Burmese

Finite Verb Phrase Operators: Tense or Modality?

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BASIC FACTS ABOUT BURMESE

› Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman

› Only official language of Burma (Myanmar), ca. 45 million speakers

› Oldest documents 11\textsuperscript{th} century

› Indian script

› 3-4 tones, no final consonants

› Strictly verb-final syntax

› Isolating with agglutinating tendencies
### The Verbal Sentence in Burmese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Periph.</th>
<th>ARG&lt;sub&gt;n&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>PrVOOp&lt;sub&gt;n&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>V&lt;sub&gt;n&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>PoVOOp&lt;sub&gt;n&lt;/sub&gt;</th>
<th>FVO</th>
<th>SP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>တရား</td>
<td>အများမှားသား</td>
<td>ကျော်</td>
<td>ပြု</td>
<td>ရှု</td>
<td>မျှော်</td>
<td>တွေ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>di.né</td>
<td>ηα = kά mì = ko</td>
<td>tha?</td>
<td>pyò</td>
<td>pyá</td>
<td>yá</td>
<td>ႇျ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

today    I = SBJ you = OBJ pile.up speak show OBL again FVO = Q

‘Do I have to tell you [this story] again today?’
# 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>tɛ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directionality</td>
<td>CONSTRUCTION)</td>
<td>Manner</td>
<td>mɛ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manner</td>
<td></td>
<td>Directionality</td>
<td>pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other notions:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Aspect</td>
<td>phù</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V along, help</td>
<td></td>
<td>Plurality</td>
<td>nɛ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V, V after,</td>
<td></td>
<td>Politeness</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>let V</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### The 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>Non-Future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mɛ</td>
<td>mɛ́</td>
<td>hma</td>
<td>mɛ =</td>
<td>Future</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>
<tr>
<td>nɛ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prohibitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Imperative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXAMPLES OF THE MAIN FVOs

(1)  

a. ʨənɔ thəmì sà te.  
1m rice eat FVO  
‘I eat rice.’ / ‘I ate rice.’  

b. ʨənɔ thəmì sà me.  
1m rice eat FVO  
‘I will eat rice.’


c. ʨənɔ thəmì sà pi pi.  
1m rice eat finish NSIT  
‘I have eaten rice.’

d. ʨənɔ thəmì mə=sà phù.  
1m rice NEG = eat NEG  
‘I don’t/didn’t/will not eat rice.’

e. thəmì mə=sà nè!  
rice NEG = eat PROH  
‘Don’t eat!’  

f. thəmì sà (pa) Ø!  
rice eat (POL) Ø  
‘Eat!’
The Markers ֶ and ֶ

Indigenous Burmese Grammars on ֶ (LB ַי, ֵי) and ֶ:

ַי, ֵי and ֶ 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 loggedin (LB myi, ʔá)

ဝေါက်ကိုက်သော်ဖျင်လိုသောစီး:

ʔənagaʔ-kalá ko ṣₚ ʔò ʔəgà-lòu

‘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.

ʔã, future, as θwà ʔã, he will go.
myi, future.
Anna J. Allott (1965)

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

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

(2) *mətɕì.θì  sà phù  me thī  te.*
tamarinds eat EXPER FVO think FVO

‘I think he must have eaten tamarinds before.’
Justin Watkins (2005)

Yanson, Vittrant:

\[ tε = \text{REALIS}, \ mε = \text{IRREALIS} \]

FVO express modality

Gärtner:

Burmese does have tense. The marker \( mε \) marks \textsc{future} but can also be used to express \textsc{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.*
**SOME MORE BURMESE DATA**

1. *tɕ*

(3) ʔəwuʔ ɕo  ne  tɕ.  
    clothes wash  stay FVO  
    ‘I am washing my clothes.’

(4) di  mənəʔ  tǒu  ká  tɕənə  sa  pó  tɕ.  
    this morning  TEMP  ABL  lm  text  send  FVO  
    ‘I sent (you) an e-mail this morning.’
(5) ʨəŋə ʔu ʔeʔ? ʔəʔeʔ tɕì ʔe.

ım 3 COMP age big FVO

‘I am older than he.’

(6) ʔəlè twə nɛ tɕì tɕɔ̀u tɛʔ tɛ.

child PL day every school go.up FVO

‘The children go to school every day.’
**Past-Counterfactual**

(7) ʨən̥c mẽi.má yu tɕʰiŋ yĩ yu laiʔ ta tɕa pi.
    1m woman take DES COND take FOLLOW FVO:NML long NSIT
    ‘If I wanted to get married, I would have married long time ago.’

**Future-reference**

(8) məneʔ.phyã tɕən̥c ?à tɕe.
    tomorrow 1m free FVO
    ‘I am free tomorrow.’

(8´) *məneʔ.phyã tɕən̥c ?à mɛ.

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(9) məneʔ.phyā mè-səya çí thè te. (*me)
tomorrow ask-thing exist still FVO
‘I’ll still have questions tomorrow.’

BUT:

(10) məneʔ.phyā tɔəŋə ʔəlou? əwà me.
tomorrow 1m work go FVO
‘I am going to work tomorrow.’

(10´) *məneʔ.phyā tɔəŋə ʔəlou? əwà te.
2. me

FUTURE

(11) məneʔ.phyā mè-səya ɕí ʔòu me.
    tomorrow ask-thing exist again FVO
    ‘I’ll have more (new) questions tomorrow.’

RELATIVE FUTURE

(12) mǐ mənɛ  ká  la   me  (ló)  thǐ  te.
    2 yesterday ABL come  FVO (SUB) think  FVO
    ‘I thought you would come yesterday.’
Speculative

(13) *ho t难受 ká ㄋㄨㄥ ʔəʔɛʔ shé.ŋà lau? ɕí me thǐ te.*
     that TEMP ABL 1m age fifteen as.much.as exist FVO think FVO
     ‘Back then I was/must have been about fifteen, I guess.’

(14) *θu n bahwa ㄋɛŋ yau? phù me thĩ te.*
     3 country other arrive EXPER FVO think FVO
     ‘I think that he has been abroad before.’

(14’) *θu n병.ŋał t.OrderByDescendingNamespaces.æyau? phù te thĩ te.*
     3 country other arrive EXPER FVO think FVO
Is mɛ an Irrealis marker? Facts about tɛ and mɛ:

1. tɛ occurs in counterfactual expressions
2. mɛ in future contexts does not confer a notion of uncertainty
3. mɛ can be used in relative-temporal contexts
4. mɛ is optional in assumptive contexts, but obligatory in future contexts
5. mɛ does not indicate epistemic modality on its own; mɛ can be used to express epistemic modality together with some overt modal expression (‘I think’, ‘certainly’)
6. mɛ is not used in IMPERATIVE and OPTATIVE contexts
7. mɛ is not used to mark deontic modality
8. both tɛ and mɛ occur in negative contexts (attributive, nominalised clauses)
- *me* does not occur in all events that can be labelled *irrealis*, but it can be used to express a personal (subjective) prediction about the truth of the proposition

- **FUTURE** tense is inherently **PREDICTIVE**
→ *me* is basically a future tense marker; the use as epistemic modal marker (assumptive) is derived from the exploitation of the predictiveness of future markers

→ *te* marks non-future situations, i.e. situations that do not require a prediction about the truth value of the proposition
DEVELOPMENT FROM FUTURE TO ASSUMPTIVE OR ASSUMPTIVE TO FUTURE?

Deontic Modality $\rightarrow$ Future:

English: $will$ (‘want to V’ $>$ ‘will V’)
Greek: $\theta a$ ($< \theta elo ina$ ‘want that’)
Romance: $V + ‘have’$ (‘have to V’ $>$ ‘will V’)

Deontic Modality $\rightarrow$ Epistemic modality

German, English, Thai, ...
Future $\rightarrow$ Epistemic Modality

German, Romance languages, etc.

*Epistemic Modality $\rightarrow$ Future

Subjectivisation as unidirectional process
Conclusion:

- Burmese does have obligatory tense marking with a FUTURE vs. NON-FUTURE distinction in verbal predicates in main clauses.
- The FUTURE marker can be used to express a personal prediction/assumption in modal contexts (epistemic modality).
- The NON-FUTURE marker is used in past and present contexts, irrespective of the realisation of the event described in the proposition.
- The NON-FUTURE marker can be used in some contexts with future reference (very restricted).
REFERENCES


