Subject and Subject Marking in Colloquial Burmese

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I. Differential Agent Marking and Differential Subject Marking

II. Case markers in Burmese

III. ‘Subject’ in Burmese

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

V. Summary and hypotheses
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) sápaʔ tfaj-Ʉ. 
who play-pres 
‘Who is playing?’

(2) sápaʔ na kùk-Ʉ. 
who AGT win-PRES 
‘Who is (committed to) winning?’

(3) sápaʔ (*na) mè-kùk-Ʉ. 
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 tɕì ká phà-khəlè ko kan tɕhá laiʔ 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) tɕənc Ø khəlè Ø tɕhi pì ðwà tɛ.
1M child carry SEQ go NFUT
‘I carried the child as we went.’

(6) tɕənc ðuí *(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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>CB</th>
<th>FB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOPIC-CONTR</strong></td>
<td>tó, ká-tó</td>
<td>kà</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOPIC/SUBJECT</strong></td>
<td>ha</td>
<td>hma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUBJECT</strong></td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>θi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUBJECT-CONTR</strong></td>
<td>ká</td>
<td>ká</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ABLATIVE</strong></td>
<td>ká</td>
<td>hmá</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marker *ká* usually described as

- Subject marker
- Contrastive (subject)
- Topic (subject or other)
- Subject of matrix clause: $\text{SBJ}^{\text{MAT}} \text{ká} \ [\text{SBJ}^{\text{SUB}} \ \text{PRED}^{\text{SUB}}]^{\text{CL, SUB}} \ \text{PRED}^{\text{MAT}}$
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
Table 19.1. Some common GRs defined as subsets of generalized argument roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammatical relation</th>
<th>Commonly used names</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>{S}</td>
<td>intransitive subject, nominative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{S, A}</td>
<td>subject, nominative; accusative alignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{A}</td>
<td>transitive subject, ergative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{O, T}</td>
<td>direct object, accusative; indirective alignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{O, G}</td>
<td>primary object, dative; secundative alignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{T}</td>
<td>secondary object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{G}</td>
<td>indirect object, dative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{S, O, T}</td>
<td>absolutive; nominative; ergative alignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{S, O, G}</td>
<td>absolutive; nominative; ergative alignment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

'Subject' = \{S, A\}
‘Subject’ in Burmese

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

*Number agreement in verbal predicate:*

(7) \(\theta u \ tó \ \theta wà \ teá \ te.\)
    3 PL go PL NFUT
    ‘They went.’

(8) \(\theta eŋɛ.ʔzin \ twe \ sa \ phaʔ \ ne \ teá \ te.\)
    friend PL text read stay PL NFUT
    ‘The friends are reading.’

(9) \(\theta u \ móun \ twe \ să \ ne \ (*teá) \ te.\)
    3 sweets PL eat stay PL NFUT
    ‘he is eating different sweets.’

\textit{SBJ = the NP that may trigger number agreement in the verb complex}
**Case marking:**

(10) ʨənɔ ʨaiʔ tɛ.  
1M like NFUT  
‘I like it.’ (*‘They like me.’)

(11) ʨənɔ máʔè *(ko) pyɔ̀ mɛ.  
1M 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) ʔənɔyəthà mìn Ø tɛ thà khé tɛ.
PN lord build deposit DISPL NFUT
‘King Anawrahta built it.’

(13) bɛ.ðu (ká) yè thà lè?
who SBJ write deposit Q
‘Who wrote it?’

ʔəphe (*ká).
father
‘Father (did).’

► Not all subjects are marked by *ká*

► some cannot be marked by *ká*
**Contrastive (subject)?**

(14) θú yé ?əpo ká ha twe ká mwè pi pí.
3.DEP POSS above ABL NML PL SBJ born NSIT INSIST

ʔau ká ha twe ká tó mə=mwè θè phù pí.
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

ʔəphe (ká) là, ʔəme (ká) là.
father SBJ Q mother SBJ Q

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

► *ká* can optionally mark contrastive subjects
(16) ʔɛ̀=lo ha myò twe tənɔ tô ká ?ɔmyè.tàn
ANA=manner NML type PL 1M PL SBJ always

təhein yá tə. sin po hma tənɔ tô ká
weigh get NFUT stage on LOC 1M PL SBJ

hmà ló ə=m=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
‘Everyone called her Ma Khin Si.’ [First sentence in a short story]

‘If the audience of the theater accept you, you have a chance to be an actor.’ [First sentence in a short story]
Subject of matrix clause?

(19) [di mèin.má Ø ηwe mɛʔ ló] di mèin.má ká
this woman money dream SUB this woman SBJ

θìnbɔ̀.ðà tə=yauʔ ko lo tɛhin 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) [ʔəme (ʔ*ká) θe θwà tònun.ká]lè tɔəmá maun hnəmá
mother die go when ADD 1F y.brother y.sister

ŋà yauʔ ko ca 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  ηwe  hnə-ya  pè  tó  

teacher-DIM  SBJ  silver  two-hundred  give  CONTR  

θabyɔ̀  Ø  ηwe  ko  tó  yu  laiʔ  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  tɔ̀ɛnɔ  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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Category</th>
<th>N of Words</th>
<th>N of tokens of  ká</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spontaneous speech</td>
<td>155'614</td>
<td>5'423</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative</td>
<td>36’014</td>
<td>1’406</td>
<td>3.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>72’083</td>
<td>2’564</td>
<td>3.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual conversation</td>
<td>31’611</td>
<td>994</td>
<td>3.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio interview</td>
<td>15’906</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>2.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-fabricated speech</td>
<td>95’730</td>
<td>2’136</td>
<td>2.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue in fiction</td>
<td>20’840</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>2.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio play</td>
<td>40’811</td>
<td>1’005</td>
<td>2.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film script</td>
<td>34’079</td>
<td>592</td>
<td>1.74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **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

- *ká* is preferred on SBJ in matrix clauses with non-verbal predicates
- *ká* is dispreferred on SBJ in subordinate clauses
- *ká* 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


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 пheʔ ká, ká ne pì tó, and others).