

Not a study of English! A corpus analysis of discourse features in spoken Burmese

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger research project on the 'Comparative analysis of discourse markers in Burmese and in English', and the product of my attempt to identify so-called particles in Burmese in terms of their discourse functions. Particles are bound morphemes, many of which do not have one-to-one equivalents in English. In traditional grammars, these lexical items are usually described in terms of their syntactic distribution: these studies present different kinds of sentential environments, but often fall short of a systematic generalization describing their semantic or pragmatic properties. A corpus-based study of spoken Burmese in different genres, within the framework of Discourse Analysis, suggests that particles often have prominent discourse functions, and many are in fact used primarily for their discourse functions in natural spoken discourse, in which propositional meaning remains the same with or without the particles.

Introduction

This study examines naturally-occurring spoken language in Burmese with an aim to understand the discourse functions of particles. Burmese particles share many characteristics of discourse markers, as described in the literature on discourse studies to date. However, discourse markers have been mostly studied in English, using models for English, which depend on the notion of discourse markers as freestanding morphemes such as words or phrases. Corpus-based approaches use the 'word' as their unit of analysis, but the notion of word is problematic for Burmese. If relatively little research has been done on the Burmese language, discourse studies on spoken Burmese are as yet almost non-existent. While findings from previous work on discourse studies in English have contributed many valuable insights that are potentially applicable to

Burmese, English models are not entirely suitable to define a framework for Burmese.

Background: Particles in Burmese

Burmese is the official national language of Myanmar, previously known as Burma. Along with Tibetan, Burmese is one of the two most important languages of the Tibeto-Burman language family, most of which are syntactically classified as SOV languages. One of the most prominent features of Burmese is its heavy use of PARTICLES — bound lexical morphemes which are post-positionally attached to syntactic or lexical units. Some particles are obligatory for indicating grammatical relations between words, clauses, or utterances, and therefore often receive grammatical labels such as *subject marker*, *sentence-final particle*, etc. In order to illustrate the functions of Burmese particles, let us consider first example (1) in which all the so-called particles are marked in italics and glossed as 'PCL'.

- (1) Thu-*gá* Limerick-*hma* sa-dàn thwà-phaq-teh-*lei*
 S/he-SUBJ Limerick-in paper go read PCL-PCL
 'S/he went and read a paper in Limerick, *you know*'.

I am deliberately omitting specific terms for some of the particles in (1), except when it is possible to give an exact equivalent in English, or a widely recognized label is available. In fact many particles do not have a gloss that has been agreed upon by previous researchers.

Table 1: Explanation of particles from utterance (1)

<u>Burmese Particle</u>	<u>English equivalent</u>	<u>Function as syntactic marker</u>	<u>Non-obligatory or Obligatory</u>
<i>gá</i>	—	Subject	Non-obligatory
<i>hma</i>	in/at	Place without movement	Obligatory
<i>teh</i>	—	End of the sentence	Obligatory
<i>lei</i>	you know	No syntactic function	Non-Obligatory

It is debatable whether certain particles (e.g. *gá*) are syntactically obligatory or not, but this issue is beyond the scope of the

present study. On the other hand, particles such as *hma* and *teh* are obligatory: *hma* has a syntactic meaning equivalent to prepositions in English; *teh* has been known as a VERB SENTENCE MARKER (henceforth VSM) (Okell 1969). In general, every declarative affirmative statement in Burmese ends with a VSM of some type, which may or may not be followed by an additional particle with a particular discourse meaning, such as *le*. While VSMs are considered syntactically obligatory, many other particles like *le* are seemingly non-obligatory. There are in fact a large number of particles which seem non-obligatory, as they do not affect the propositional or conceptual meaning of utterances. They do, however, affect discourse meaning — an essential component of the communication process. Different particles are associated with different discourse functions. For instance, by simply altering the particles, (1) conveys different discourse meanings while maintaining the truth conditionality of the utterance (cf. the utterances in Table 2). It is in fact the use of seemingly non-obligatory particles such as *le* or *gá* that is the scope of this study, as they all express important discourse meanings. In Table 2 below, different discourse particles for the sentence as in (1) are given together with possible discourse meanings associated with the respective discourse particles in italics.

Table 2: Utterance (1) with different discourse particles

Burmese utterance	Possible discourse meaning
Thu-gá Limerick-hma sa-dàn thwà-phaq- <i>teh-lei</i>	'you know' (provisional translation)
Thu-gá Limerick-hma sa-dàn thwà-phaq- <i>teh</i>	Neutral statement: stating a fact
Thu-gá Limerick-hma sa-dàn thwà-phaq- <i>teh-táw</i>	Expressing surprise or admiration

I demonstrate further with the set of examples in Table 3 below how the use of non-obligatory particles can modulate the discourse meanings of a simple imperative utterance equivalent to *Come!* or *Please come* in English. The word *la-* means, 'to come'; it occupies utterance-final position (unlike English, additional information such as 'here' comes before the verb), and various particles are post-positionally attached to it, affecting the pragmatic or discourse meaning of the utterance while maintaining its propositional

content. The absence of particles also indicates a discourse meaning, as can be seen in utterance 8 in the table, which would be heard as a bald (and quite imposing) directive. In addition, socio-cultural rules in Burmese dictate that some of the particles are acceptable to be used by those higher in the hierarchy, by age and rank, to their inferiors only (e.g. 6 and 8), and some among equals (e.g. 3, 4, and 7).

Table 3: Imperative statement 'to come' + various particles expressing different discourse meanings

Transcription	English equivalent (provisional translations) and possible discourse functions
1. di-go la-ba	'Please come here'
2. di-go la-naw	'(Please) come, OK?' [Softening a request]
3. di la-kwa	'Come' [compelling attention. cf. English <i>Boy!</i> , <i>Man!</i> , <i>My dear!</i> , etc.]
4. di-go la-kweh	'Come' [compelling attention, but more sympathetic and less peremptory than the previous one]
5. di-go la-lei	'Please come' [Used in intimate friendly conversation, means more like 'Come along.' Implying something like 'you should have come here already and now I have to insist']
6. di la-zàn	'Please come' [but it is more like a command, and conveys urgency]
7. di-go la-s'o	'(Please) come' [Implying 'I'm telling you to come, so please do come', or '... so just come!']
8. la!	Come! [More of a command, can sound harsh]

Many of the particles lack one-to-one equivalents in English, as their semantic value is highly dependent on the context — one of the main sources of difficulty for learners of Burmese. For instance, compare the English equivalent of *lei* in (1) and in utterance 5 from Table 3. From a discourse perspective, it can be observed in naturally-occurring language that the particles may serve as discourse-connectors, confirmation-seekers, intimacy signals, topic-switchers, attitude markers, or hedging devices, etc. In general, Burmese particles share many characteristics of discourse markers, as described in the existing literature.

In this paper, I discuss three different types of particles in Burmese that function as discourse markers — utterance-final particles, utterance-initial particles following the word 'yes', and particles that follow appellatives (address terms).

Discourse markers in previous research

Discourse markers, also known as discourse particles, discourse connectives, pragmatic markers, etc., are, as defined by Schiffrin (1987: 31), 'sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk'. For Schourup (1985: v), who examined common discourse particles in English conversations, they express 'private thoughts' in the communication process, as speakers 'convey ongoing concerns for what they are not indicating on the discourse surface'. In other words, as McCarthy (1993: 172) states, particles 'signal to the receiver, independently of content, what is happening, where the discourse is, where it is going ... [and] are therefore a system of management of what is said or written'. In addition, it is commonly stated that they convey *procedural meaning* rather than *conceptual* or *propositional meaning*; they do not affect determination of truth conditionality, nor do they contribute to propositional content (Ochs 1979, Jucker 1993, and Fraser 1990); they are syntactically detachable (Schiffrin 2001), yet their distribution is not random, and they are not freely interchangeable (Wierzbicka 1986). When discourse markers are used, their more specific interpretation is negotiated by the context (Fraser 1990). They relate to the speech situation (Jucker 1993) and they pertain primarily to language use, rather than to language structure, and thus cannot be studied in the absence of context (Wierzbicka 1986). They express an *affective* or *emotive* (rather than a *referential* or *denotative*) function (Jucker 1993 and Maynard 1993).

However, many of the findings of previous research are based on data from western languages, which do not share linguistic and sociocultural rules with non-western languages such as Burmese. According to Schiffrin (2001), one of the conditions that would qualify a word as a discourse marker (henceforth DM) is its occurrence in utterance-initial position. However, as I demonstrate below with examples from a corpus, a large number of Burmese particles occur in utterance-final position. Schiffrin also describes them as non-obligatory in utterances. However, Burmese VSMs have a dual role: as shown above, they are syntactically obligatory, although the

choice of a particular VSM over another usually indicates discourse meaning. On the other hand, discourse studies based on Asian languages have different views of lexical items with discourse functions. Maynard (1993) uses the term *INTERACTIONAL PARTICLES* (henceforth *IP*), to describe such lexical items in Japanese. Maynard points out that adding *IPs* at the sentence-final position helps end the sentence with emotional effect. On the surface, *IPs* seem to play a primarily grammatical function, marking grammatical relation within the sentence, but a corpus-based study indicates that they also express the speaker's judgment and attitude toward the message and the partner. Uyeno (1971: 131-132) uses a different term, *PARTICLES OF RAPPORT*, as they reflect 'the speaker's consideration of the addressee, and the addressee feels more participation in the conversation with mutual understanding'.

With this corpus-based study, I aim to identify discourse functions typically associated with specific particles, and suggest that particles are often more important for their discourse meanings than their grammatical meaning. I will then argue that current definitions of *DMs* tend to be Euro-centric and too restrictive: they do not include discourse-sensitive particles such as Maynard's *IPs*, or discourse marking particles in utterance-final positions other than 'tag questions', which are known from western languages. The data for this study also questions the notion of word as a unit of analysis for a corpus-based approach.

Data and methodology

The data for this paper are drawn from a corpus of spoken Burmese in different genres, namely personal interviews, narratives, pre-planned speech in radio plays and a work of fiction (spoken Burmese in a written mode, for which there is a parallel corpus available), and news broadcasts. Each genre in spoken mode consists of 15 to 30 minutes' audio recordings. The data analysed is summarized in Table 4, which displays categories of texts in the corpus, the total number of texts per category, and the total number of syllables per category.

Table 4: Description of corpus

Categories of texts with brief description of content	Texts per category	Syllables per category
1. <i>Personal interview</i> : Two men: opinions about a radio station abroad	1	4786
2. <i>Narrative</i> : Two friends: recounting a film	1	4435
3. <i>Dialogues in fiction (written mode)</i> : 1. Nagging mother and married son and daughter: how one should look after one's own family rather than in-laws 2. Child with different adults: what he wants to do when he grows up 3. Mother-daughter; husband-wife: discussing gifts (as bribes) for teachers, doctors, etc.	3	7403
4. <i>Pre-planned dialogue (radio plays)</i> : 1. Two friends: how one should be fashionable or traditional in clothing and general behaviour 2. Three friends: talking about eating vegetable 3. Two friends: same as above	3	4041
5. <i>News broadcast</i> : 1. Headline news 2. Seizing Burmese Embassy in Bangkok 3. Battle on Thai-Burma border 4. Nobel prize: Médecins sans frontières 5. Thai fishing boats in Burmese water 6. Politics in Thai parliament	6	6445
TOTAL		27,110

All the data in spoken mode were recorded by various individuals, and collected randomly over the last few years. There is no concordance software available for Burmese, nor word processing program that does 'word count' for Burmese. In fact, the notion of 'word', as perceived for languages that use an alphabetic script, cannot be applied to Burmese, which uses a syllabic script. I am using therefore 'syllables' as a measuring system for the Burmese corpus. All texts were counted manually and all the particles to be examined were isolated manually. Prosodic features are excluded in the

transcription and in the analysis, as they are not within the scope of this study. In fact, only a partial phonemic transcription is included in this paper, mainly for the lexical items that are discussed, which are marked in italics.

Although the corpus size is relatively small, and texts in each genre are not of equal size, they all fall within a range of 4,000-7,000 syllables, and the findings of this analysis will still be indicative of certain features of spoken Burmese discourse. They offer insights on discourse marking particles of spoken Burmese, and thus can serve as a starting point for future discourse studies in Burmese alone, or in comparative discourse studies between Burmese and other languages.

The analysis of utterance-final particles will be based on quantitative as well as qualitative findings. For the other two categories, however, I shall illustrate qualitative findings only, based on selective sections of the data from pre-planned dialogues in radio plays and work of fiction. The aim is to merely indicate the possible nature of the particles in each category, as suggested by the actual data, which is indeed different from their descriptions in traditional grammars. While it is not possible to report findings in detail within the scope of this study, it is my intention to present a variety of particles in different categories in order to illustrate the complex nature of discourse-marking particles in Burmese.

Analysis

Particles with discourse meaning in utterance-final position

*Verb-sentence marking particle /teh/ or /deh/*¹

VSM *deh* is one of the most important lexical items to be learnt in language classes: it is often regarded as an obligatory lexical item for formulating affirmative declarative sentences. Nonetheless, among the five different genres of spoken Burmese data that I have investigated for this study, few affirmative declarative sentences actually end with *deh*, as shown in Table 5 below, which is based on a sample of approximately 1,000 syllables.

The findings as they are illustrated in Table 5 suggest that the use of VSM *deh* may be genre-specific, as it occurs with the highest frequency in the news broadcast, or in parts of the narrative where

one is presenting 'facts', whereas it occurs with the lowest frequency in the personal interview which is indeed full of incomplete sentences, hedges, and false starts. Similarly, in the pre-scripted dialogues in radio plays, *deh* appears minimally in sections where the speaker is talking about benefits of eating vegetables — as if presenting facts in a lecture.

(2) Bi-ta-min ei-da-q chó-téh-yin ...thwèi-à-nèi
Vitamin A deficient if anaemia

yàw-ga-dwe p'yiq-taq-*deh*
can happen-PCL

'If you have vitamin A deficiency, you can get anaemic'.

Table 5: Verb-sentence marking particle deh in spoken Burmese corpora

	<i>Number of VSM deh tokens</i>
1. Personal interview	7
2. Narrative	29 (in the first 1,000+) 14 (in the second 1,000+)
3. Dialogues in fiction	8
4. Dialogues in radio plays	10
5. News broadcast	15 — every affirmative declarative ends with <i>deh</i>

The lower frequency of *deh* in the dialogues in fiction, in comparison to those in radio plays, suggests that the use of this VSM may also be topic-sensitive: in the dialogues in fiction, between the nagging mother and a defensive daughter, there is relatively less fact-presenting in the discourse. Besides, in the film narrative data, it is observed that the first 1,000 words have a higher frequency of *deh* than the second section of 1,000 words (29 vs. 14), which supports the idea of the topic-sensitive nature of the discourse-marking particles: in the first part, the speaker is trying to establish the context, giving facts about the (male) protagonist — who he is, what he does in life, where the action takes place, etc., and therefore mostly producing utterances like (3) and (4).

(3) He is very rich

(4) They strolled around.

As the narrator goes on with the story, she gets more involved in the narration, at times checking the comprehension or participation on the part of the listener. As a result she uses fewer utterances that end with *deh*. Instead, in many of the statements, the VSM *deh* is replaced by another VSM *da* (also described as a 'nominalizing particle', cf. Okell 1969, Okell and Allott 2001), or followed by other particles or phrases such as tag questions as in (6), either directly after the verb or after the nominalized utterances.

(5) Lu-zò-dwei-gá shwe-ló t'in-*da*
Robbers gold think-PCL
'The robbers thought it was gold'.

(6) A-wèi-pyèi-kà-dwei shí-*deh* ma-houq-là
Long-distance buses be-PCL isn't it?
'There are busses that run long-distance, *right?*'.

(7) mì-bòun-byan-jì louq-*teh* a-má
hot air balloon make-PCL Sister
'(They) made a hot air balloon, *you know Sister*'.

The following text, taken from a short story in the parallel corpus, can serve as a typical example of casual conversations in Burmese, in which every VSM is followed by other discourse-marking particles. The speaker is a vendor (in an open market) chatting with a customer who is new to the neighbourhood, shopping there for the first time. The text is a response to the customer's question 'This is a pretty small market, isn't it, Auntie? Has it been here long?'.

The English text in (8) shows a rough translation of each utterance in the Burmese text which follows in Figure 1: approximate equivalents of the particles are based on their discourse meanings in the context. Some utterances have more than one equivalent reflecting the original discourse meaning in Burmese, and thus alternatives are presented.

(8) a. *Well*, let's say, it's been quite a while.

- b. It's been about 4-5 years, *I guess*.
- c. If it's a small market, it's not something opened by the Municipal department, *right?*
- d.i. Before, we were vendors 'on the run' selling (things) near the big market on that (tar) road, *you know*. [OR]
- d.ii. Before, we were *just* vendors 'on the run' selling (things) near the big market on that (tar) road.
- e.i. Since it's all organized into little shops, (we are) it's more presentable/respectable, *you know*. [OR] *may be with a big sigh!*
- f.i. Besides, (government) employees around this area don't have to go far to do their shopping, *you know*. [OR]
- f.ii. Besides, *of course (now)* employees around this area don't have to go far to do their shopping.

Figure 1: Extract from dialogue in fiction

Note: particles with discourse meaning appear in bold.

ကြာပြီဆိုပါတော့ **ကွယ်** လေးငါးနှစ်တော့ ရှိပြီပေါ့။ ဈေးကလေးဆို စည်ပင်သာယာကုန်ပစ္စည်းတွေရတဲ့ မဟုတ်တာ **ကွယ်**။ အလျင် အဆင်တိုက် ဟိုးကားလမ်းမက ဈေးကြီးနားမှာ ပြေးလွှားရောင်းနေရတဲ့ ယုံကျဈေးသည်တွေပေါ့။ ဒီနားမှာစုပြီး ဆိုင်လေးကနားလေးနဲ့ လုပ်လိုက်တော့ ဣန္ဒြေရသွားတာပေါ့ **ကွယ်**။ ဒီတစ်ခိုက်က ဝန်ထမ်းသမားတွေလဲ နီးနီးနားနား ဝယ်လို့ရသွားတာပေါ့။

[Extract from Nu Nu Yee, 1987. *Rain water market*]

In (9), a translation by a native speaker of American English which is taken from the parallel corpus, however, we observe that not all Burmese particles with discourse meaning are expressed in the English text. Compared to six possible DMs for each of the utterances in the original, (9) has only three DMs, which are also different from the equivalents suggested in (8). This discrepancy suggests that the use of DMs is closely related to the discourse structure of specific languages.

- (9) You *could* say that it has. It's already been here four or five years. It wasn't set up by the municipal authorities, *though*. I and the others were just itinerant vendors who conducted business on the sly, *so to speak*, near the large market on

the main highway. By getting together and setting up little stalls here, we've become more legitimate. The office workers from the neighbourhood now have someplace close by to do their marketing.

Utterance-final particle páw

Between the two utterance-final particles — *páw* and *kweh* — from the text in Figure 1, the particle *páw* appears with high frequency across genres in the corpus, even though the frequency rate is different in different genres: personal interviews and narratives, which represent spontaneous speech, have the highest frequency (over 60) and the broadcast news has the lowest (only one).

Table 6: Particle páw in spoken Burmese corpora

	<i>Number of particle páw tokens in approximately 5,000 syllables</i>
1. Personal interview	61
2. Narrative	69
3. Dialogues in fiction	14
4. Pre-planned dialogue (radio play)	20 in one story; 8 in another
5. News broadcast	1

The dictionary meaning of the particle *páw* is explained in standard reference books as in Figures 2 and 3 below. If the use of the particle *páw* is genre-specific as Table 6 indicates, the use also seems topic-sensitive — a phenomenon which is probably true for all discourse-marking particles in Burmese in general. In the dialogues from two radio plays (of approximately equal size), one has a higher frequency than the other: in the one with higher frequency, the speakers are two young women who get into a dispute and eventually get reconciled. Their dialogues mainly evolve around two-way criticisms of one's passion for everything foreign-made and the other's naïve view of fashion and social skills. On the other hand, the second story, which is in fact an educational

programme about vegetables and nutrition, has considerably fewer tokens of the particle *páw* (cf. Table 6: 20 uses vs. 8).

Figure 2: Description of particle *páw* (Myanmar-English dictionary)

ပေါ့	/po. (bo)/	pawr [colloq]	Same as ပေါ့	pawr	No further explanation given
ပါ	/pa/	pawr [colloq]	particle	suffixed to a verb as emphasis.	
			Also ပါ၏, ပေါ့		
Myanmar-English Dictionary [Dept. of Myanmar Language Commission]					

Figure 3: Description of particle *páw* (Okell and Allott 2001)

ပေါ့ (Stc-) => of course, by all means, naturally, obviously; presumably, no doubt, I suppose; you know, let's say, I mean; stc fin phr ptcl, main CB; before ပေါ့ sentence markers တယ် and မယ် often take the forms တာ and မာ, sts သ and မ; • အကြိမ်ကြိမ် လုပ်ရရင်တော့ မောတာပေါ့။ If you have to do it over and over again then naturally you get tired. • မင် ကုန်သွားရင် ရေးလို့ မရတော့ဘူးပေါ့။ Obviously, when the ink runs out you can't write any more. • ဆုံမပေါ့။ Of course it will fit in. • မကြိုက်ရင် ထပ်လုပ်အုံးပေါ့။ If you don't like it, do it again of course. • လက်ဖက်ရည်လေး သောက်ပါအုံးလား။ - သောက်တာပေါ့။ Would you like a cup of tea? — Yes I would. • တွေ့ကြသေးတာပေါ့။ See you! ("naturally we'll meet again"). • လန်ဒန်မှာ ရှိတုန်းက ဒါမျိုး တွေ့ဖူးမှာပေါ့။ No doubt you came across that sort of thing while you were in London? • သူ့ဝတ္ထု တော်တော်များများ ဖတ်ဖူးပြီပေါ့။ I take it you have read quite a few

In narratives, when the speaker uses the particle *páw* she seems to be either checking the listener's comprehension, or soliciting her interlocutor's involvement in the narrative process (cf. example 10). Sometimes, she seems to use *páw* when she is offering her opinion or interpretation as in (12) or as a hedge as in (11).

- (10) Thú a-ko-yéh a-wuq-a'sà-páw-lei
Her brother's clothes-PCL-PCL
'Her brother's clothes, *you know*'.

- (11) Ho-ha-lo-páw-naw
Like that-PCL
'What do you call it?' [*Hedge*].

- (12) Kaun-lèi-gá-lèh a-t'in-lwè-thwà-da *páw*-naw
 The guy also misunderstand-PCL-PCL
 '[And then] The guy misunderstood, *you see?*'.

In the news broadcast, the only token of *páw* occurs in a direct quotation where the lawyer who is interviewed by the radio station is explaining about the law regarding Thai fishing boats in the Burma water; there it functions like a DM for comprehension check.

- (13) What are the agreements between the fishing companies and the government? [*Hedge*] *let's say*, conditions in the contract.

Among the utterance-final particles, *deh* and *páw* have been discussed here. The findings of the data suggest that the use of *deh* is genre-specific: it is commonly used for presenting facts in pre-planned speech such as news broadcasts, and it is often used in combination with another discourse-marking particle post-positionally attached to it. Utterance-final particle *páw* is used in spoken Burmese, immediately following a VSM, and the use of *páw* is not only genre-specific but also specific to topic management. In using *páw* the speaker is likely to be doing one of the following discourse functions: checking comprehension, soliciting involvement from the interlocutor, or toning down the presentation of one's opinion or interpretation, as modesty is a quality highly valued in Asian cultures such as Burmese.

Particles in utterance-initial position following the word 'yes'

The word *in* or *èi* means 'yes' in Burmese. While this generic 'yes' usually occurs by itself, i.e., without any particle in response to questions which require 'yes/no' answers, or as a BACK CHANNEL functioning simply to acknowledge the continuing talk, the set of examples (14)-(16) illustrate its use as a possible HEDGE (see papers by Farr et al. and McCarthy and Carter, this volume), and the attached suffix particles indicate the attitudinal stance of the speaker towards the previous utterance or the message. In the following examples, the words in italics in the gloss indicate the discourse function expressed by the particles that are attached to the word

'yes', also indicated in italics. Underlining is used where the author has inserted her alternative translation.

- (14) Èi-*kwéh* youq-ka-lèi-gá-lèh-shí, pyinnya-galèi-gá-lèh taw-s'o-dáw Thwe-gá lá-gá-dáw kàun-gaùn yá-mha-páw-naw Tha-mi

'[*HEDGE*], you have the look, and education, so you must get a good salary, *I suppose?*'.

- (15) a. Thwe a-phyei pèi-pì-yin Khin Nhaun-go pyàw-oùn-mhá-páw

b. Èi-*ba-ha*

a. 'You must tell me when you have given the answer, OK?'

b. 'Sure, sure, I will'. [*May be with a bit of resignation in response to her friend's demand*].

- (16) Èi-naw sheq-saya-jì-naw

'Yeah, [*supporting the partner's opinion*], it's [so] embarrassing [shameful]!'.

Particles as discourse markers after address terms (and 'appellative suffixes')

Particles in this category are post-positionally attached to proper names, used as pronouns or address terms in Burmese. The use of different particles signifies different discourse meanings, which can sometimes be expressed with intonation in English. Among them, as suggested by my data, the particle *lèh* expresses discourse meaning that is often overlooked in traditional grammars. Contrary to the dictionary conjunctive meaning of 'in addition' or 'also', the findings in my data suggest that in natural spoken discourse, this particle is used for discourse meanings: for instance, when the particle *lèh* is post-positionally attached to a noun + 'subject marker' *gá*, its discourse function is either to reproach someone, or for self-justification or self-defence.

Figure 4: Particle *lèh* as described in the reference books

လဲဟ်: / le: / **part** 1 word affixed to a noun or verb to mean "also". 2 word replicated and prefixed to a pair of verbs to denote simultaneous action (equivalent in usage to adverb 'at the same time')

- (17) Hin Khin Nhaun- gá-lèh lá-za-dwe
Oh Khin Nhuan SUBJ-PCL you have

di-lauq a-myà-jì pèi-t'à-da
been getting a really good salary

'Oh, Khin Hnaung, you have been getting a really good salary'. [*Reproach by a friend to Khin Hnaung for not spending money on fashion items*]

- (18) Aw Mei Mei- gá-lèh k'eq-laiq-ta
Oh Mother SUBJ-PCL you're really being difficult

'Oh, Mom, you're really being difficult'. [*Reproach to a nagging mother, and may be a self-defence at the same time, expressing frustration*]

- (19) Aw A Mei- gá-lèh a-mei-dó-go
Oh Mother SUBJ-PCL I have been

kya-naw a-yèi-saiq-thà-bèh
looking after you

'Oh, come on Mom, I have been looking after you' [*Self-defence to an accusation by a nagging mother*].

Concluding note

Using a corpus-based approach, within the framework of discourse analysis, I have discussed three different categories of Burmese particles in natural spoken and written data in relation to their discourse features. The findings of the data suggest that Burmese particles are context-dependent, genre-specific, and/or topic-sensitive

(it is even possible that they are gender-specific, a promising topic for future research in Burmese discourse studies). Moreover, Burmese particles seem more important for their discourse function than their grammatical function. Even in a handful of examples illustrated from the corpus above, it is clear that their important discourse meanings are often overlooked in traditional grammars.

The applicability of the findings of this study can be bi-directional: for English speakers learning Burmese, and for Burmese students of English. There are also important implications for the study of discourse features of non-western languages such as Burmese using frameworks designed for western languages such as English. Finally, not least, the notion of 'word' as a unit of analysis for a corpus-based approach is challenged by the data of this study.

Note

1. The pronunciations /teh/ or /deh/ are alternative forms of the same lexical item in Burmese. Pronunciation differs according to the voicing process in Burmese.

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