Modality in Burmese: ‘may’ or ‘must’ - grammaticalised uses of yá ‘get’

Mathias Jenny

Department of General Linguistics, University of Zurich
I. The Data

a. Full verb yá ‘get’:

Basic semantics:

BECOME have´ (x, y);

x = RECIPIENT (ACTOR) [-VOLITION], [-CONTROL], [+ HUMAN/HIGH ANIMATE]
y = THEME (UNDERGOER) [± DESIRABLE]

Anticausative semantic component: X gets Y → Z gives Y to X

(underlying ‘giver’ is backgrounded) X Y yá → Z X ko Y pè
b. Grammatical functions of \( y\)á

i. POTENTIAL MODALITY (DEONTIC)

ii. NECESSITATIVE/OBLIGATIVE MODALITY (DEONTIC/EPISTEMIC)

iii. TEMPORAL/MODAL FUNCTION (RESULT OF PRIOR EVENT, CAUSE)
EXAMPLES

(1) ʨənɔ di né pwè tówà ló ýá θə là?
   1m this day festival go SUBGETNF Q
   ‘May I go to the temple fair today?’

(2) ʨənɔ di né tɔ̀u te? ýá mə/θə là?
   1m this day school go.up GETFUT/NF Q
   ‘Do I have to go school today?’

(3) ʨənɔ tɔ̀u mə-tório ýá θè phù.
   1m school NEG-go GETPERS NEG
   ‘I haven’t been to the temple/school yet.’
(1a) θwà ló ɣá te.  θwà ló mə-ɣá phù.
go SUBGETNF  go  SUBNEG-GET NEG
‘Yes, you may.’  ‘No, you may not.’

(2a) θwà ɣá me/te.  mə-θwà ɣá phù.
go GETFUT/NF  NEG-go  GETNEG
‘Yes, you must go.’  ‘No, you don’t have to go.’
**SYNTACTIC/SEMANTIC FEATURES:**

(1):  - *yá* occurs as free operator (with subordinator, negation)
      - potential (abilitive, permissive) modality

(2):  - *yá* occurs as bound operator (negation on main verb)
      - obligative/necessitative modality

(3):  - *yá* occurs as bound operator (negation on main verb)
      - often negated in combination with *PERSISTIVE* marker *θè*
      - expresses situation as result of or caused by prior event
        (which is backgrounded, but implicit)
II. Further Observations

1. In Old Burmese

   - V-ýá only used in potential contexts
   - always used as bound operator

2. In colloquial Burmese

   - subordinator often dropped in context (1)
   - distinction made by use of non-future/future
   - bound/free distinction retained, but not visible in all constructions
Colloquial Burmese data:

(1´) ցɛnɔ di né pwɛ̀ θwà yá là?

lm   this day festival go GETQ

‘May I go to the temple fair today?’

(2´) ցɛnɔ di né tɛ̀u te? yá mɔ là?

lm   this day school go.up GETFUTQ

‘Do I have to go school today?’
(1a´) (θwà) yá ṭe. (θwà) mə-yá phù.
   go GETNF  go  NEG-GET NEG
  ‘Yes, you may.’  ‘No, you may not.’

(2a´) θwà yá me. mə-θwà yá phù.
   go GETFUT  NEG-go GETNEG
  ‘Yes, you must go.’  ‘No, you don’t have to go.’
III. Questions:

Why...

1. Semantic extension from Potential to Obligative and caused by prior event?

2. Development from bound to free operator?

3. Use of Non-future/Future distinction for Potential – Obligative?
IV. POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

1. Semantics of V yá constructions:

   Anticausative: volition, control transferred from X to backgrounded Y
   (parallel to semantics of main verb yá)

   \[\begin{align*}
   &X \text{ (may/must/do)} \ V \ BECAUSE \ Y \ CAUSE \ X \ V \\
   &X \ V-yá \\
   &Y \ X\text{-OBJ} \ V-se \ (se = \text{CAUSATIVE})
   \end{align*}\]

   Causative can have permissive, jussive or neutral semantics →
   three distinct functions: POTENTIAL, OBLIGATIVE, CAUSED BY PRIOR EVENT
2. Development from bound to free operator

Serial verb constructions in Mon and Thai involving ‘get’

(3)  \textit{khǎw càp plaæ dây.}

\textbf{Thai} 3hum catch fish get/\textbf{GET}

‘He caught a fish.’ → ‘He can/may catch fish.’

(4)  \textit{dĕh ròp kɔʔ kaʔ.}  →  \textit{dĕh ròp kaʔ kɔʔ.}

\textbf{Mon} 3 catch get fish 3 catch fish \textbf{GET}

‘He caught a fish.’  ‘He can/may catch fish.’

⇒ Development from ‘successful attempt’ to general possibility
Newer Literary Burmese/Formal Burmese

(5) ẓu ṣə hmyə ywé yá ẓi.
3  fish  catch      SUB  get/GET  NF
‘He caught a fish.’ / ‘He can/may catch fish.’

with *ywé* **SEQUENTIAL** and **CAUSAL** subordinator, i.e.

‘He got a fish after/because he tried to catch one.’

⇒ not bound operator to free operator, but **re-grammaticalisation**
3. **NON-FUTURE/FUTURE distinction**

**Cognitive/psychological connection between FUTURE and OBLIGATION:**

- Obligative modality can be used to express future tense (e.g. Romance languages)

- Some languages use future tense to express obligation (e.g. German)

- Obligations (negative experience) are rather seen as not yet present, permission/ability (positive experience) is construed as actual/present
V. **Historical Scenario**

1. **Summary of development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Potential</strong></th>
<th><strong>Obligative</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OB (11&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; c.)</td>
<td>V-<em>ra</em> [+ bound], NF (?)</td>
<td>(V-<em>rā</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LB (19&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; c.)</td>
<td>V-<em>yá</em>, [+ bound], NF (?)</td>
<td>V-<em>yá</em>, [+ bound], FUT (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FB (20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; c.)</td>
<td>V &lt;sub&gt; SUB&lt;/sub&gt; <em>yá</em> [-bound]</td>
<td>V-<em>yá</em> [+ bound]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CB (21&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; c.)</td>
<td>V &lt;sub&gt;(SUB)&lt;/sub&gt; <em>yá</em> [-bound], NF</td>
<td>V-<em>yá</em> [+ bound], FUT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Stages of development

- V-ya expresses non-volitional, uncontrolled events (anticausative), usually positive for the actor → **POTENTIAL** modality (parallel to semantics of full verb ya with THEME wanted/desired by RECIPIENT).

- Use is extended to **OBLIGATIVE** modality (corresponding to main verb use of ya with THEME unwanted by RECIPIENT); old obligative marker is gradually replaced (still present in literary language).
• Potential modality is re-introduced from grammaticalised use of biclausal construction expressing *Activity* (volitional, conative) and *Result* (non-volitional, no control), possibly influenced by Mon and/or Thai usage (constructions semantically transparent in all languages) → new free operator for potential modality, occurring with subordinator.

• Subordinator is dropped in colloquial language, leading to ambiguity in some constructions → new distinction made based on pre-existing *Non-Future/Future* distinction (not fully grammaticalised, maybe dialectal).
VI. **FURTHER ISSUES TO BE INVESTIGATED**

- Historical data and influence from neighbouring languages

- **NON-FUTURE/FUTURE** or **REALIS/IRREALIS**?

- Dropping of subordinator dialectal?

- How consequent is the **NON-FUTURE/FUTURE** distinction in the modal context? Dialectal?