

Aspect Markers in Prai: A Reanalysis in Comparative Austroasiatic Context

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Abstract

This study investigates the grammatical aspect system of Prai (ISO 639: prt), an Austroasiatic language spoken in northern Thailand and Laos. Research was conducted by corpus analysis of traditional folktale narratives and literature created by Prai working for Prai literacy and language development. Three primary aspect markers are identified and analyzed: *ʔuʔ*, *læ:o* and *ʔæm*. This study builds on the linguistic descriptions of Jordan (1985) and Malapol (1989) and offers an alternative analysis of *læ:o* in particular.

Findings demonstrate the semantic functions of these aspect markers: *ʔuʔ* indicates continuative aspect, *læ:o* marks a new situation created after a change of state (NSIT), and *ʔæm* is a completive marker that signifies comprehensive completion of an action. The aspect system of two closely related Austroasiatic languages (Khmu (two varieties, ISO 639: kjg) and Mlabri, ISO 639: mra) and one other Austroasiatic language (Lamet, ISO 639: lbn) are also presented for comparison.

Keywords: Prai; Khmu; aspect; Austroasiatic languages

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Introduction

This paper investigates the aspectual system of Prai (ISO 639: prt), an Austroasiatic language spoken in northern Thailand and Laos. It is motivated by several factors. First, the only two existing descriptions of grammatical aspect in Prai reveal discrepancies in both number and types of aspectual distinctions, suggesting a need for additional analysis. Malapol (1989) is a published doctoral dissertation and Jordan (1985) is an unpublished grammar sketch made available to the authors by D. Jordan. Malapol (1989) describes two aspectual categories (continuative and perfective), which correspond to descriptions of aspect in many other Austroasiatic languages as documented in Jenny and Sidwell's *Handbook of Austroasiatic Languages* (2015). In contrast, Jordan (1985) notes three aspectual categories: continuative, punctiliar, and completive. Secondly, the study of aspect in Prai offers an opportunity to contribute to a broader understanding of aspectual systems in Austroasiatic languages. Although this paper does not undertake a thorough comparative analysis of these systems, summaries of the aspectual systems of four other Austroasiatic languages are offered for initial comparison. The first two are the two most closely related languages documented in Jenny and Sidwell (2015): (Northern) Khmu (ISO 639: kjg) and Mlabri (ISO 639: mra).¹ A summary of the aspect markers of Eastern Khmu (ISO 639: kjg) (original in this study) is also presented. Prai, Khmu, and Mlabri are members of the "Khmuic" subgroup of nine languages, as classified by the *Ethnologue* (Eberhard et al., 2025). Furthermore, a comparison is made with Lamet ISO 639: lbn (also called Rmeet) which is not part of the Khmuic subgroup but is still within the Austroasiatic family.

In addition to its linguistic significance, this study has potential implications for language documentation and revitalization efforts. The Prai language faces pressure from dominant national languages. A better understanding of its grammatical aspectual system will contribute to language documentation and support efforts to maintain and revitalize the language.

Background and previous research on Prai

The Prai language is spoken by an ethnic minority group also called Prai who live in Nan Province, Thailand, and Sayaboury Province, Laos. The people and language are often referred to as "Lua" or "T'in," although in most contexts these terms are considered pejorative.

The *Ethnologue* classifies Prai as follows: Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer, Khmuic, Mal-Khmu', Mal-Prai. The Prai in Thailand have an estimated population of 20,000 and the Prai in Laos have a population of 28,700 according to a 2015 census (Eberhard et al., 2025).

This section reviews previous research on Prai, highlighting the gaps that motivate the present study. Previous research concerning Prai grammatical aspect is limited to two sources:

- Malapol, M. (1989). *Pray Grammar at Ban Pae Klang, Thung Chang District, Nan Province* [Doctoral dissertation, Mahidol University].
- Jordan, D. (1985). *Prai Grammar – an unpublished manuscript from Ban Pae Klang, Thung Chang District, Nan Province.*

¹ There is a spelling discrepancy between the *Ethnologue* (2025) which writes "Khmu" and Jenny & Sidwell (2014) which uses the alternate spelling of "Kammu." Both spellings refer to the same language (ISO 639: kjg).

The following table presents an understanding of Jordan's (1985) and Malapol's (1989) descriptions of Prai aspect.

Table 1: Comparison of Jordan's (1985) and Malapol's (1989) analyses of Prai aspect

Jordan (1985)	Corresponds to:	Malapol (1989)
punctiliar (unmarked/default)	→	(not discussed in Malapol)
continuing <i>ʔuʔ</i>	→	continuative <i>ʔuʔ</i>
perfective <i>læ:o²</i>	→	perfective <i>læ:o</i>
completive <i>ʔæm</i>	→	completive (categorized as phase) <i>ʔæm</i> 'completely' "Action has already finished"
(not categorized as part of aspectual system)	→	inceptive (categorized as Phase) <i>bak (læʔ)</i> 'almost' <i>εom</i> 'just' "Action has not yet begun"
(not categorized as part of aspectual system)	→	inchoative (categorized as phase) <i>bam</i> 'just' <i>phuəm</i> 'just now' "Action is just starting"
(not categorized as part of aspectual system)	→	durative (categorized as phase) <i>khwaʔ</i> 'still' "Action is underway"

Jordan (1985) and Malapol (1989) seem to agree in their assessment of the semantics of *ʔuʔ* although there is a minor difference in the glosses they use ('continuing' vs. 'continuative' respectively). The aspect marker *læ:o* also appears to be a point of agreement (glossed 'perfective').

The fundamental difference between Jordan (1985) and Malapol (1985) is found in their categorization of the remaining morphemes. Jordan (1985) lists three aspect markers: *ʔuʔ*, *læ:o*, and *ʔæm*, and does not categorize the remaining morphemes as part of the TAM system per se. Malapol categorizes *ʔuʔ* and *læ:o* as aspect markers and categorizes *ʔæm* together with five additional markers (*bak (læʔ)* 'almost,' *εom* 'just,' *bam* 'just,' *phuəm* 'just now,' *khwaʔ* 'still'), representing three phasal categories (inceptive, inchoative, and durative), as phase rather than aspect (Malapol, 1989:85). The inceptive, inchoative, and durative phase markers identified by Malapol occur pre-verbally. The two aspect markers occur post-verbally. Malapol (1989, p. 186) lists the basic structure of the verb phrase as follows:

Neg - Mod / Aux / **Phase** / Man / Intens - (NP) - MV - **Asp**/Man - Intens - Dir

² This morpheme is spelled "læ:w" in both Jordan (1985) and Malapol (1989). It is the same morpheme discussed here, but the spelling has been regularized here for the sake of clarity.

Malapol initially lists *ʔæm* as a *phase* marker but later includes it in a table presenting all pre-and post-verbal *aspect* markers (Malapol, 1989, pp. 85, 188). So, the analysis does appear to consider *ʔæm* to be an integral part of the aspectual system.

On a final note, Jordan (personal communication, 2024) notes that *læ:o* and *ʔæm* frequently occur together in the same clause, a fact which is readily observed in natural speech and in the data examined in this study, though not discussed in either Jordan (1985) or Malapol (1989).

Objectives

The research questions for this paper are as follows: What are the primary markers and functions of aspect in Prai? To what extent can the findings of Malapol (1989) and the unpublished analysis of Jordan (1985) be harmonized—particularly where there are discrepancies? What is the evidence for considering *læ:o* a perfective marker?

Although linguistic description is considered by some to be atheoretical or pre-theoretical, we take Dryer’s view that while descriptive theoretical approaches have different aims from those of explanatory theories, they are no less theoretical for that difference (Dryer 2006a, 2006b). Our findings are presented from the theoretical perspective of Basic Linguistic Theory (Dixon, 2009). The main contributions of this study are: (1) to make the analysis of Prai aspect contained in Jordan (1985) more broadly accessible, (2) to synthesize that analysis with the existing scholarship on Prai aspect (i.e. Malapol 1989), and (3) to make use of additional data—both from published sources and by elicitation—in order to arrive at a better characterization of *læ:o* in particular. Along the way we also offer a comparison of the aspectual systems reported in closely related Austronesian languages for context, but we do not undertake a thorough comparison.

Methodology

For this study we examined a limited corpus of Prai texts, including both traditional narrative texts (folktales) and Prai literature created for Prai language development, to identify aspect markers. The two traditional narrative texts are published in Jordan Diller & Diller (2018) and are useful for an examination of aspectual markers in natural texts:

- The Batao and Batai Folk Story
- The Python Folk Story

Additional Prai literature consists of 46 written stories collected for Prai language development. From this limited literary corpus, two texts were made available in the following data sets:

- Pangaut, K. (2025). Lueang wan roen ton yaa on ao [Buying Medicine for Grandpa] [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15087403>
- Pangaut, K. (2025). Lueang siloep phoep koep doklaang [The Butterfly and the Flower] [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15092999>

The first text was elicited orally by the Prai Literacy Team and then written down. The second text was originally written by a member of the Prai Literacy Team. Both stories were written in 2017.

In total, 48 stories were examined, and each instance of an aspect marker was identified for further review. Example sentences were compiled in the findings to illustrate aspect marker usage. It should be noted that other texts such as all 27 books of the New Testament and 5 books of the Old Testament were not included in the corpus of study. Stories written by Prai were examined. Other stories that were translated from other languages were not included in the corpus for research.

After initial corpus research, our focus narrowed to the function of *læ:o* in particular, and further data were elicited by D. Jordan in Phae Klang village, Nan Province, Thailand. These data appear as examples (29)-(44).

Aspect in other Khmuic Languages

This section presents summaries of the aspectual systems of two related Austroasiatic languages, Khmu and Mlabri. The aspectual system of Eastern Khmu is presented first, followed by a summary of the aspectual system of Northern Khmu presented in Svantesson & Homer (2015).

Khmu

As part of this study, further research on aspect markers in the Eastern dialect of Khmu was conducted by R.A. Osborne (2025a) and (2025b) and is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Aspect markers in Eastern Khmu

Continuative	<i>ŋɔ:ŋ</i> <i>jet</i>
Habitulative	<i>gu?</i> <i>ɟɔ:</i>
Inchoative	<i>p^hɔ: de:</i> <i>tŋ.kɔ:/kɔ: de:</i>
NSIT/Perfect	<i>lɛ:w</i> (Lao borrowing in common use in Khmu)
Completive	<i>ho:c</i>
Progressive	<i>p^huam</i> (Lao borrowing, not often used)
Frequentive	<i>kn.dɜ:n</i>

Table 3 presents a comparison of an understanding of Svantesson and Holmer's description of the Northern dialect of Khmu in Jenny and Sidwell's (2015) *Handbook of Austroasiatic Languages* with the above findings of grammatical aspect in Eastern Khmu.

Table 3: Comparison of aspect markers in Northern and Eastern Khmu

Svantesson & Holmer (2015) (Northern Khmu)	Corresponds to:	This study (Eastern Khmu)
(not discussed)	→	Continuative <i>ŋɔ:ŋ</i> <i>jɛt</i>
Habitual <i>kuʔ</i>	→	Habitualive <i>guʔ</i> <i>ɟɔ:</i>
Inchoative <i>ho:c</i>	→	Inchoative <i>pʰɔ: de:</i> <i>tŋ.kɔ:/kɔ: de:</i>
Perfect <i>ho:c</i> <i>lɛw</i>	→	Completive <i>ho:c</i> NSIT/Perfect <i>lɛ:w</i>
Progressive <i>kn.laŋ</i> (Tai borrowing, seldom used)	→	Progressive <i>pʰuam</i> (Tai borrowing, seldom used)
(not discussed)		Frequentive <i>kn.dɜ:n</i>

For further information on Khmu aspect markers see Appendix A: Additional examples and discussion of Khmu aspect markers.

Mlabri

Both Bächtcher (2015) and Rischel (1995) mention only one aspect marker in Mlabri. A summary of their analyses is presented here.

Bächtcher (2015), states that *ʔa*, the sole aspect marker³ in Mlabri, indicates perfective aspect or ‘NSIT’ (“denoting a new situation” (p.1022)). It is unclear whether the two labels are taken to be equivalent in meaning, or whether the same morpheme is performing two distinct functions. *ʔa* is glossed ‘NSIT’ or perfective throughout. This marker appears to be quite productive and is used to indicate completed actions or new states. For example:

- (1) *ʔa bul patok*
NSIT die all
‘They all died.’ (Bächtcher, 2015, p.1022)

Although Bächtcher does not state it explicitly, *ʔa* occurs preverbally in all his examples (2015, pp. 1013, 1022). Rischel (1995, p.158) further notes that this perfective aspect marker “generally occurs before the last part of the complex predication,” as in the following example:

- (2) *boŋ ʔa laac*
eat PFV finish
‘have finished the meal’ (Rischel 1995, p.198)

³ Although Bächtcher categorizes *ʔa* as a tense marker (2015, p. 1022), both the gloss (‘NSIT’) and the characterization of its functions align with what we in this study consider to be consistent with an aspect marker.

Rischel (1995, p.159) claims that the Mlabri perfective aspect marker *ʔa* is “typologically and genetically remarkable” because it has no counterpart in either Prai or Khmu. He also notes that this aspect marker does have an equivalent in the genetically unrelated Northern Thai (คำเมือง) language - *lêɛw*, which he describes as an “adverb occurring in final position.” However, it should be noted that both in the previous research cited above and in the findings presented below, the Thai form *lêɛw* has been borrowed and well-integrated into the systems of both Prai (*læ:o* ‘perfective/NSIT’) and Khmu (*lɛw/lɛ:w* ‘perfect/NSIT’) with similar functions.

Rischel (1995, p. 159) adds that beyond its primary role in marking completed actions, the *ʔa* marker demonstrates extended functions in modal contexts such as to express future or hypothetical action. He cites the following example for future action:

- (3) *ʃruw ʔa wal*
 tomorrow PFV be-back
 ‘I shall be back tomorrow.’ (Rischel 1995, p.159)

Aspect in other Austronesian Languages

Lamet

Lamet is a member of the Palaungic branch of Austroasiatic spoken in Laos. Barkman (2024) mentions two aspect markers in Lamet: *kəmlaŋ* and *loic*. A summary of his analysis is presented here.

The aspect marker *kəmlaŋ* is likely borrowed from Lao and is a progressive aspect marker where the action of the verb is ongoing. He cites the following example (4) where a character protests that soldiers’ gunshots interrupted his ongoing action of luring a crocodile.

- (4) *ɔʔ kəmlaŋ æŋ æŋ ɔi*
 Person (1SG) PROG poop poop lure
 ‘I was pooping to lure it in!’ (Barkman 2024, p.59)

The second aspect marker identified by Barkman (2024) is the word *loic*. This word is found frequently in narrative texts and can be found as either a preverbal ingressive marker or as a postverbal aspect marker.

Barkman (2024) notes that this preverbal aspect marker seems unique to Lamet among all other Eastern Palaungic languages. He cites the following example (5) where a speaker describes heads of rice that are beginning to blossom in the field.

- (5) *puŋ ŋɔk loic kɔtɔʔ oih*
 when rice INGR to flower PRT
 ‘when the rice stalks began to flower’ (Barkman 2024, p.60)

When *loic* occurs post-verbally it marks the action of the verb as completed. He cites the following example (6) where a speaker indicates that his efforts to make a drum are complete.

- (6) *ɔʔ* *poo* *sətuj* *loic*
 Person (1SG) make drum COMPL
 ‘I made a drum’ (Barkman 2024, p.61)

The following table summarizes the aspect markers in Prai, Khmu, Mlabri, and Lamet as described by Jordan (1985), Malapol (1989), Svantesson and Holmer (2015), original Eastern Khmu findings from this study, Rischel (1995), Bättscher (2015), and Barkman (2024).

Table 4: Comparison of Prai, Khmu, and Mlabri aspect

Aspect	Prai Jordan (1985), Malapol (1989)	Northern Khmu Svantesson and Holmer (2015)	Eastern Khmu (this study)	Mlabri Rischel (1995), Bätscher (2015)	Lamet Barkman (2024)
Punctiliar	unmarked /default (Jordan 1985)	(assumed unmarked /default)	unmarked	(assumed unmarked /default)	(assumed unmarked /default)
Continuative	<i>ʔuʔ</i>		<i>ŋɔːŋ</i> <i>jet</i>	-	-
Habituaive		<i>kùʔ</i> (‘Habitual’)	<i>guʔ</i> <i>ɔː</i>		-
Perfect	-	<i>hóːc</i> <i>lew</i>	<i>lɛːw</i> (/‘NSIT’)	-	-
Perfective	<i>læːo</i>			<i>ʔa</i> (‘NSIT’ Bätscher 2015)	-
Completive	<i>ʔæm</i> (characterized as phase by Malapol 1989)	-	<i>hoːc</i>	-	<i>loic</i> (postverbal)
Inceptive	<i>bak (laeʔ)</i> ‘almost’ <i>ɛom</i> ‘just’ (Malapol 1989)	-	-	-	<i>loic</i> (preverbal ‘Ingressive’ Barkman 2024)
Inchoative	<i>bam</i> ‘just’ <i>phuəm</i> ‘just now’ (Malapol 1989)	-	<i>pʰɔː deː</i> <i>tŋ.kɔː/kɔː deː</i>	-	-
Durative	<i>khwaʔ</i> ‘still’ (Malapol 1989)	-	-	-	-
Progressive	-	<i>kn.laŋ</i> (Tai borrowing, seldom used)	<i>pʰuam</i> (Tai borrowing, seldom used)	-	<i>Kəmlaŋ</i> (Lao borrowing)
Frequentive	-	-	<i>kn.dɜːn</i>	-	

Findings

This section focuses on the three post-verbal Prai aspect markers: *ʔuʔ*, *læ:o*, and *ʔaem*. Our findings support the analyses of Jordan (1985) and Malapol (1989) regarding *ʔuʔ* ‘continuative’ and *ʔaem* ‘completive.’ We have given more attention, on the other hand, to the occurrences of *læ:o* in section 7.3, and we focus the following discussion on an alternative analysis of its function.

Prai aspect marker ʔuʔ

Both Jordan (1985) and Malapol (1989) gloss *ʔuʔ* ‘continuative.’ The following examples show the range of situations expressed by *ʔuʔ*. The following example describes an ongoing state (i.e. ‘kept on living’).

(7) อีเสียบ ฤค ตัก มพุง นะ กี่รีด อู

ʔi: lep kut tak mphuŋ naʔ kɔ ri:t ʔuʔ
it quickly go in hole that CONJ live **CONT**

‘It escaped into a hole in a tree and lived.’

(Jordan-Diller & Diller, 2018, p. 157, The Batao and Batai Folk Story, 75)

ʔuʔ can be used to indicate an action that is portrayed as ongoing or in process at the time of reference.

(8) มัห เอ็ด เอิญ เอิญ พระ นอก งะ มัห มาร นเงี๊ห อั้ง อู

mah ət ʔəŋ ʔəŋ phraʔ nɔ:k mah ma:l ndzæh
you take me I release water you snake python
ʔəŋ ʔuʔ
say **CONT**

‘If you take me (as your husband) I will release the paddy water for you, the python was saying.’ (Jordan-Diller & Diller, 2018, p. 164, The Python Folk Story, 11)

In the following example *ʔuʔ* indicates an action that is repeated habitually or on a regular basis.

(9) มาร นเงี๊ห กี่ชวาน เอ็ด เอิญ อูจุงจุงเตี๊ห เอา นำอั้ง

ma:l ndzæh kɔ fuan ʔət ʔəŋ ʔuʔ tʃuʔ
snake python CONJ ask take me **CONT** every
ŋiʔ tʃuʔ ŋiʔ teh ʔao nam ʔeŋ
day every day EMPH father she say

- (9) มาร นเง็ห กี่ชวาน เอ็ด เอิญ อุจุงจุงเค็ห เอา นำอั้ง

ma:l ndʒæh kɔ fuan ʔət ʔəŋ ʔuʔ tfuʔ
 snake python CONJ ask take me **CONT** every
 ŋiʔ tfuʔ ŋiʔ teh ʔao nam ʔeŋ

‘The python asks me to marry him every day, Father, she said.’ (Jordan-Diller & Diller, 2018, p.164, The Python Folk Story, 15)

Prai aspect marker ʔæm

ʔæm is labelled an aspect marker by Jordan (1985) and a phase marker by Malapol (1989), but both gloss it ‘completive.’ In (10) *ʔæm* emphasizes that the conclusion of the story is the end of the matter.

- (10) กี่ลัด ชุด แอ้ม ตัก เน งวาง เพา กะต่าย นะ กี่โอ มีโตะ เตาะ ชุด แอ้ม

kɔ lot fut ʔæm takne: ŋwa:ŋ phao
 CONJ now finish **COMPL** here continue wait

kaʔta:i naʔ kɔ ʔai mi: toʔ fut ʔæm
 rabbit that CONJ not have come finish **COMPL**

‘So it is finished like that. From then on, they just waited for the rabbit, but it did not come. That is the end.’ (Jordan-Diller & Diller, 2018, p. 162, The Batao and Batai Folk Story, 120)

ʔæm indicates that the woman’s hand will be completely severed in (11), and that Python removed his scales completely from his body in (12).

- (11) เนทจ แอ้ม ทีมาร นเง็ห อั้ง เค็ย

nthatf ʔæm thi: ma:l ndʒæh ʔəŋ khəj
 cut **COMPL** hand snake python say to

‘Your hand will be cut off, the python said to her.’ (Jordan-Diller & Diller, 2018, p. 68, The Python Folk Story, 170)

- (12) เอ็ม มาร นเง็ห กี่โปลก แอ้ม งโคร ออ

ʔəm ma:l ndʒæh kɔ plo:k ʔæm ŋkho:r ʔɔ:
 bathe snake python CONJ remove **completely** scales own

‘When the python bathed, he took off his scales.’ (Jordan-Diller & Diller, 2018, p. 70, The Python Folk Story, 170)

Prai aspect marker læ:o

Jordan (1985) and Malapol (1989) label *læ:o* a ‘perfective’ marker, while the folk stories found in Jordan-Diller & Diller (2018) alternatively gloss *læ:o* ‘finish’ or ‘already.’⁴ In (13) *læ:o* indicates that the next step of the plan should not be carried out until after the drying rack has come into existence.

(13) แอง งกรรา แลว มด ก็

ʔæ:ŋ ŋgra: **læ:o** mot kɔ

make rack **finish** all CONJ

‘When you are finished making the drying rack,’ (Jordan-Diller & Diller, 2018, p. 164, The Batao and Batai Folk Story, 104)

(14) อั้น ก็แอง งกรรา เซียร บัด แลว มด

ʔah kɔ ʔæ:ŋ ŋgra: fəl pat **læ:o** mot

they CONJ make rack smoke meat **already** all

‘So they made a meat drying rack. When they were finished,’ (Jordan-Diller & Diller, 2018, p. 161 The Batao and Batai Folk Story, 115)

In (15), the rabbit’s release creates a new relevant situation.

(15) อั้น ก็พระ กะตาย นั้น แอ้ห แลว อั้น พระ

ʔah kɔ phraʔ kaʔta:i nan ʔæh **læ:o** ʔah phraʔ

they CONJ leave rabbit that of course **already** they leave

‘They let the rabbit go and left it.’ (Jordan-Diller and Diller, 2018, p. 162, The Batao & Batai Folk Story, 116)

In (16) *læ:o* indicates that the subject has a new state of awareness of the flower that he did not previously have.

(16)a. ฉูาม นำ เม็ง ดอกกลาง แลว มพุยมัด นำ ก็ แฉล

ʔəm nam məj dokla:ŋ **læo** mphuimat nam kɔ tʃæ:l

when he saw flower **finish** tears he CONJ dripped

‘After he saw the flower, he cried.’

⁴ Glosses appear as given in the original sources.

b. เป็น ตัก เขียวใจ ดี นำ เกย อี๊ด อัง ดอกกลาง

pen tak siatfai kɔ nam kəi ʔɔt ʔon dokla:ŋ
 is for sadness CONJ he before angry at flower
 ‘Because he was sad that he had been angry at the flower.’ (แปงอุด, กานดา, 2025, เรื่อง
 ซีเลียบเพิบ เกิบ ดอกกลาง “The Butterfly and the Flower”)

A comparison of (17) and (18) illustrates that in a negative context, *læ:o* is not restricted to a completive reading. (17) definitively asserts that the speaker has not eaten. (18) can alternatively be understood to mean either “I have already eaten,” or “I don’t eat anymore.” The first means that the act of eating has taken place in the past and has relevance for the present. The second reading means that the fact that the speaker no longer eats is a new situation.⁵

(17) *ʔəŋ ʔai mi: poŋ toʔ*
 Person (1SG) not have eat EMPH
 ‘I did not eat.’

(18) *ʔəŋ ʔai mi: poŋ læ:o*
 Person (1SG) not have eat NSIT
 ‘I did not eat already.’/ ‘I don’t eat (s.th.) anymore.’

The use of *læ:o* with the verb ‘come’ strongly implies that the process of movement is finished and the state of being located in the destination has been achieved. Thus, (19) is the natural answer to the question, “Has John arrived?”

(19) *(dʒɔn) toʔ læ:o*
 John come NSIT
 ‘(John) has come (/arrived).’

It is possible for *læ:o* to be used in the case that the new situation is that someone is in the process of coming, but the progressive marker *kəmlaŋ* must be added to force this interpretation.

(20) *nam kəmlaŋ toʔ læ:o*
 3SG PROG come NSIT
 ‘He is already in the process of coming.’

læ:o can also be used to convey the idea that someone has experienced something, regardless of how distant in the past. (21) is the natural answer to the question, “Has he ever been to America?”

(21) *nam ril læ:o*
 3SG go NSIT
 ‘He has been (there).’

In contrast to ‘come,’ *læ:o* appears to strongly prefer an emphasis on the beginning point of the verb ‘go’; that is, that the action has been initiated. (22) can be used to answer the

⁵ This is not the preferred way to express “I don’t eat (it) anymore,” in most pragmatic contexts, but it is acceptable.

question, “Why aren’t you here?” or “Have you left?,” but *læ:o* cannot be used if the sentence is in answer to the question, “Where have you gone?”

- (22) *ʔəŋ* *kəi* *ri:l* ***læ:o***
 Person (1SG) before go NSIT
 ‘I have gone (/left).’

læ:o can also indicate the persistence of a state beyond the speaker’s expectations or wishes.

- (23) *ʔəŋ* *p^hao* *ʔu?* *p^hæ?* *fuamo:ŋ* ***læ:o***
 Person (1SG) wait here three hours NSIT
 ‘I have been waiting here for three hours (now/already).’

(24) and (25) illustrate that *læ:o* is strongly preferred when indicating situations that have quite recently arisen. (24) would be naturally followed by, “Hurry, we have to meet her at the station!” (25) might be uttered to/by someone currently on their way to cross the border, and so their current plans must be changed.

- (24) *to?* *lot* ***læ:o***
 arrive bus NSIT
 ‘The bus has arrived.’

- (25) *ʔah* *pit* *da:n* ***læ:o***
 3SG close border NSIT
 ‘They have just closed the border.’

(26) might be uttered as reassurance that the person in question is qualified to help tutor someone because he has completed the action of studying the entire book.

- (26) *nam* *kəi* *ndʒen* *to?* ***læ:o***
 3SG before study EMPH NSIT
 ‘He has (already) studied (it).’

(27) is a natural way to say, “I already know,” but cannot be construed to mean “I know now (I didn’t know before).” Similar to (26), *læ:o* highlights that the state of knowing is currently relevant, but it doesn’t necessarily highlight that the state is a particularly new situation in this instance.

- (27) *ʔəŋ* *məj* ***læ:o***
 Person (1SG) know NSIT
 ‘I already know.’ (*‘I know now.’)

In other pragmatic contexts, however, *læ:o* does seem to indicate that a state has newly come into being. (28) might be asked of someone who has been standing in the sun. An affirmative answer would also make use of *læ:o*.

- (28) *mah* *fo?* *ʔɔ:k* ***læ:o*** *ʔan*
 2SG thirst water NSIT Q
 ‘Are you thirsty now?’

(29) shows that with an active verb with no inherent beginning or end point, *læ:o* indicates that the action is in progress. This sentence means something like “(He’s not a child anymore); he is already working.” It does not mean, “He has already worked; (now he’s resting).”

- (29) *nam* *ʔæ:ŋ* *ka:n* *læ:o*
 3SG do work NSIT
 ‘He already works.’

læ:o is also used in prospective or future contexts. Although it is not entirely clear what aspect of the proposition is in focus as a new situation, examples like (30) show that *læ:o* does not constrain an anterior or past interpretation.

- (30) *wan* *sao* *nam* *toʔ* *læ:o*
 day saturday 3SG come NSIT
 ‘On Saturday he will come back.’

On a final note, *læ:o* is not felicitous with states that are not conceived as being preceded by a contrasting state, such as, “He is a child,” (Jenny’s “original states” (2001, p. 128)). It is also not used in imperatives, and its use in content questions is limited to contexts in which the expected answer is some quantity or quantifiable progress toward a goal. So (31) (with *læ:o*) is not felicitous unless asked in the context of a meeting, for example, in which the speaker and addressee were both aware of the list of people who are expected to attend.

- (31) *ʔi:e:* *toʔ* *læ:o*
 who come NSIT
 ‘Who (all) has come?’

Based on these facts, the previous analysis of perfective does not appear to be the best fit for *læ:o*. The core meaning or function of perfective is a focus on an event as a whole without attention to its internal duration, but as is illustrated in (20), (23), (27), and (29), *læ:o* is compatible with a focus on a state or event’s duration. The common thread among the uses of *læ:o* is rather the current relevance of the situation. This core meaning suggests the aspectual category perfect, which we will address in the next section. By way of preview, however, we mention here that based on its similarity to the case in Thai (Jenny (2001); see the discussion in Section 9), we propose the gloss ‘NSIT’ (‘new situation’) for *læ:o*. In addition to fitting well with the data, this gloss has the advantage of aligning with current descriptions of aspect markers with similar ranges of function in other Austroasiatic languages, such as those found in the descriptions in Jenny & Sidwell (2015).

Co-occurrence of læ:o with ʔæm and ʔuʔ

The NSIT marker *læ:o* can co-occur in the same clause with *ʔæm* or *ʔuʔ*. We stated earlier that all three of these markers occur post-verbally, but an additional observation can be made that *ʔæm* and *ʔuʔ* follow the verb more closely while *læ:o* occurs at the end of the clause. The result is that their relative word order is always *ʔæm/ʔuʔ* precedes *læ:o*. The reverse word order is not attested in texts or in conversational speech.

In (32) *ʔuʔ* indicates the ongoing nature of the state of being good, while *læ:o* indicates that this state is a new situation (i.e. it was previously not the case that all was good, but now it is the case).

- (32) *lɔʔ* *ʔuʔ* *læ:o*
 good CONT NSIT
 ‘It’s good already.’

When *ʔæm* occurs with *læ:o* it may add a sense of irrevocability. (33) implies that the object in question cannot go back to the state of being whatever color it was before turning red.

- (33) *so* *ʔæm* *læ:o*
 red COMPL NSIT
 ‘(It) has become red.’ (Jordan, 1985, p. 25)

It appears to be the case that when *ʔæm* and *læ:o* co-occur, *ʔæm* is narrower in scope than *læ:o*. This is illustrated in the following examples from written materials developed by the Prai Literacy Team in Knife Creek village, Nan Province (2020).

- (34) เอิญ ก็ โหระ แฉ้ง กอง เอิญ ก็ บัก และ
ʔəŋ *kɔ* *foʔ* *sæŋ* *khɔŋ* *ʔəŋ* *kɔ* *bəklæʔ*
 1SG CONJ hungry intestines belong me CONJ almost

กิด แอ้ม แลว เอิญ ซึ่มา มั้ห เตาะ ดาย

- kit* *ʔæm* *læ:o* *ʔəŋ* *ʃima* *mah* *tɔʔ* *da:i*
 broken COMPL NSIT I apologize you EMPH okay

‘I am hungry. My intestines are about to break already. I apologize.’
 (แปลงอุค, กานดา, 2025, เลือ่ง ซึ่เดิมเพีบ เดิบ ดอกกลาง “The Butterfly and the Flower”)

In (34) *ʔæm* indicates that the breaking of the speaker’s intestines will be complete, while *læ:o* indicates that this state of being extremely hungry is a new situation that has become relevant to the discourse. Similarly, in (35) below, *ʔæm* indicates that the speaker’s pain is so extreme that it is going to cause complete death, while *læ:o* indicates that the entire situation of experiencing the pain has just recently developed and is different from what the prior situation was.

- (35) นำ ก็ ลด ไล่ ควัน ออ ตัก วัน
nam *kɔ* *lotʔ* *lai* *khwan* *ʔɔ:* *tak* *wan*
 he CONJ then tell child his named Wan
 คื่อเน “วัน มั้ห เริล ทน ยา กาฮัวซิง อน เหา
khine *wan* *mah* *rɪl* *thon* *ya:* *kahuasing* *ʔɔn* *ʔɔo*
 this day you go buy medicine Kahasing for father

เดอ เอา โหะ ก็ บัก และ เป็ด แอ้ม แลว”

du ʔoo ʃoʔ kiʔ bəklæʔ pəl ʔæm læ:o

please father hurt head almost die **COMPL** already

‘So, he told his child named Wan this, “Wan you go buy Kahasing medicine for me please. I have a headache that hurts like I’m already dead.” (hurts to death)’ (แปลงอุค, กานดา, 2025, เลื่อง วัน เริง ทน ยา อน เอา or “Buying Medicine for Grandpa”)

Discussion of *læ:o*

Among the Prai post-verbal particles *ʔuʔ*, *ʔæm*, and *læ:o*, the native particles *ʔuʔ* and *ʔæm* appear to stand in a paradigmatic relationship with each other. Both occur immediately following the verb, and their semantic domains are mutually exclusive. Namely, *ʔuʔ* indicates that an action or state is ongoing at the temporal point of reference while *ʔæm* indicates that an action has been completed.

The aspect marker *læ:o* on the other hand indicates that a situation has come into existence and is relevant at the temporal point of reference, and *læ:o* does not appear to be as closely associated with the verb in the same way. In terms of word order, it occurs at the end of a clause, often after other intervening morphemes between the verb and itself. This includes clauses in which *læ:o* co-occurs with *ʔuʔ* or *ʔæm*. When this happens, *ʔuʔ* or *ʔæm* occurs closer to the verb it is associated with, and *læ:o* follows.

læ:o as a perfect marker

This three-way distinction calls to mind Friedrich’s case for the three universal aspectual categories ‘durative,’ ‘punctual,’ and ‘stative’ (1974). Furthermore, the unique status of *læ:o* vis-a-vis the other two Prai aspect markers calls to mind the work of Hopper (1979a), (1979b), and Li et al. (1982), which draw on the facts about Mandarin *le* to make the case that these three categories are motivated by their distinct discourse functions. Imperfective (/continuative) relates ongoing, background happenings; perfective (/completive) relates events; and perfect (/stative) relates events or states to a reference time (Li et al., 1982, p.19).

We have already demonstrated that the use of *læ:o* is compatible with both perfective and imperfective events and states. This universal three-way distinction in aspectual categories provides a conceptual framework for returning to our prior question: if Prai *ʔæm* covers the completive/perfective space, what is the motivation for a second ‘perfective’ marker *læ:o* (as analyzed by Jordan 1985 and Malapol 1989)? Our findings show instead that *læ:o* covers a range of functions that aligns with the category of ‘perfect’ rather than ‘perfective.’

In his foundational work on aspect, Comrie notes that perfect indicates “continuing relevance of a previous situation,” and lists four types of perfect: result, experiential, persistent situation, and recent past (1976, p.56). Anderson (1982) builds on this view, affirming that the common thread among all uses of perfect markers is the ‘current relevance’ of the event/state, and observing that there are four semantic components that are commonly included (roughly corresponding to Comrie’s four types): experience, result, anterior, and new situation. Both analyses hold that while these four types/semantic components are characteristic of the universal category of perfect, no one of them is a necessary component.

Our findings demonstrate that *læ:o* is used in all four of these situations. Examples (19) and (22) show the use of *læ:o* for the perfect of result. Example (21) demonstrates the experiential perfect. Example (23) demonstrates the perfect of persistent situation. (24) is an example of the perfect of recent past. This supports an analysis of *læ:o* as a type of perfect marker, broadly speaking. On the other hand, *læ:o* shares some characteristics with similar markers in other Asian languages that have prompted analyses rejecting the label “perfect.” These characteristics include its use in negative contexts to mean “not anymore,” its use in future contexts, and the restrictions on its use in content questions.

Fine tuning Perfect-like categories in Asian context

We now turn to two such cases: ‘Currently Relevant State’ in Mandarin (Li & Thompson, 1981; Li et al., 1982), and ‘New Situation’ in Thai (Jenny, 2001) and various Austroasiatic languages (Jenny & Sidwell, 2015).

Comparison with Mandarin *le* ‘Currently Relevant State’

The Mandarin sentence final particle *le* provides an areal point of comparison. Li & Thompson (1981) and Li et al. (1982) outline its many functions and make the case that the common thread throughout all its functions is that it indicates a “currently relevant state” and accordingly gloss it ‘CRS’ (Li & Thompson, 1981, p.240). Li et al. express some hesitancy to use an aspectual label (like ‘perfect’) for *le* because aspect is typically narrowly associated with verbs, while Mandarin *le* belongs to a class of sentence final particles that are “attitudinal” in nature (1982, p.21). In the end, however, they conclude that from a discourse point of view the functional range of *le* covers the core discourse function of their universal aspectual category “perfect” (i.e. relating an event or state to a reference time), and so although *le* does not have some of the peripheral functions commonly associated with “perfect,” they consider it an exponent of the category “perfect” (but retain the gloss “CRS,” p.41).

The similarities between Mandarin *le* and Prai *læ:o* are suggestive. Prai *læ:o*, like Mandarin *le*, appears to have sentence scope rather than the closer association to the verb exhibited by other aspectual particles. Furthermore, the ranges of functions of the two have a large amount of overlap.

There are, however, a few points of difference in function. The biggest difference is in situations in future contexts. Mandarin *le* is used quite freely to indicate that a situation is relevant to a temporal point of reference located in the future (e.g. “Next month I’ll be in Japan.”) (Li & Thompson, 1981, p.241). Although *læ:o* can be used in some future contexts (e.g. (30)), sentences like (30) appear to be asserting that the information about future plans is new or relevant at the time of speech; *læ:o* is not used to indicate that a situation will be relevant at a reference time located in the future.

In addition to differences in function, Mandarin *le* appears to have grammaticalized from the verb *lai* ‘to come’⁶, while Prai *læ:o* means ‘to finish’ when used as a main verb.

Comparison with Lao *leew*⁴ ‘perfect’ and Thai *læu*³ ‘new situation(s)’

We now turn to Lao and Thai for a point of comparison closer to home for Prai. Jordan (1985) notes that *læ:o* is borrowed from Lao/Northern Thai. This study does not undertake to

⁶ This hypothesis is not completely uncontested (Anderson 1982, p.239).

thoroughly investigate this assertion, but an initial look at the evidence does corroborate it. From a historical perspective, Lao/Northern Thai has been the surrounding dominant language in the Prai sociolinguistic context for several generations. In the more recent past, Lao and Standard (Central) Thai have been the national language and language of education in the Prai context. Furthermore, the use of *læ:o* as a lexical verb ('to finish') and as a sentence initial connector in addition to its use as an aspectual marker is strikingly similar to the situation in Lao (Enfield, 2007) and Thai (Jenny, 1981).

Regarding the Lao form *lè̀w4*, Enfield reports that as a main verb it means 'to be finished' or 'to finish (something) off,' while as a postverbal marker it "conveys the idea that an event or state transition has taken place, and the state of affairs resulting from that transition (now/still) pertains at the time of speech" (2007, p.180). As a postverbal marker, it is glossed 'perfect' (Enfield 2007). This correspondence between the semantic meaning and aspectual meaning of the same (phonological) form when used in different syntactic contexts is parallel to the situation in Prai. Additionally, the examples Enfield gives to illustrate the function of *lè̀w4* as an aspectual marker largely overlap with our findings for Prai *læ:o*. Two small points of difference are noted here.

First, Enfield notes that in Lao, the sentence, 'He come *lè̀w4*' is ambiguous; it can either mean 'They've already left (and are now on the way here),' or 'They've already arrived (and are now here)' (2007, p.181). The corresponding Prai sentence, however, can only mean 'They've already arrived.' In order to force the first meaning ('They've already left'), the addition of the progressive marker *kəmlaŋ* is required (see (19) and (20) above).

Second, when *lè̀w4* occurs with a negated lexical verb it has the meaning 'not anymore' (Enfield, 2007, p.183); this appears to be the primary—or possibly only—meaning of this combination of NEG+main verb+*lè̀w4*. In contrast, recall from the discussion of (17) and (18) above that although this combination can mean 'not anymore' in some limited contexts, it is not the preferred way to express 'not anymore.' Furthermore, in most contexts this combination is more likely to mean 'haven't already done X.'

The points of comparison with Standard Thai are very similar to those with Lao. The Thai form *læu³* means 'to finish' when used as a main verb, and when used as an aspectual marker, Jenny states that it indicates "that a change has taken place and a new situation has arisen" (2001, p. 128) and glosses it 'NSIT' for 'New Situations.' The overlap in range of functions between Prai and Thai is quite similar to that of Prai and Lao. Two minor distinctions are noted here. First, although the current study has not attempted to quantify the frequency of the use of *læ:o* in conversational speech, the use of *læu³* with future (/prospective) events and states (including with a negated main verb to mean 'not anymore') appears to be quite limited as compared to the use of Thai *læu³* in these contexts (see for example, Jenny (2001, p.127, 129) for the situation in Thai). The distinctions are similar to those noted above for the Prai/Lao comparison.

Second, there seems to be a minor difference in which the use of Prai *læ:o* is *less* restricted than the use of Thai *læu³*. Jenny (2001) notes that *læu³* is not used with "original states" (that is, states that cannot reasonably be construed to have had a point in time when there was a change from "this was not the case" to "now it is the case" (2001, p. 128)), in imperatives, or in most content questions. As noted in our findings, Prai *læ:o* similarly does not occur with original states or imperatives. The details about the restrictions of its use in content questions, however, possibly differ slightly from the restrictions for Thai.

Jenny notes that in content questions *lɛɛu³* is only allowed when asking whether a specified quantity has been reached by the time of asking (2001, p.129), and offers the following minimal pair:

- (36)a. Thai (Jenny, 2001, p.129)
**khrai maa lɛɛu³*
 who come NSIT
 * ‘Who has come?’
- b. *maa kan ki¹ khon lɛɛu³*
 come REC how.many CL NSIT
 ‘How many people have come so far?’

In general, this distinction is similar to the case in Prai. Recall, however, from example (31) that the Prai equivalent of (36a) does occur. While this technically constitutes a distinction, we consider it a minor one because (31) is only felicitous in a context where its pragmatic meaning is something akin to (36b).

Conclusion: revisiting *læ:o* as a perfect marker

In conclusion, the range of functions of *læ:o* does not fit the previous analyses of ‘perfective.’ Our findings suggest that a label in the domain of ‘perfect’ is a better fit. Comrie’s definition, for example, does not require that all the functions of result, experience, persisting state, or recent past be present so long as the common thread is that relevance to the current (or reference) point in time is highlighted; and *læ:o* satisfies these criteria. We also noted that the use of *læ:o* most often indicates a new situation (or at least a situation that is newly relevant) and has a range of distribution very similar to forms glossed ‘NSIT’ in related or areal languages. We propose the label ‘NSIT’ as a good fit for *læ:o*, and view it as an exponent of the universal category ‘perfect.’

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three main aspect markers in Prai: *ʔuʔ* ‘CONT,’ *ʔæm* ‘COMPL,’ and *læ:o* ‘NSIT.’ We show that the markers *ʔuʔ* ‘CONT’ and *ʔæm* ‘COMPL’ stand in paradigmatic relationship to each other and alternatively indicate either the ongoing or completed status of an action or state. Having a basic two-way aspectual distinction that aligns with a perfective vs. imperfective semantic divide fits with a broader pattern among Austroasiatic languages and in human languages in general.

The aspect marker *læ:o* indicates that a given state of things is a new situation that has relevance at the time of speech. *læ:o* can occur as the sole aspect marker in a clause or may co-occur with either of the other two aspect markers. We propose that the gloss NSIT (new situation) fits the range of functions of *læ:o* better than the previous gloss ‘perfective.’ Having an NSIT marker that does not occur in paradigm with other aspect markers also aligns with the situation in other languages of the Austroasiatic language family as well as in Thai and Lao, from which *læ:o* was likely borrowed. Additionally, if the overlap in range of functions between NSIT and PERFECT is considered, this is a pattern that is well attested in languages beyond Austroasiatic as well.

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Abbreviations

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
ABIL	ability
AUX	auxiliary
CERT	certainty
CLF	classifier
COMPL	completive
CONJ	conjunction
CONT	continuative
DIR	directional
EMPH	emphatic
F	feminine
FREQ	frequentive
HAB	habituaive
INCH	inchoative
INDF	indefinite
INT	interrogative
INTENS	intensity/intensifier
IRR	irrealis
M	masculine
MAN	manner
MOD	modality

MV	main verb
NEG	negative
NSIT	new situation
PFV	perfective
PL	plural
PRF	perfect
PROG	progressive
Q	question particle
REC	reciprocal
SG	singular

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Appendix A: Additional examples and discussion of Khmu aspect markers

For this study, original research on Khmu aspect markers was conducted by R.A. Osborne for comparison with the Prai aspect markers. The following examples are categorized and taken from Osborne (2025).⁷

Continuative

The marker *ɲɔːŋ* denotes continuing action. *ɲɔːŋ* also occurs as a main verb meaning ‘to remain.’

- (1) *ʔnaːm niʔ r.waːj ɲɔːŋ ruː kʰruːˈbaː laː ʔarˈduʔ mah*
 amount that tiger **CONT** pull priest La take_flee eat
 ‘(Even with) this effort the tiger kept pulling Priest La and took him away and ate (him).’ (Osborne, 2025a, Man-eater 4.5)

The marker *jet* denotes an ongoing action or state. *jet* also occurs as a main verb meaning ‘to stay, to be located.’

- (2) *coːn niʔ jet cɔːp gəː bian sɔːŋ miː saːm miː*
 thief that **CONT** spy 3SGM elapse two CLF_days three CLF_days
 ‘..the thieves kept spying on him for two or three days.’ (Osborne, 2025a, Two Thieves 3.1)

Habituative

The marker *guʔ* denotes events that occur routinely from time to time, or a characteristic quality often with a negative connotation. As a main verb *guʔ* means ‘to like, to love.’

- (3) *nam jəʔ naːjkʰuː gɔʔ guʔ raːj heŋ*
 time long_ago teacher CONJ **HAB** be_angry INTENS
 ‘Actually, in the times long ago, teachers were often very angry...’
 (Osborne, 2025b, Children were Afraid to Go to School 3.1)

The marker *ɲɔː* denotes habitual committed action. As a main verb *ɲɔː* means ‘to be diligent, hard-working.’

- (4) *meh gon ɲɔː sɔːk toː daʔ briʔ*
 be person **HAB** search animal at forest
 ‘...(he) was a person (who) often went hunting in the forest.’ (Osborne, 2025a, The Bear 3.3)

Inchoative

The markers *pʰɔːdeː* and *tɲ.kɔː/kɔː deː* denote the beginning of an action or state. As a main verb *pʰɔː* means ‘to be enough.’

⁷ Sentence examples found in the Appendix A restart with (1) and continue through (12).

- (5) *pʰɔ:de:* *bah* *g.ni?* *ŋɔ:ŋ* *paʔda?* *bah* *ŋi?*
INCH light that_one CONT NEG light there
ŋɔ:ŋ *l.ŋiŋ* *cm.ci:* *ni?*
 CONT dark half_light that
 ‘(When it) was beginning to be light, not quite light there, still partly dark,...’
 (Osborne, 2025a, The Bear 4.3)

As a main verb *ko:* means ‘to start, to begin.’ The following example was elicited with Mrs Than Ounpachanh.

- (6) *hɛ:m* *pn.si:n* *sŋ.mah* *ho:c* *bo:*
 younger_sibling cook food COMPL INT
na: *kɔ:de:* *pn.si:n* *ʔamda?* *ho:c*
 2SGF **INCH** cook NEG finish
 ‘Has younger sibling finished cooking the food?’
 ‘She just began cooking, (she) is not yet finished.’ (Than Ounpachanh,
 September 2021, p.c.)

NSIT/Perfect

Out of 23 examples of *lɛ:w* in 7 texts, 6 were analysed as PERFECT and 17 as NSIT, based on a semantic understanding of whether the event or state was something completed in the past or current and ongoing. The distinction is not always clear cut and there is specific term that covers all functions.

A pattern emerges of NSIT occurring largely in dependent clauses (13 out of 17) with stative verbs or adjectives, while PERFECT aspect is seen more in main clauses (5 out of 6) with dynamic verbs. In the example of a negative clause, the situation is clearly ongoing.

- (7) *kʰwɛ:n* *lɛ:w* *joŋ* *ʔo?* *brɔ:ŋ* *ʔo?* *jɔh* *la?*
 improve **NSIT** father 1SG invite 1SG go at_leisure
 ‘When I was better my father invited me to go out.’ (Osborne, 2025a, Tan’s
 Malaria Story 15.1)
- (8) *r.wa:j* *hi:* *pok* *mah* *lo:c* *lɛ:w*
 tiger PST bite eat all **PRF**
 ‘The tiger had already attacked and eaten them all.’ (Osborne, 2025a, Man-eater 6.3.)
- (9) *ho:c* *ʔo:* *ʔi?* *ci:* *ʔam* *bian* *mah* *lɛ:w* *ijɔ?* *gi:*
 and_then oh! 1PL IRR **NEG** CERT eat **NSIT** rice this_one
 ‘And then, “Oh! we won't get to eat it now, this rice.”’ (Osborne, 2025a,
 The Bear 2.4)

Completive

The marker *ho:c* denotes completion of an event or state that has been ongoing. As a main verb *ho:c* means ‘to finish.’

- (10) *pliat* *s.ʔɔ:ŋ* *niʔ* ***hɔ:c***
 chop_up wood that **COMPL**
mo:j *blah* *mo:j* *gon* *niʔ* *cap* *wɛk*
 one CLF_sides one CLF_people that hold knife
mo:j *gon* *niʔ* *cap* *s.ʔɔ:ŋ*
 one CLF_people that hold wood

‘Having cut the wood, one of them took hold of the knife and one took hold of the stick.’ (Osborne, 2025a, Two Thieves 5.2)

Frequentive

The marker *kn.dɜ:n* denotes an action that is repeated frequently on separate occasions. The following example was elicited with Mrs Pang Snta' Mar.

- (11) *t.wa:ŋ* *gi:* *maʔ* *ʔiʔ* ***kn.dɜ:n*** *ɲu:r* *je:ŋ* *jeʔ*
 Time interval this_one mother 1PL **FREQ** descend watch grandchild
ʔam *ʔah* *məʔ* *dian*
 NEG have INDF take
maʔjon *kʰa:t* *wiak* *ʔam* *bian*
 parents lack work NEG ABIL

‘These days our mother often goes down to look after her grandchildren, there is no one else to take them. The parents are not able to miss work.’
 (Pang Snta' Mar, March 2025)

In addition, it should be noted that continuative aspect was not found by Svantesson and Holmer in Jenny and Sidwell’s (2015) *Handbook of Austroasiatic Languages*, but in Osborne’s (2025) research two markers were observed, namely *ŋɔ:ŋ* and *jet*, which both occur before the main verb.

Svantesson and Holmer’s (2015) Habitual aspect corresponds to this study’s Habituated aspect, marked with *kuʔ* in the Northern dialect and the equivalent *guʔ* in the Eastern dialect. In addition, this study found the marker *ɲɔ:*.

Inchoative aspect is described by Svantesson and Holmer as marked by *ho:c* in clause-final position ‘if the situation is static.’ In this study *pʰɔ: de:* and *tŋ.kɔ:/kɔ: de:* were seen marking inchoative aspect before the main verb.

Svantesson and Holmer describe *lɛw* as marking perfect aspect. This corresponds to *lɛ:w* in this study, the difference in vowel length possibly reflecting the different dialects. In the current study, *lɛ:w* marks NSIT predominantly in dependent clauses with stative verbs or adjectives, while it marks perfect aspect predominantly in independent clauses with dynamic

verbs. The distinction is not always clear cut and is based on a semantic understanding of whether the event or state was something completed in the past or current and ongoing.

Svantesson and Holmer also include *ho:c* as marking perfect aspect. In this study *ho:c* was found to be a completive aspect marker, indicating completion of an event or state that has been ongoing, but does not necessarily have implications for another point in time. As an aspect marker *ho:c* occurs in clause-final position.

Svantesson and Holmer (2015, p. 991) note that *hó:c* and *lɛ:w* may sometimes occur together. This was also observed in this study. In the following example, the use of *ho:c* denotes that the action was completed, and *lɛ:w* adds the implication that this is relevant to the time of speaking. The implication in this example is that they still had more to do.

- (12) *ɔj* *ɔani?* *tɛ:ŋ* *ho:c* *lɛ:w*
 EXCL that_one do_make **COMPL** **PRF**
gɔ? *ŋɔ:ŋ* *ɔam* *ho:c*
 CONJ CONT NEG finish

‘Oh! We’ve done all this and it still isn’t finished.’ (Osborne, 2025a, Mr Kiang Gets Shot 9.4)

The Progressive aspect markers, *km.laŋ* and *p^huam*, are both Tai borrowings, the difference probably reflecting the locations of the Northern and Eastern dialects of Khmu as closer to Thai and Lao speakers respectively.

The Frequentive aspect marker *kn.dɜ:n* was not observed by Svantesson and Holmer (2015). In this study it was observed in translated texts, but as there were no examples in collected texts an example was elicited.