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Subject and Subject Marking in Colloquial Burmese

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I. Differential Agent Marking and Differential Subject Marking

- Some agents (A) or agentive single arguments (S) are optionally marked
- The marking or non-marking depends on a number of language-specific factors
- Differential {S, A} marking can be triggered by semantic or pragmatic factors
- Extension of ergative constructions are often (seen as) the source of DSM
- Agentivity or volitionality is often seen as determining factor for DSM

Mongsen Ao (Coupe 2011:36): Agentive marker used to emphasize

agentivity → volitionality, intention, commitment

(1) *sápá?* *tfaj-àɿ*
who play-pres
'Who is playing?'

(2) *sápá?* ***nə*** *kùk-àɿ*.
who AGT win-pres
'Who is (committed to) winning?'

(3) *sápá?* ***(*nə)*** *mà-kùk-àɿ*.
who NEG-win-pres
'Who is (*committed to) losing?'

No marker necessary on intrinsically volitional/agentive V (1)

Marker necessary on intrinsically non-volitional V to encode commitment (2)

II. Case markers in Burmese

**Optional for “flagging” of arguments in the case of S, A and O;
obligatory on G**

(4) *phà tɛ̀i ká phà-khəlè ko kan tshá lai? tɛ.*
frog big SBJ frog-DIM OBJ kick CAUS.fall follow NFUT
'The big frog kicked the little frog down [into the water] at once.'

(5) *tɛ̀ə̀nɔ ʔ khəlè ʔ tchi pì θwà tɛ.*
1M child carry SEQ go NFUT
'I carried the child as we went.'

(6) *tɛ̀ə̀nɔ θú *(ko) paiʔshan pè thà tɛ.*
1M 3.DEP OBJ money give deposit NFUT
'I gave him some money.'

Markers for grammatical and pragmatic relations in Burmese

Function	CB	FB
TOPIC-CONTR	<i>tó, ká-tó</i>	<i>kà</i>
TOPIC/SUBJECT	<i>há</i>	<i>hma</i>
SUBJECT	\emptyset	<i>θi</i>
SUBJECT-CONTR	<i>ká</i>	<i>ká</i>
SUBJECT-CONTR		<i>hmá</i>
ABLATIVE	<i>ká</i>	<i>hmá</i>

Marker *ká* usually described as

- ◆ Subject marker
- ◆ Contrastive (subject)
- ◆ Topic (subject or other)
- ◆ Subject of matrix clause: **SBJ_{MAT} *ká* [SB]_{SUB} PRED_{SUB}]_{CL.SUB} PRED_{MAT}**

III. Subject in Burmese

Traditional notion of 'Subject'

Often seen as mixture of *topic* (pragmatic) and *actor* (semantic)

Argument that triggers *agreement in verb* (predicate)

Argument that receives the *nominative case*

Argument that occurs in sentence initial *position*

Control and *raising* constructions

Argument outside the *VP* (external syntactic argument)

Obligatory argument in sentence besides verb

Derived external syntactic argument in *passive* constructions

Refinement of grammatical relations and the notion of 'Subject'

(Bickel 2011)

Table 19.1. Some common GRs defined as subsets of generalized argument roles

Grammatical relation	Commonly used names
{S}	intransitive subject, nominative
{S, A}	subject, nominative; accusative alignment
{A}	transitive subject, ergative
{O, T}	direct object, accusative; indirective alignment
{O, G}	primary object, dative; secundative alignment
{T}	secondary object
{G}	indirect object, dative
{S, O, T}	absolutive; nominative; ergative alignment
{S, O, G}	absolutive; nominative; ergative alignment

'Subject' = {S, A}

'Subject' in Burmese

Constructions where {S, A} behaves differently from O, T and G:

Number agreement in verbal predicate:

(7) *θu tó θwà tsá tε.*
3 PL go PL NFUT
'They went.'

(8) *θθηε.δζìn twe sa pha? ne tsá tε.*
friend PL text read stay PL NFUT
'The friends are reading.'

(9) *θu móun twe sà ne (*tsá) tε.*
3 sweets PL eat stay PL NFUT
'he is eating different sweets.'

SBJ = the NP that may trigger number agreement in the verb complex

Case marking:

- (10) *tə̀nɔ̃ tə̀ai? tɛ.*
1_M like NFUT
'I like it.' (*'They like me.')
- (11) *tə̀nɔ̃ má.ʔè *(ko) pỳɔ̃ mɛ.*
1_M PN OBJ speak FUT
'I will tell Ma Aye.'

SBJ = the human pronominal argument or personal name that can occur without any case marker.

+ other syntactic constructions

→ the notion of subject as set of {S, A} is relevant in Burmese

IV. The marker *ká* - data from the corpus

General subject marker ('nominative')?

(12) *ʔanɔyathà mìn Ø tɛ thà khé tɛ.*
PN lord build deposit DISPL NFUT
'King Anawrahta built it.'

(13) *bɛ.ðu (ká) yè thà lè? ʔaphe (*ká).*
who SBJ write deposit q father
'Who wrote it?' 'Father (did).'

- ▶ Not all subjects are marked by *ká*
- ▶ some cannot be marked by *ká*

Contrastive (subject)?

(14) *θύ* *γέ* *ῥαρρ* *κά* *ha* *twe* *κά* *mwè* *πι* *πό.*
3.DEP POSS above ABL NML PL SBJ born NSIT INSIST

ῥαυ? *κά* *ha* *twe* *κά* *τό* *mə=mwè* *θè* *phù* *πό.*
below ABL NML PL SBJ CONTR NEG=born still NEG INSIST

‘The older ones were born already, you see. The younger ones, on the other hand, weren’t born yet.’

(15) *da* *bəθu* *yè* *lè,*
this.NML who write Q

ῥαphe (*κά*) *là,* *ῥame* (*κά*) *là.*
father SBJ Q mother SBJ Q

‘Who wrote this, the father or the mother?’

► *ká* can optionally mark contrastive subjects

(16) *ʔè=lo* *ha myò* *twe* *tɛəŋɔ* *tó* *ká* *ʔəmyè.tàn*
ANA=manner NML type PL 1M PL SBJ always

tchein yá tɛ. *sin* *pɔ hma* *tɛəŋɔ* *tó* *ká*
weigh get NFUT stage on LOC 1M PL SBJ

hmà ló mə=yá phù.
wrong SUB NEG=get NEG.

‘We always have to think carefully about this. Once on stage, we cannot make any mistakes.’

► **Unchanged subject over two sentences → not contrastive**

⇒ ***ká* can be used with non-contrastive subjects**

Topic (subject)?

- (17) *ʔà.lòun ká θú ko má.khin.si ló khɔ tsá ta pa pè.*
all SBJ 3.DEP OBJ PN QUOT call PL NFUT.NML POL RSTR
'Everyone called her Ma Khin Si.' [First sentence in a short story]

- (18) *pwè tsí pərei?θa? ká θa θəbò.tu lɛ?.khan mɛ*
performance look audience SBJ only agree accept FUT

sho yin θin Ø lè mìn.ǎa phyi? khwín ɛí pa tɛ.
say if 2 ADD actor be chance exist POL NFUT

'If the audience of the theater accept you, you have a chance to be an actor.'
[First sentence in a short story]

- **First sentence subjects in narrative not 'given', but may be topical**

Subject of matrix clause?

- (19) [*di mèn.má* \emptyset *ŋwe mɛ? ló*] *di mèn.má ká*
this woman money dream SUB this woman SBJ
- θìnb̀.ǎ̀ tə=yau? ko lo tchin pa tɛ sho ló*
sailor one=CL OBJ want DES POL NFUT say SUB
'Since this woman wants (to marry) a sailor because she's crazy about money ...'

- (20) [*?ame (?*ká)* *θe θwà toun.ká*] *lè tɛmá maun hnámá*
mother die go when ADD 1F y.brother y.sister
- ŋà yau? ko ɛa tɛwè yá ta.*
five CL OBJ seek feed get NFUT.NML
'When mother passed away I had look after the five brothers and sisters.'

- **Matrix SBJ may be marked or unmarked, subordinate SBJ is unmarked**

- (21) *shəya-lè* *ká* *ŋwe* *hnə-ya* *pè* *tó*
 teacher-DIM SBJ silver two-hundred give CONTR
- θabyò* *∅* *ŋwe* *ko* *tó* *yu* *lai?* *tɛ.*
 PN silver OBJ CONTR take follow NFUT

‘As soon as the school teacher gave him two hundred Kyat, Thabyaw immediately took that money.’

- (22) *θu* *ká* *mə=θwà* *yin* *tɕənɔ* *ká* *lè* *mə=θwà* *phù.*
 3 SBJ NEG=go if 1M SBJ ADD NEG=go NEG
- ‘If he isn’t going, I’m not going either.’

- Subordinate subjects may be marked, though marking here seems to be generally dispreferred

Frequency and text genres

TEXT CATEGORY	N OF WORDS	N OF TOKENS OF KÁ	FREQUENCY
<i>Spontaneous speech</i>	155'614	5'423	3.48%
Narrative	36'014	1'406	3.90%
Interview	72'083	2'564	3.56%
Casual conversation	31'611	994	3.14%
Radio interview	15'906	459	2.89%
<i>Pre-fabricated speech</i>	95'730	2'136	2.23%
Dialogue in fiction	20'840	539	2.59%
Radio play	40'811	1'005	2.46%
Film script	34'079	592	1.74%

Spontaneous speech **3.48%**

Pre-fabricated speech **2.23%**

V. Summary

ká marks

- | | | |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| some SBJ | → | not an obligatory SBJ marker |
| some contrastive SBJ | → | not general SBJ.CONTR marker |
| some non-contrastive SBJ | → | not really a SBJ.CONTR marker |

Apparently

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <i>ká</i> is preferred on SBJ | in matrix clauses
with non-verbal predicates |
| <i>ká</i> is dispreferred on SBJ | in subordinate clauses |
| <i>ká</i> is not possible | on predicative nominals
in one-word utterances |

Differential Subject Marking in Burmese

- Burmese marks some subjects in some contexts by *ká* → DSM
- DSM in Burmese is different from DAM as found in other TB languages
- DSM in Burmese is homonymic with ablative marking
- DSM in Burmese is not explainable as underlying ergative or passive
- DSM can be used to disambiguate A and P (though marking of P is more common)
- DSM triggers contrastive reading if no other context is given
- DSM in Burmese is more common in spontaneous than in prefabricated speech

Hypotheses

1. Formal Burmese rather consistently uses case marking on arguments: *θi* for S/A, *ko* for O, *ʔà* for G (Pali influence probable).
2. Colloquial Burmese uses *ko* for G and some O (DOM); only obligatory case marker.
3. Ablative constructions can be used to emphasize the source of an action or event, leading to some (contrastive) subjects being marked by *ká*, with semantics along the lines of ‘from S’s side’ (cf. German *meinerseits*, etc.)
4. This use spread especially in spontaneous speech and serves in structuring information, as well as differentiating the subject from the object (when felt necessary), maybe partly influenced by FB *θi* as an instance of ‘pivot matching’.
5. This spread lead to bleaching of the emphatic function (and subsequent renewal by more elaborate *phɛʔ ká*, *ká ne pì tó*, and others).