



Universität Zürich  
Seminar für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft

# **FINITENESS IN BURMESE**

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## WHAT IS FINITENESS

**Traditional view:**

Property of the VERB expressed mainly  
by TENSE and AGREEMENT

**Contemporary linguistics  
(e.g. Givón, Bisang):**

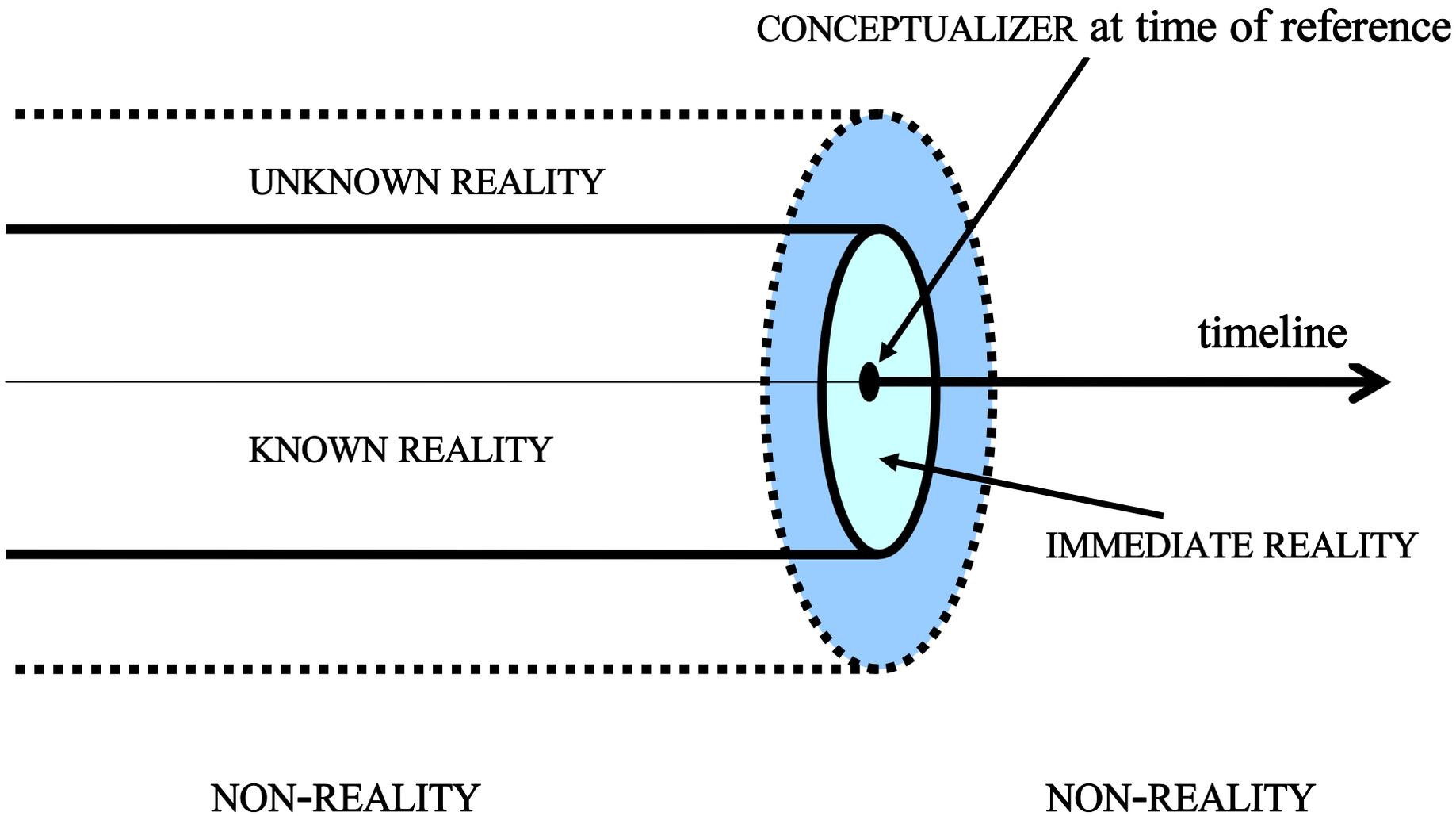
Property of the INDEPENDENT CLAUSE,  
expressed mainly by TAM marking,  
AGREEMENT

**Cognitive Grammar  
(Langacker):**

Epistemic grounding of an event in the  
sphere of REALITY as conceived by the  
speaker

## **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.



## REALITY

**KNOWN**

**1. IMMEDIATE (PRESENT)**

**2. NON-IMMEDIATE (PAST)**

**UNKNOWN (IRREALITY)**

## NON-REALITY

**(KNOWN ?)**

**UNKNOWN**

## THE VERBAL PREDICATE IN BURMESE

(PRVOP)	V	(PoVOP)	FVO	
ASPECT	(any lexical VERB or SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTION)	MODALITY	<i>tε</i>	“REALIS”
DIRECTIONALITY		MANNER	<i>mε</i>	“IRREALIS”
MANNER		DIRECTIONALITY	<i>pi</i>	NEWSIT
OTHER NOTIONS: V ALONG, HELP V, LET V		ASPECT	<i>phù</i>	NEG
		PLURALITY		
		POLITENESS		

## THE MAIN FINITE VERB PHRASE OPERATORS (FVO)

Basic form	Attributive	Nominalised	Clitic	Function
<i>tε</i>	<i>tέ</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>θə =</i>	“REALIS”
<i>mε</i>	<i>μέ</i>	<i>hma</i>	<i>mə =</i>	“IRREALIS”
<i>pi</i>			<i>pə =</i>	NEWSIT
<i>phù</i>	<i>tέ, μέ</i>	<i>ta, hma</i>		NEGATION

## The Markers *tɛ* and *mɛ*: TENSE or MODALITY or what?

### Indigenous Burmese Grammars on *tɛ* (LB *θi*, *ʔi*) and *pi*:

*θi*, *ʔi* 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 *mε* (LB *myi*, ?<sup>á</sup>)

အနာဂတ်ကာလကိုညွှန်းသောစကားလုံး

*?ənaɡa?‑kalá ko hɲǐ θə zəɡà‑lǝu*

‘word indicating future time’

(Myanmar Language Commission 1999:242)

## Western Scholars' explanations

Judson (1852):

*θi*, simply ASSERTIVE, as *θwà θi*, *he goes*.

*ʔí*, same as *θi*.

*ʔǎ́*, FUTURE, as *θwà ʔǎ́*, *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 *mε* 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) *mətçì-θì*            *sà phù*    *mε thĩ*    *tε.*

tamarind-fruit eat EXPER ME think TE

‘I think he must have eaten tamarinds before.’

**Watkins (ed., 2005)**

**Yanson, Vittrant:**

*tε* = REALIS, *mε* = IRREALIS

FVO express modality

**Gärtner:**

Burmese does have tense. The marker *mε* 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.*  
(Bybee *et al.* 1994:236ff, Bybee 1998)

## BURMESE DATA

### 1. *tɛ*

(2) *ʔəwuʔ ɕə ne tɛ.*

clothes wash stay TE

‘I am washing my clothes.’

PRESENT:

IMMEDIATE

REALITY (KNOWN)

(3) *di mənɛʔ tɔ̀u ká tɕənɔ sa pó tɛ.*

this morning TEMP ABL 1m text send TE

‘I sent (you) an e-mail this morning.’

PAST :

NON-IMMEDIATE

REALITY (KNOWN)

(4) *tɕəŋə θu theʔ ʔəθeʔ tɕì tɛ.*

1m 3 COMP age big TE

‘I am older than he.’

GENERAL

STATEMENT

(KNOWN)

(5) *khəlè twe né tãì tɕǎu tɛʔ tɛ.*

child PL day every school go.up TE

‘The children go to school every day.’

HABITUAL

(KNOWN)

## PAST COUNTERFACTUAL: NON-REALITY (KNOWN)

(6) *tɕənɔ məi.má yu tɕhĩ yĩ yu lai? ta tɕa 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) *θu θí yĩ la ta tɕa pi.*  
3 know COND come TE.NML long NSIT  
'If he knew he would have come here long time ago.'

(8) *məné ká mò mə=ywa yĩ ?à.gəzà-kwĩ θwàphyi? tɛ.*  
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. *mε*

### FUTURE: NON-REALITY (UNKNOWN)

(9) *tʃənɔ mənɛʔ.phyã wĩ.ká tɛʔ mε (θe.tʃha 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) *mĩ mənɛ ká la mε (ló) thĩ tɛ.*

2 yesterday ABL come ME (SUB) think TE

‘I thought you would come yesterday.’

SPECULATIVE: REALITY (UNKNOWN)

(11) *ho tồu ká tɕənɔ ʔəθɛ? shé.ηà lau? ɕí léi = mɛ.*

that TEMP ABL 1m age fifteen as.much.as exist SPEC = ME

‘Back then I was/must have been about fifteen, I guess.’

(12) *θu nãi.ηã tɕhà yau? phù mɛ thĩ tɛ.*

3 country other arrive EXPER ME think TE

‘I think that he has been abroad before.’

(12´) *θu nãi.ηã tɕhà yau? phù tɛ thĩ tɛ.*

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.

*tɛ* 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.

*mɛ* 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; *mɛ* does not by itself express uncertainty, but can do so in combination with *lěi* or *thĩ tɛ*.

<b>STATUS</b>	<b>REALITY</b>	<b>NON-REALITY</b>
<b>KNOWN</b> <b>(PAST, PRESENT)</b>	<b>τε</b>	<b>τε</b>
<b>UNKNOWN</b> <b>(PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE)</b>	<b>με</b>	<b>με</b>

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