

# On the Question of Topics in Topic Prominent Interlanguage

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## *Abstract*

For twenty-five years, interlanguage researchers have accepted an early period of topic prominence in the language of a native speaker of Hmong learning English (Huebner 1983). The study was based on Li and Thompson's Typology of Subject-Prominent and Topic Prominent language types. Since Huebner only examined properties of topic prominent languages without also looking for evidence of subject, I revisit the study and show evidence for subjecthood from grammatical relations, semantic functions, and properties of behavior and control. An investigation of one of the properties, namely that topics control co-referential constituent deletion, suggests instead evidence for subject in serial verb constructions. After finding evidence for at least three properties of subject as a basic subject-predicate construction in the interlanguage, I propose an alternative analysis that the learner's early interlanguage must be re-classified as both subject and topic prominent.

**Keywords** Interlanguage, SLA, Subject, Topic Prominence

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## **1.0 Introduction**

The notion of an early stage of topic prominence in interlanguage, the language system of learners as they develop from their first/native language (L1) to the language they are attempting to acquire, the target language (TL), was first proposed by Huebner in 1983. Tracking the changes of one learner in a longitudinal study over a year's time, Huebner found a pattern of development from a topic prominent to a more English-type subject prominent interlanguage. However, Huebner did not also test the learner's language for evidence of subjecthood in the interlanguage. In this paper I argue that the learner showed characteristics of subject as early as the very first interview of the study. Hence, the interlanguage cannot be classified as a topic-prominent language, but must be reclassified as both subject and topic prominent.

In Part 2, I present Li and Thompson's four class typology (1976) and list the syntactic characteristics for identifying topic prominent languages. I then briefly summarize properties for subject described by Keenan (1976). In Part 3, I apply two tests for evidence of subjecthood: a grammatical relation of syntactic subject and an argument structure subject. I then present evidence against Huebner's interpretation for topics controlling co-referentiality in this interlanguage, suggesting instead that these resemble serial verbs sharing the same subject, showing evidence of Keenan's behavior and control properties. I conclude that the interlanguage does show evidence of subjects. Although we cannot prove transfer or interference without further testing of more learners from his native language, I nonetheless use analyses of serial verb constructions from his native language Hmong (Jarkey 1991) to explain the constructions in the interlanguage, since serial verbs are language specific and the IL structures pattern like the expected structures of his native language.

## **2.0 Subject and Topic Typology of Language Types**

At the time of Huebner's study, linguistics was greatly influenced by Chomsky's conception of topic and subject in his 1970s transformational grammar. As he explained:

Transformationalists have traditionally held that the structure underlying all languages is subject-predicate and that the topic-comment relation is a surface phenomenon (Chomsky 1965:221.) Grundel [sic] (1974), however, has gone to the other extreme, proposing an underlying topic-comment structure for all sentences of all languages (Huebner 1983: 85-86).

Recognizing characteristics of topic-comment structure in the interlanguage of Ge, his informant, Huebner turned to Li and Thompson's newly proposed classification of four language groups based on their basic sentence structures (b-sentences) (Li and Thompson 1976:460). At the time of their proposal, only a few studies, Schachter 1972 (Tagalog), Hope 1974 (Lisu), had proposed a sentence structure other than subject-predicate as a basic sentence structure. It was "not considered that the basic structure of a sentence

could be described in terms of topic and comment” (Li and Thompson 1976: 460). The typology is shown below:

<b><u>Subject-Prominent</u></b>	<b><u>Topic-Prominent</u></b>
Indo-European, Niger-Congo, Finno-Ugric, Sinitic[sic], Dyirbal (Australian) Indonesian, Malagasy	Chinese, Lisu
<b><u>Subject - Prominent and Topic-Prominent</u></b>	<b><u>Neither Subject- Prominent nor Topic-Prominent</u></b>
Japanese, Korean	Tagalog <sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1. Subject and Topic Typology of Language Types**  
(Li and Thompson 1976:460)

Huebner first tested for evidence of these eight characteristics of basic sentence constructions for topic prominent languages that Li and Thompson provide.

1. They have topics which are coded or overtly marked at the surface level. Subjects need not be.
2. They either have no passive or the passive construction is a marginal construction, often with a specialized meaning.
3. They have no dummy subjects, such as the English there and it in existential and impersonal constructions.
4. They do have double subject constructions.
5. Topic rather than subject controls co-referential constituent deletion.
6. They tend to be verb-final languages.
7. There are no constraints in these languages on what can be a topic.
8. Topic- comment structures in these languages are basic (Huebner 1983:69).

Arguing that all eight were found, Huebner concluded that the interlanguage was topic prominent: “Ge’s early interlanguage exhibits all of the characteristics of topic prominence....Since topic-comment organization is pervasive in the early interlanguage, the early interlanguage will be considered topic prominent” (Huebner 1983:87). Although I question the evidence for Huebner’s argument that evidence exists for all eight characteristics, I only investigate Number 5, topics control co-reference, reserving a fuller investigation of the other seven in Korpi (forthcoming). In this paper I address the

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<sup>1</sup> Kroeger (1993) has since identified both a subject and topic function in Tagalog.

ambiguity of this concept with respect to topic and subject, arguing that it is evidence for subject, not topic.

Subject is of equal importance for classifying languages in the typology, since Li & Thompson's typology includes the notion of subject in all but one class, topic prominent. Therefore, we need to test for evidence of subject, before we can determine the exact classification of a given language. Assuming that the interlanguage must be topic prominent because of the presence of all eight characteristics based on his analyses, Huebner did not test for evidence of subject.

Subject properties were studied in detail by Keenan (1976) at the same time Li & Thompson proposed their typology. Concluding that no property could be found that is both necessary and sufficient for defining subjects, he proposed a 'cluster' concept whereby the NP with the most subject properties in a grammar be defined as the Subject. These behaviors could be grouped into (1) coding properties, such as position, casemarking or subject-verb agreement; (2) semantic properties, such as agency; and (3) behavior and control properties, such as Equi-NP deletion in English.<sup>2</sup> As evidence for subject in the early interlanguage of Ge, I show at least one property from each of these three groups.

Since the cluster notion of subject has been shown not to be especially useful for identifying subjects, the behavior of these properties can be systematically organized at different levels in the grammar: grammatical relations, argument structure, and grammatical functions of behavior and control.

### **3.0 Evidence for Subject**

In this section I first present evidence that Ge's interlanguage grammatical structures have coding properties related to position at the time of the first interview. Secondly, I show that a separate level of argument structure was functioning with several semantic roles. Finally, I demonstrate one construction that exhibits behavior and control properties, verb serialization.

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<sup>2</sup> Later, Andrews (1985) also pointed out that "there are no properties in all languages which are always exhibited by subjects and only exhibited by them" (p. 105), although he mentions Bresnan's proposal for the 'raising' of complement clause arguments as one process which is universally restricted to subjects (p. 104). This does not mean that subjects in all languages will have raising. In a recent thesis on Sinhala, Henadeerage was not able to find a test which supported raising (Hendeerage, 2002). However, raising is not a useful test for subject in Huebner's study, since it is restricted to certain verbs (e.g. seem, 'strike', 'impress') and adjective constructions ('be unlikely', 'be certain'), (Bresnan 2001:283-286) and none of these verbs is mentioned in Huebner's report of the data.

### 3.1 Coding Properties

Grammatical relations refer to the grammatical structure of a sentence and are indicated by coding features. Central to grammatical relations are subject, direct and indirect object. In English, subject has a privileged status and grammatical functions can be shown to be dependent upon it.

Huebner's analyses and data show no evidence of the coding properties of casemarking or subject-verb agreement in Ge's interlanguage. However, the interlanguage data clearly shows a systematic coding of preverbal, sentence initial NPs. Sentence initial position is also a default position for topic, so we will have to find other evidence that NPs in this position are not topics.

Below is data from Huebner followed by his translation, (T= Thom, interviewer, G= Ge, the learner).

**Example 1)** T: How many people were eating?  
G: piipow –n- ste' –n- wer iiting, isa trii tawsan.  
“Three thousand people were eating” (1-27)<sup>3</sup> (p.107)

This could also be glossed as “The number of people staying and eating is three thousand” (presumably staying in the refugee camps). In this interpretation the preverbal information, i.e. group of people before ‘is’, functions as the group which contains ‘three thousand’ individuals. Therefore, we can claim that the word order in the sentence is S-V-X, where X represents postverbal entities. Since the presence of the pre-verbal information with its progressive past participle may be due to copying from the Wh-question, we need further evidence of coding subject by preverbal position.

We can not do a simple field test for acceptance of either pre or postverbal position. However, examples of the preverbal actor doing the designated action abound in the data. Below is an example which includes early question formation.

**Example 2)** T: What? You talked to them?  
G: yae. tok. ‘ow. waduyu kam tailaen? du, yu, riid aeplein,  
aen yu wok. law kam hia.’  
“Yeah. Talked. ‘Oh, how did you come to Thailand?  
Did-you-ride an airplane or did you walk?  
From Laos to here.” (1-46/49)(p. 158)

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<sup>3</sup> The numbers refer to Tape 1, lines 1-27.

This example is useful because it is an extended answer, not a direct answer copying part of the Wh-question.

However, we do not really need to find more examples to prove the existence of word order and position as coding for subject. Huebner himself considered word order as a coding mechanism in his discussion of ‘constituent order’ and ‘case relations and word order’:

#### Constituent Order in Ge’s Interlanguage

There are two kinds of relations which must be made explicit in language: case relations (i.e., agent, object in relation to action, and pragmatic relations...In the early stage of Ge’s interlanguage, word order is a major vehicle which Ge employs to mark both of these relations.

#### Case Relations and Word Order

In Ge’s interlanguage at the time of Tape One, and perhaps universally in initial language contact situations, case relations are expressed primarily through word order. Ge marks agents and objects by their position in the sentence in relation to the verb. The basic case order for simple declarative sentences is agent/experiencer-verb-object. This is the basic order in Hmong, Ge’s native language, in Lao, the other language with which he has some fluency, and in English, the target language. It is not surprising, then, that this is also the basic case order throughout his interlanguage.

The claim that the basic case order is A/E-V-O (as opposed to other combinations of A/E, V, and O) is supported by a statistical count of simple declarative sentences in Tapes One and Seventeen. All of the simple declarative sentences containing both agent /experiencers and objects were tallied. For the present purposes, a sentence will be defined as that stream of speech falling between two terminal falling intonation patterns and containing at least one verb. Simple declarative sentences are those which contain only one verb. (Huebner 1983:60-61)

Huebner gives this example of what he means by ‘simple declarative sentence’:

**Example 3)** ai riid aepleain.

“I rode an airplane.” (1-18)

As we can see, the verb ‘riid’ is flanked on the left by ‘ai’ and on the right by ‘aepleaien’, clearly showing evidence for a word order choice of an NP performing the action of the predicate. Moreover, the results of Huebner’s tally show that 62 out of 63 sentences, i.e. 98%, have A-V-O word order during the first interview on Tape 1. He simply has chosen

to represent these as the semantic roles of ‘agents/experiencers’<sup>4</sup>. Nowhere does he use the notion ‘subject’, as he argues for topic prominence in the early stages of Ge’s interlanguage.

Consistency in preverbal placement of the NP doing the action of the verb suggests position is a coding device for subject in this interlanguage. We now need to find more evidence to support this hypothesis of subjecthood.

### **3.2 Semantic Roles**

Semantic roles assign meaning to participants in a situation that the predicate refers to. Jackendoff (1972: Chapters 2, 4, 5) first recognized the importance of semantic roles to syntax. Although the notion of semantic roles is somewhat problematic (Dowty 1991, Andrews 1985), their behavior in languages can be ordered according to their function in a predicate as proposed in the Thematic Hierarchy (Bresnan & Kanerva, 1989):

Agent>Benefactive>Goal>Experiencer>Instrument[al]>Theme>Patient>Locative

This thematic hierarchy defines the logical subject, the “Distinguished entity at a-structure”, as the most prominent in a predicate (Manning 1996: 34). This is the highest argument at argument structure of the basic form of a predicate, normally the agent or experiencer of transitive verbs.

We have read in the discussion above that Huebner described Ge’s interlanguage as showing evidence of the semantic roles of both Agent and Agent/Experiencer from the very first tape. The fact that his interlanguage shows at least two types of semantic roles gives evidence for an independent level of argument structure. This is important since we need evidence for distinguishing the development of semantic roles at the level of grammatical relations in interlanguage. Because, if in the interlanguage data, we find only one semantic role in Ge’s interlanguage, we would have to argue that the semantic versus syntactic properties of subject are not clearly distinguishable.

First, let’s examine the nature of these two semantic roles. The first role, agent, can be divided into three semi-autonomous parts: 1) doer of action; (2) extrinsic instigator; (3) volitional actor (Jackendoff 1990:129). We have seen evidence for the semantic role of agent, in Example 3 with the verb ‘ride’: the person riding the airplane, ‘I’, is doer of the action and probably a willful participant, but not necessarily instigator. Therefore, Ge’s interlanguage has one semantic role, agent, the prototypical role for subjects.

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<sup>4</sup> Huebner does not explain his use of agent-V-object, but it appears to be a modified version of Lexibase developed by Starosta, a staff member at the University of Hawaii where Huebner completed his study.

Evidence of the semantic role of experiencer, the participant who is aware of something” (Andrews 2004: 8) in Example 1, ‘eat’, may be due to copying from the WH-question. So, we need to find independent utterances in the data which cannot be attributed to copying speech from the interviewer, Thom. Other verbs from Tape 1 which Huebner classifies under ‘agent/experiencer-V verbs’ are “eat, swim, cry, know, study, stay/live, wake up, and sleep.” (p. 219). The example below is from a short narrative and does not appear to be copied from a Wh-question:

**Example 4** ai sii –n- ola piipow.  
I saw all the people.(1-125)

This utterance gives a second semantic role to the preverbal NP, a participant who is aware of people in the situation.

The question now is, does Ge’s interlanguage only show evidence of two semantic roles? A closer look at Huebner’s analyses shows that Ge only uses two semantic roles for the entire analysis. All of the semantic roles in the verbs in Huebner’s appendices for Tape 1 are limited to the two semantic roles, Agent or Agent/experiencer.

Example 3 above exemplifies Ge’s use of the verb ‘walk’, ‘wok’. Huebner classifies ‘walk’, a process verb, with ‘leave’ in a separate category, ‘-V-Vd Verbs’ where Vd stands for directional verb’, taking the semantic role of agent/experiencer (page 220). In current usage (Jackendoff (1987:381, 1990:259), Andrews (1985), Bresnan and Kanerva (1989), the semantic role of ‘walk’ is not classified as either agent or experiencer, but rather as ‘theme’. Andrews (1985:9) defines theme as “Participant being in a state or position, changing its state or position, or undergoing the effect of some action...” and Gruber (1970:29) and Jackendoff (1987:378) consider “the object in motion or being located” as a theme. Gruber (1970), Jackendoff (1972:29-31, 1983:170-174, 1990:46), Parsons (1990: 264) all consider a verb such as ‘walk+ing’ as a process or activity which takes theme as the participant in the situation. Their interpretation is that an animate participant may be engaged in the process of walking, but the action does not require specific agentive influence to accomplish the task. The primary goal is to walk from somewhere to someplace. Thus, using this definition of theme, we have a third semantic role in Ge’s interlanguage.

Example 1, “piipow –n- ste’ –n- wer iiting, isa trii tawsan”, glossed as “The people staying and eating is three thousand” uses a copula-like form, which Huebner glosses as ‘is’ and ‘isa’, as the link between the first part of the answer and the number ‘three thousand’. In addition, he reports that Ge uses this form over one hundred times in the first tape, and that “on the basis of the frequency of occurrence alone, the form must be considered an important part of the early interlanguage.”(p. 91). Huebner’s Table 4.1 (p.



91) listing its syntactic environment shows its distribution appearing before attributive/quantifier and noun phrases in tape one. He also reports that “equative noun phrases”...“are always marked with *is(a)*” in the first tape<sup>5</sup>. The semantic role of NPs before copulas are participants in a stative situation, “being in a state or position”, and can only take the semantic role of theme. Hence, themes are also an important part of the semantic functions in the early interlanguage in Tape 1.

It is not necessary to do a full analysis of semantic roles of all the verbs in his study. We only need to verify that semantic functions are part of the grammatical structure of a sentence in Ge’s early interlanguage. With three semantic roles, we have evidence that a level of argument structure is active in Ge’s interlanguage. These preverbal NPs can be grouped together according to Keenan’s second property, semantic roles.

To summarize, since a variety of semantic roles are consistently appearing preverbally, we have neutralization of semantic roles, a sign of grammaticalisation toward subjecthood. Moreover, the level of grammatical relations shows evidence of Keenan’s first property, an S-V-X word order, so we can conclude that Ge’s interlanguage has subjects.

### 3.3 Behavior and Control Properties

Grammatical functions, indicated by “overt coding features’, such as word order, case marking and cross-referencing from grammatical structure (Andrews 2004:63), are important for determining the behavior of the syntactic processes in a particular language, such as ellipsis of subject in Equi-NP constructions.

In contrast, “in a Tp language, the topic takes precedence over the subject in controlling coreference” (Li and Thompson 1976:470). To exemplify that “in a Tp language the topic, and not the subject, typically control co-referential constituent deletion”, Point 5 on the list of eight syntactic characteristics of Tp languages, they provide the following example from Mandarin:

**Example 5)** Nèike Shù yèzi dà, suǒyi wǒ bu xǐhuān --.  
 That tree leaves big so I not like  
 ‘That tree (TOPIC), the leaves are big, so I don’t like it.’  
 Li and Thompson (1976:469)

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<sup>5</sup> Huebner argues against the forms “is” and “isa” as being copulas, because “it is not equivalent to SE ‘is’, or even to the SE copula without respect to tense, person, and number” (p.93). I analyse these as copulas based on their function in the interlanguage alone without appealing to a comparison with English (see Korpi forthcoming).

In this sentence the ‘it’ can only refer to ‘tree’, and not the ‘leaves’. Therefore, zero-NPs can only refer to topics, not subjects in Mandarin.

The case is different in Hmong, Ge’s native language, as shown in Example 6:

**Example 6**) Tsob ntoo ntawn cov nplooj loj me ntsis lawm  
 CLF tree that GRP leaf big little-bit ASP  
 Ces kuv tsis nyiam ø  
 PRT I NEG like  
 ‘That tree, the leaves are a bit big, so I don’t like it/them.’  
 (CLF=classifier, GRP=group, ASP=aspect marker, PRT=particle,  
 NEG=negative marker) (Fuller 1986:37)

In Example 6, the zero NP can refer to either the leaves or the tree. Either ‘*tsob ntoo ntawn*’ ‘that tree’, the topic, or ‘*cov plooj*’ ‘leaves’, the subject, can be the referent of the object position. Thus, control of a co-referential zero noun phrase in a coordinate clause in Hmong is ambiguous between the subject and the topic (Fuller 1988:117). Therefore, Li and Thompson’s claim of topic as the controller of co-referential zero NP cannot be entirely maintained in Ge’s native language, Hmong.

Huebner, citing the claim above by Li and Thompson, (1976:469), adds “in a topic prominent interlanguage, we would expect to find deletion employed as an anaphoric device more frequently and in more environments than it is employed in English” (Huebner 1983:80). He provides this passage as evidence that the topic controls co-referential constituent deletion in Ge’s interlanguage, arguing that “all the cases of deleted noun phrases”...“are realized as zero in the interlanguage to a degree that would not be found in an English text” (pp. 81-82).

**Example 7)** Ge:(1)bat ai -n- stei  
 n- kaemp winai, haev menii, menii werk....  
 (7) gib da fud. da’ da kaa. da bas.  
 (8) aen teik da miit aen rais  
 kam -n- gow teik da fud.  
 (9) teik da fud.  
 (10) owkei. bing -n- fud fo piipow

As for my stay in camp Winai, (I) has a lot of work . . . . (I) gave out food. (From) the bus. (I) brought the meat and rice. (After I) got the food out, (I) would give the food to people.” (1-155/158). (Huebner, p. 81)

Since Huebner is assuming that Ge’s interlanguage is topic prominent, he analyzes this as “all but the first of the verb phrases, the agent noun phrase ‘ai’ has been realized as zero”, because they are “co-referential with the first topic agent ‘ai’” (Huebner 1983: 81). Acknowledging that “all the cases of deleted noun phrase in this passage are subjects and some could be deleted in co-ordinate constructions in English”, he argues that in a topic

prominent language, “the topic, and not the subject, typically controls co-referential constituent deletion and constituents are deleted more frequently than in subject prominent languages” citing Li and Thompson 1976:469 (p. 80)<sup>6</sup>.

### ***3.3.1 Verb Serialization as evidence for subject***

Huebner’s translation is in fact a close rendering of the meaning, but the multiple verb construction in line 8-10 of Example 7 is important in determining its grammatical function in the interlanguage, and he has simply glossed over it. Are these really several clauses which have undergone zero anaphora, therefore showing evidence of topic as controller of co-referential deletion? Or, are these behaving like a single syntactic unit?

Multi-clausal constructions differ in their syntactic structure from serial verbs, as Foley and Olson explain:

Although there are differing theoretical explanations about serial verb constructions, most agree that one basic attribute is the head of the phrase must share a common argument, which distinguishes serial verbs from multiclausal verb constructions.  
Foley and Olson (1985:24)

Identifying constructions with the sharing of a common argument is important for a more accurate analysis of the function of topics versus subject in Ge’s interlanguage. Foley and Olson (1985) provide the following explanation about serial verbs, and their interaction with argument structure:

All serial verb constructions are heavily constrained so that some core arguments are shared by all the verbs in the series. (The core arguments are the basic, conceptually necessary arguments of a verb, as entered in its lexical entry.) The most common restriction is that all verbs require the same subject...This same subject constraint is widespread among languages with serial verb constructions ...these kinds of constraints are what is to be expected if serial verb constructions are tightly knit grammatical structures of a special type, constituting a particular grammatical unit, and not simply two clauses joined together to which obligatory rules of deletion have applied. (Foley & Olson 1985: 24- 26)

Huebner’s rather loose translation of Ge’s speech fails to recognize the argument structure of a serial verb construction composed of the verbs ‘take’, ‘come’, and ‘go’ in

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<sup>6</sup> Huebner’s explanation for simply looking at frequency as evidence of topic prominent sentence types is explained as: “In this paper, no distinction is made between deletion and zero anaphora. It is not the purpose of this paper to debate the relative merits of a deletion transformation versus interpretation rules to explain zero constituents” (footnote 11, p. 89).

line 8, translating this instead as “After (I) got the food out, (I) would give the food to people.” Notice that the lexemes which mean ‘bring’ and ‘give’ appear several times in the sentences. In Ge’s interlanguage, *come*, *go*, and *take* all occur together with *ai(I)*, as subject, and *fud*(food), as object, for all three verbs<sup>7</sup>.

Co-referential deletion can be due to the grammatical function of subject, as well as the pragmatic function of topic, and each set of utterances needs careful analyses. In serial verb constructions, the ‘deletion’ is obligatory; hence it is not a property of zero anaphora (topic-related), where the presence or absence of a pronominal is optional.

### 3.3.2 Verb Serialization as Semantic Units: different facets of one event

The three verbs, ‘take’, ‘come’, and ‘go’ are common basic verbs which combine to form the verbal compositions of serial verb constructions (Sebba 1987: 162-174; 112-114; 184-193; Durie 1997: 289-317). Analysing these as independent grammatical structures with zero anaphora rather than as one single predicate sharing the common subject ‘ai’ misses the fact “that they constitute different facets of the one event, and as such, are ideal candidates for expression via the serial verb construction” (Jarkey 1991:158). As Lord explains:

...What serial constructions have in common semantically is the fact that the verbs in the construction all refer to sub-parts or aspects of a single overall event (Lord:1974:196, cited in Jarkey 1991:127)

The verbs in line 8 refer to the subparts of taking meat and rice, coming, going and taking food, used to describe the event of delivering food, while he was at Camp Wanai.

The construction is strikingly parallel to the facts of serial verbs in his native language (Jarkey 1991: 157-160; 162, 164, 166). The elements of the verbs in line 8 are typical of one type of serial verb, ‘transport’ verbs which are a subclass of cotemporal motion verbs in Hmong.

In the sentence in his interlanguage they are transitive and describe the manner in which the agent (Ge) is transporting the food through space. Especially distinguishing is that the agent and the object being transported move together (in contrast to ‘transfer’ verbs like sending a letter). Secondly, the order is unique, first path, then source and then

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7 It is not clear from Huebner’s transcription if the ‘n’ is hesitation, a gerund (suggested by an ALS 2005 conference participant), or indicates a conjunction, although Huebner transcribes ‘aend’ elsewhere as a clear coordinating conjunction. The ‘n’ also appears throughout the interlanguage, regardless of constituent structure, suggesting hesitation rather than a grammatical structure.

goal, where path refers to the extent of the motion (take)<sup>8</sup>, source refers to point of reference with the speaker (come), and the motion is away from the speaker (go), the latter two typical deictic functions. Finally, atelic verbs (take) precede telic verbs (come, go) in manner of motion verbs. If the order is reversed, the serial verb cannot be interpreted as a single event, but rather two distinct events with the second indicating purpose<sup>9</sup>. Thus, what appears to be multiple clauses having undergone zero anaphora due to coreferential topic deletion in this passage, is actually functioning as “a very tightly knit grammatical structure, ...constituting a particular grammatical unit”, all sharing one subject.

A further analysis of Huebner’s data seems warranted since all three of the verbs in this construction have the highest frequency in his data, and the highest occurrence of ‘go’ and ‘take’ are followed by another verb: take: (A)VOVdG and (A)VOVd; go, the highest of all verbs, Vd-V, where Vd=directional verb and G=goal noun phrase (Appendix B, pp. 221, 219 respectively). Unfortunately, Huebner provides these facts as statistical lists only instead of actual occurrences, so it is not possible to determine either the elements or context of the constructions. Without looking at the lexical structures in the utterances listed in the chart, we can not ascertain if they are compound verbs, complements, or serial verbs.

Serial verbs are a particular type of grammatical unit and have a special function in discourse. Lines 1 to line 7, a complex discourse structure of an event, i.e. Ge’s activities at Camp Wanei, all work together in which this one serial verb construction is only one part. Although the arrangement of verbs in this passage clearly function as a serial verb constrained by a single subject, we need more than one example before we can have evidence to support the grammatical function of serial verbs in this interlanguage.

Yet, Huebner used this example to prove that topic controls co-referential deletion in subject position in this interlanguage. We have seen that although topic controls coreferential deletion in Mandarin, it is ambiguous between subject or topic control in Hmong. Assuming that he had proven that Ge’s interlanguage was topic prominent, since all eight characteristics of a topic prominent language were found in the interlanguage, he closely followed Li and Thompson’s claim that “in a Tp language, the topic takes precedence over the subject in controlling coreference” (Li and Thompson 1976:470).

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Path’ is used by Jarkey in the Fillmorean sense rather than Talmy, in order to more completely characterize the relationships among the three properties of the event (Jarkey 1991:160).

<sup>9</sup> The example below illustrates the semantic unity of another transport serial verb in Hmong:

Example 8 Lawv coj cov me nyuam los tsev  
3PL take along CLF. PL child come.home home

“They brought the children home.”

not:...”took the children (somewhere) and then came home.” (Jarkey 1991: 165)

We have shown that in Ge's interlanguage the grammatical function of subject in serial verbs takes precedence over topic controlling co-referential deletion. Thus, Huebner's argument is neither sufficient nor accurate for claiming this as evidence for topic controlling co-referential deletion.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

In this paper I have shown that Ge's interlanguage has evidence of properties of both the grammatical relation of subject and a variety of semantic roles as early as the very first interview of the study. In addition, his argument for topic controlling co-referential deletion is evidence of the grammatical function of subject, not topic, in serial verbs. Hence, this interlanguage cannot be classified as a topic-prominent language, but must be reclassified as both subject and topic prominent.

Although the Li and Thompson taxonomy was shown to be flawed in some respects, it nonetheless provides useful guidelines theoretically and pedagogically for second language research.<sup>10</sup> Studies of zero anaphora need to consider all aspects of the interlanguage grammar, including serial verb constructions and the pragmatics of topic controlling co-referential deletion. Other areas of SLA research inevitably will follow, such as the 'dissolution' (Crowley 2002: Chapter 5) of serial verb constructions in interlanguage, which typically are found without indexing for verbal morphology (Foley and Olson 1985:51), following a path of development toward a language with inflectional morphology, concomitantly with prepositions instead of verbs used for deictic relationships, such as 'come' in Example 2.

In conclusion, absence of subject can be due to three processes: (1) co-referential deletion of the grammatical function of subject; (2) zero anaphora due to the pragmatic function of topic; (3) obligatory deletion in serial verb constructions. Distinguishing the types requires careful analysis (Korpi, forthcoming). In order to do so, it is important that we have broader and more thorough tests for the properties of subject and topic, and the grammatical functions associated with each. Diagnostic tests for the descriptive facts at the levels of grammatical relations, semantic structure and grammatical function combined with tests for pragmatic structure of topicality are necessary to distinguish these levels in an interlanguage grammar necessary for an understanding of topic and subject prominent interlanguages.

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<sup>10</sup> Gundel (1981) has proposed a revision to a three class typology based on properties of zero anaphora.

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