Concept**
 naaiv buo yienc lui- **maeng**
 DEM three CLF shirt green
 ‘these three green shirts’

(14) provides additional examples of noun phrases; each PC follows the head noun.

- (14) a. naaiv norm don- **mbuov-** **waaic**
 DEM CLF chair blue broken
 ‘this broken blue chair’
 b. naaiv buonv sou- **siqv-** **nzueic**
 DEM CLF book red beautiful
 ‘this beautiful red book’

Recall that there are two strategies for indirect modification within a noun phrase: relative clauses and the *nyei* linker construction. Both strategies are crucially prenominal. Relative clauses, for instance, occur between the demonstrative and numeral in a noun phrase, which are both prenominal; (15) provides examples of relative clause modification involving a verb. In reduced relative clauses, the relativizer *uov* is omitted, along with any adjacent classifier; this is indicated with parentheses in (15).

- (15) a. naaiv [yie maaiz daaih (uov)]_{RC} buo yienc lui
 DEM 1SG buy come REL three CLF shirt
 ‘these three shirts (that) I bought’
- b. [zueiz jienv don (uov)]_{RC} (dauh) mienh
 sit PROG chair REL CLF person
 ‘a/the person (who is) sitting in a chair’

As shown in (16), PCs in relative clauses are similarly prenominal. Reduced relative clauses with PCs, whereby the relativizer and an adjacent classifier are omitted, are furthermore degraded. The postnominal use of PCs—which is their most common usage—thus cannot plausibly be derived from a reduced relative clause.

- (16) a. naaiv [**maeng** ??(uov)]_{RC} (yienc) lui
 DEM green REL CLF shirt
 ‘this shirt that is green’
- b. naaiv [**siqv** ??(uov)]_{RC} (buonv) sou
 DEM red REL CLF book
 ‘this book that is red’

The *neyi* linker construction is also prenominal; the modifier introduced by *neyi* occurs between the classifier and the noun. This is shown for a verbal modifier in (17). The linker *neyi* is obligatory in this construction and cannot be omitted.

- (17) naaiv yienc [yie maaiz daaih] *neyi* lui
 DEM CLF 1SG buy come LK shirt
 ‘this shirt I bought’

PCs can also occur in the *neyi* linker construction, as shown in (18). Once again, however, the PC appears prenominally, and *neyi* cannot be omitted.

- (18) a. naaiv yienc **maeng** *neyi* lui
 DEM CLF green LK shirt
 ‘this green shirt’
- b. **siqv** *neyi* sou
 red LK book
 ‘a/the red book’

Thus we have seen that both indirect modification strategies in Iu Mien are consistently prenominal. PCs, however, can modify nouns postnominally, indicating that not all uses of PCs can be analyzed as involving indirect modification of the noun.

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’

Table 1. Iu Mien tone inventory (Purnell 2012)

3.2. TONE SANDHI. Our second argument for the presence of a direct modification strategy in Iu Mien comes from tone sandhi. Purnell’s (2012) tonal inventory of Iu Mien is given in Table 1; checked syllables end in an oral stop ($\langle p, t, k \rangle$) or glottal stop ($\langle q \rangle$). All tones except the high-mid tone are marked in Iu Mien orthography with a final consonant.

Tone sandhi is observed within the noun phrase, triggered by a noun or PC on a preceding noun or PC (Purnell 2012). As summarized in (19), checked syllables undergoing tone sandhi neutralize to the low level tone ($\langle c \rangle$), while other syllables neutralize to the mid fall tone ($\langle h \rangle$). This process is marked orthographically with a hyphen, unless there is no surface change.

(19) Tone sandhi rules

- a. Rule 1: checked syllables $\rightarrow c$
- b. Rule 2: all other syllables $\rightarrow h$

Examples of tone sandhi in noun-noun compounds are given in (20), where the first noun undergoes a tone change triggered by the presence of the following noun.

(20) Tone sandhi in nominal compounds

jae-	jaux	‘chicken egg’
ndeic-	liuh	‘field cabin’
hnoi-	hnoi	‘every day’

As shown in (21), both nouns and postnominal PCs participate in tone sandhi. A PC triggers sandhi on a preceding noun or PC.

- (21) a. naaiv yienc lui- **ndaauv**
DEM CLF shirt long
‘this long shirt’
- b. naaiv norm don- **mbuov-** **waaic**
DEM CLF chair blue broken
‘this broken blue chair’
- c. naaiv buonv sou- **siqv-** **nzueic**
DEM CLF book red beautiful
‘this beautiful red book’

However, tone sandhi is not observed when PCs are in indirect modification contexts. Relative clauses with PCs, whether full or reduced, are incompatible with tone sandhi (22), as is the *neyi* linker construction (23). The ungrammaticality of tone sandhi within these indirect modification constructions holds whether or not the material between the PC and noun (e.g. *neyi*) also undergoes sandhi.

- (22) **naaiv* [**maeng-** (uov)]_{RC} (*yienc*) *lui*
 DEM green REL CLF shirt
 Intended: ‘this shirt that is green’

- (23) **naaiv* *yienc* **maeng-** *neyi* *lui*
 DEM CLF green LK shirt
 Intended: ‘this green shirt’

The unavailability of tone sandhi on the PC with indirect modification cannot be explained by appealing to the fact that PCs in such constructions are prenominal, since, as we will see in the next section, exceptionally prenominal PCs do in fact undergo sandhi, triggered by the following noun. Thus once again we see that not all constructions involving PCs can be analyzed as involving indirect modification. Rather, the evidence from word order and tone sandhi indicates that PCs must be able to participate in some form of direct modification of the noun.

3.3. EXCEPTIONAL PCs. Our final argument for direct modification comes from what we call “exceptional PCs.” Iu Mien has a handful of PCs that are exceptionally prenominal, listed in (24). Most of these exceptional PCs were borrowed from Chinese (Purnell 1972, Downer 1973, Ratliff 2010, Arisawa 2016).³

(24) Prenominal PCs

- a. *domh* ‘big’
- b. *fiuv* ‘small’
- c. *siaŋ* ‘new’
- d. *loz* ‘old’
- e. *zien* ‘real’
- f. *hieh* ‘wild’
- g. *jaav* ‘fake’⁴

Example noun phrases with these prenominal PCs are given in (25). As noted above, prenominal PCs participate in tone sandhi, triggered by the following noun.

³ It should be noted that some of these prenominal PCs are highly restricted in their usage; *fiuv* ‘small’, for instance, combines with only a few nouns. This suggests an alternative analysis of these PCs as the first element of a nominal compound rather than modifying the noun syntactically. If these PCs indeed form compounds, then debating whether they participate in direct vs indirect modification would be moot. However, we discuss these prenominal elements as potential PCs because they exhibit the right word order for an indirect modification analysis and are thus the best candidates for PC verbs in the language.

⁴ Younger Iu Mien speakers have started to use *jaav* ‘fake’ postnominally (Arisawa 2016), suggesting that *jaav* is undergoing a change in progress (Saelee & Nie 2025).

- (25) a. naaiv norm **fiuv-** sic
 DEM CLF small problem
 ‘this small problem’
 b. naaiv dauh **hieh** dungz
 DEM CLF wild pig
 ‘this wild pig’
 c. naaiv norm **siang-** don- **mbuov**
 DEM CLF new chair blue
 ‘this new blue chair’

Given that these exceptional PCs are prenominal, proponents of the stative verb analysis of PCs might be tempted to analyze them as involving indirect modification. However, we argue that even these prenominal PCs cannot be instances of indirect modification. First, some exceptional PCs cannot participate in indirect modification. For example, *fiuv* ‘small’ cannot be used as a predicate; unlike ordinary PCs, it is incompatible with clausal negation *maiv* (26a) and cannot be part of a relative clause (26b).

- (26) a. *[Naaiv norm sic] maiv **fiuv**.
 DEM CLF problem NEG small
 Intended: ‘This problem is not small.’
 b. *naaiv [**fiuv** uov]_{RC} norm sic
 DEM small REL CLF problem
 Intended: ‘this problem that is small’

For those prenominal PCs that can participate in indirect modification, we can nonetheless distinguish between direct and indirect modification strategies. In direct modification, the PC appears between the classifier and the noun and undergoes tone sandhi (27). Relative clauses, by contrast, appear between the demonstrative and classifier; like ordinary PCs, exceptional PCs in relative clauses do not trigger tone sandhi and are marginal in reduced relatives (28).

- (27) naaiv norm **siang-** don
 DEM CLF new chair
 ‘this new chair’
 (28) naaiv [**siang** ??(uov)]_{RC} (norm) don
 DEM new REL CLF chair
 ‘this chair that is new’

4. Conclusion. We investigated the behavior of PCs and found that Iu 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 distinct lexical category in Iu Mien, contra previous proposals that analyzed PCs as stative verbs. Our argument should extend to other Hmong-Mien languages, all of which (as far as we are aware) have postnominal PCs and prenominal relative clauses.

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