Finiteness in Burmese

Mathias Jenny

Department of General Linguistics, University of Zurich

jenny@spw.uzh.ch

ICSTLL 41, SOAS London, 18-21 September 2008
**WHAT IS FINITENESS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional view:</th>
<th>Property of the <strong>verb</strong> expressed mainly by <strong>tense</strong> and <strong>agreement</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contemprary linguistics (e.g. Givón, Bisang):</td>
<td>Property of the <strong>independent clause</strong>, expressed mainly by <strong>tAM marking</strong>, <strong>agreement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Grammar (Langacker):</td>
<td>Epistemic grounding of an event in the sphere of <strong>reality</strong> as conceived by the speaker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REALITY (Langacker 1991, 2008)

All those circumstances a conceptualizer accepts as presently obtaining (IMMEDIATE REALITY) or having obtained at some point in the past (NON-IMMEDIATE REALITY). For a given conceptualizer, a distinction can be drawn between KNOWN and UNKNOWN REALITY. The complement of KNOWN REALITY is called IRREALITY, whereas NON-REALITY is the complement of reality overall, both known and unknown.
CONCEPTUALIZER at time of reference

UNKNOWN REALITY

KNOWN REALITY

IMMEDIATE REALITY

timeline

NON-REALITY

NON-REALITY
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REALITY</th>
<th>NON-REALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KNOWN</td>
<td>(KNOWN ?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. IMMEDIATE (PRESENT)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. NON-IMMEDIATE (PAST)</td>
<td>UNKNOWN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNKNOWN (IRREALITY)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**The verbal predicate in Burmese**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(PrVOp)</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>(PoVOp)</th>
<th>FVO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspect</td>
<td>(any lexical verb or serial verb</td>
<td>Modality</td>
<td>te</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directionality</td>
<td>construction)</td>
<td>Manner</td>
<td>“REALIS”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manner</td>
<td></td>
<td>Directionality</td>
<td>me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other notions:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Aspect</td>
<td>“IRREALIS”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V along, help V,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>let V</td>
<td></td>
<td>Politeness</td>
<td>phù</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Neg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### The Main Finite Verb Phrase Operators (FVO)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic form</th>
<th>Attributive</th>
<th>Nominalised</th>
<th>Clitic</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$tɛ$</td>
<td>$tɛ́$</td>
<td>$ta$</td>
<td>$θɛ$ =</td>
<td>“Realis”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$mɛ$</td>
<td>$mɛ́$</td>
<td>$hma$</td>
<td>$mɛ$ =</td>
<td>“Irrealis”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$pi$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$pɛ$ =</td>
<td>Newsit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$phù$</td>
<td>$tɛ$, $mɛ$</td>
<td>$ta$, $hma$</td>
<td></td>
<td>Negation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Markers \( tɛ \) and \( mɛ \): TENSE or MODALITY or what?

Independent Burmese Grammars on \( tɛ \) (LB \( ʔi, ʔī \)) and \( pi \):

\( ʔi, ʔī \) and \( pi \) cannot be used on their own as present tense or past tense verbal suffixes. The [temporal] meaning of the sentence depends on the temporal phrases in the same sentence to distinguish past and present meanings.

(Myanmar Language Commission 2005:15)
Indigenous Burmese Grammars on *me* (LB *myi*, ၿâ)

ဗောီးကူးသောစာစောင်း ပြယံးပြီးနောက်မှာ:

ငှနာကျော်-ဗျိုက် ကြိုး ဟာ ဗျ လော့လော့ လျှော့

‘word indicating future time’

(Myanmar Language Commission 1999:242)
Western Scholars’ explanations

Judson (1852):

\( \theta i \), simply ASSERTIVE, as \( \theta wà \, \theta i \), he goes.
\( \dot{\eta}i \), same as \( \theta i \).

\( \dot{r}à \), FUTURE, as \( \theta wà \, \dot{r}à \), he will go.
\( myi \), FUTURE.
Allott (1965):

**AFFIRMATIVE-ASSERTIVE-REALIZED**  \( tɛ \)

**AFFIRMATIVE-ASSERTIVE-UNREALIZED**  \( mɛ \)

Okell (1969):

\( tɛ: \)

**VERB-SENTENCE MARKER. NON-FUTURE;** translatable by English past or present tenses in general narrative and descriptive statements.

\( mɛ: \)

**VERB-SENTENCE MARKER. FUTURE, or ASSUMPTIVE;** hence translatable by ‘shall, will, going to, may, must, would’.
Comrie (1985) based on Okell (1969)

The main function of $me$ is not time reference, as
“[i]t can be used with present or past time reference provided
the reference is not restricted to our actual world, i.e. provided
there is a modal value to the particle”

(1) $mətɕì-θì$ $sà$ $phù$ $me$ $thĩ$ $tɛ$.
    tamarind-fruit eat EXPER ME think TE
    ‘I think he must have eaten tamarinds before.’
Watkins (ed., 2005)

Yanson, Vittrant:

\[ t\epsilon = \text{REALIS}, m\epsilon = \text{IRREALIS} \]
FVO express modality

Gärtner:

Burmese does have tense. The marker \( m\epsilon \) marks FUTURE but can also be used to express EPISTEMIC MODALITY.
Definitions

**FUTURE:** “Prediction on the part of the speaker that the situation in the proposition, which refers to an event taking place after the moment of speech, will hold.” (Bybee *et al.* 1994:244)

**IRREALIS:** Non-actual events, unrealised events, events distant from the present reality: 
*Negative, future, imperative, counterfactual, etc.*
BURMESE DATA

1. te

(2) ?əwuʔ ɕɔ ne te.
clothes wash stay TE
‘I am washing my clothes.’

PRESENT:
IMMEDIATE
REALITY (KNOWN)

(3) di mənɛʔ tʰu ká tɕənc sa pó te.
this morning TEMP ABL 1m text send TE
‘I sent (you) an e-mail this morning.’

PAST:
NON-IMMEDIATE
REALITY (KNOWN)
(4) ʨənc θu tʰɛ? ʔəθɛ? tɕì  tɛ.  
1m 3 COMP age big TE  
‘I am older than he.’  

(5)  khəlɛ twɛ nɛ tâi  tɕɔu  tɛ?  tɛ.  
child PL day every school go.up TE  
‘The children go to school every day.’
PAST COUNTERFACUAL: NON-REALITY (KNOWN)

(6) ʨənɔ mɛ.ɔ>má yu tɔhĩ yĩ yu lai?  tɑ  tɔa  pi.
   1m  woman  take DES  COND  take FOLLOW  TE.NML  long  NSIT
   ‘If I wanted to get married, I would have married long time ago.’

(7) ˈθu ˈθĩ  yĩ  la  tɑ  tɔa  pi.
   3  know  COND  come  TE.NML  long  NSIT
   ‘If he knew he would have come here long time ago.’

   yesterday  ABL  rain  NEG=fall  COND  play.sport-field  go  be  TE
   ‘If it hadn’t rained yesterday we would have gone to the sports field.’
2. *mɛ*

**Future: non-reality (unknown)**

(9) ʨənc mənɛʔ.phyã wɨ.ká tɛʔ  mɛ (θe.ʨʰa tɛ).
    1m tomorrow Wangka go.up ME (certain TE)
    ‘I will come to Wangka tomorrow (for sure).’

**Relative Future (non-reality, unknown at time of reference)**

(10) mì mənɛ̃ ká la  mɛ (ló) thî tɛ.
    2 yesterday ABL come ME (SUB) think TE
    ‘I thought you would come yesterday.’
Speculative: Reality (Unknown)

that TEMP ABL 1m age fifteen as.much.as exist SPEC=ME
‘Back then I was/must have been about fifteen, I guess.’

(12) ðu nāi.ŋā tɔ hà yau? phù me thî te.
3 country other arrive EXPER ME think TE
‘I think that he has been abroad before.’

(12)’ ðu nāi.ŋā tɔ hà yau? phù te thî te.
3 country other arrive EXPER TE think TE
Conclusion:

FINITENESS in Burmese is a feature of the verbal clause, not of a verb. It expresses the state of knowledge the speaker has of the event described in the proposition. The distinction made is one between KNOWN and UNKNOWN, rather than between REAL and NON-REAL events. PAST and PRESENT events can be KNOWN or UNKNOWN, irrespective of their REALITY or NON-REALITY, while FUTURE events are always NON-REAL and can only be UNKNOWN. The state of knowledge increases with the passing of time and varies among speakers. The choice of the appropriate finiteness marker is accordingly variable.
**te** is used in propositions describing facts that are known or construed as known; these include PAST and PRESENT events, both REALISED and UNREALISED, as well as HABITUAL and GENERIC situations.

**me** is used in propositions describing facts that are unknown or construed as unknown; these include SPECULATIONS about UNKNOWN situations in the PAST and PRESENT and (almost) all situations in the FUTURE; **me** does not by itself express uncertainty, but can do so in combination with léi or thī te.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Reality</th>
<th>Non-Reality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Known</strong></td>
<td>tɛ</td>
<td>tɛ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Past, Present)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unknown</strong></td>
<td>mɛ</td>
<td>mɛ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Past, Present, Future)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


