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A LINGUISTIC IMAGE OF NATURE:
THE BURMESE NUMERATIVE CLASSIFIER SYSTEM*

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1. TWO BURMESE CLASSIFICATORY SYSTEMS

When I left Burma in 1961, after three years of study, my Burmese language teacher gave me a small paper-bound copy book, carefully written in his fine hand, in which all classes of things are listed, abstract as well as concrete, in this world and out of it.¹ The book was to be my guide for continuing my study of Burmese, a syllabus of future studies. The small encyclopedia begins with sets of two and grows, as if paralleling the growing complexity of one's experience, to larger and larger sets. The initial sets are sometimes obvious, like the two parents or the two strengths (strength of arm and strength of heart), sometimes more esoteric pairs, like the two worlds (the zero world — in which buddhas, monks, supernatural beings, etc. do not appear, exist or flourish, and the non-zero world — in which the above appear, exist, and flourish). The sets in my book continue to sets of eighteen, though other lists go on to larger sets. To understand the sets, my teacher said, is to understand the world, both inner and outer, seen and unseen. They represent, taken together, a taxonomy of the phenomenological universe of the Burmese.

Furthermore, each set in itself is a structure — a kind of plot from a universal plot book — around which to build a discourse. That is, a sermon is built around, say, the four cardinal virtues (love, attention, happiness, indifference), a political speech around, for instance, the three kinds of mistakes (those resulting from lack of memory, from lack of planning ahead, or from misguided beliefs), and a play

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¹ There are several versions of this work. Most accessible of published versions is Obhāsabhivamsa, *Thu-te-thana Thayoukpya Abhiddan* (A Dictionary of Established Sets of Forms) (Rangoon, 1955).

around some other appropriate set, perhaps the four false hopes (hoping to get rich by reading treasure maps, hoping to get healthy by reading medical literature, hoping for wisdom by following a learned man, and hoping for a girlfriend by dressing up). These sets are assumed *a priori* to any discourse as impersonal structures to which nature, both human and non-human, properly and appropriately corresponds. A true sermon, a wise foreign policy, or a well-constructed drama will be rooted in one or more of them. One can contemplate these sets with continual fascination and increasing insight, as one learns to see things in a Burmese way.

Within the language in which these sets are expressed, however, is a second kind of classification, a second phenomenological universe, rather more obscure than the first. The title of each set includes three linguistic constituents: a noun phrase, a numeral, and a classifier or numerative expression. For example, *mi' ba' hnə 'pa*, "parents 2 'pa". Here 'pa' is one of a set of words, commonly called classifiers or numeratives, by which nouns are specified and counted, somewhat like a *tin* of sardines, a *brace* of partridges, or thirty *head* of cattle in English.² Like the encyclopedic sets, Burmese linguistic classifiers are part of a system for organizing experience. In each, certain semantic polarities appear over and over again: inner versus outer, round versus straight, for instance.³ What is striking is that the same semantic polarities do not appear in both systems. Encyclopedic sets, for instance, do not classify things on the basis of shape or size. Numerative classifiers, on the other hand, do distinguish shape and relative size, but they do not give particular relevance to sex or color, which are important in the semantics of the sets. Thus, the two systems of classification — encyclopedic sets and numerative

² The Burmese classifier system is discussed in Robbins Burling, "How to Choose a Burmese Numeral Classifier" in Melford Spiro, ed., *Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology* (New York, The Free Press, 1965) and also in Hla Pe, "A Re-examination of Burmese Classifiers", *Lingua* 15 (1965) (also published, with additional examples in *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, 50 [1967]). Both these works include lists of Burmese Numeral Classifiers. Burling's very insightful study closes with a challenge to which this article is a partial response. Burling writes, "Seeing the problems which arise in the attempt to bring order into the set of classifiers, one may feel that the best 'analysis' so far is simply the list of classifiers with their definitions. If there is such a thing as 'semantic structure' in a language, then this list ought to be reducible to some more orderly arrangement . . ."

³ For a discussion of recurring semantic polarities in another linguistic system, see A. L. Becker, "Person in Kawi: Exploration of an Elementary Semantic Dimension," to appear in *Proceedings of The First International Conference on Comparative Austronesian Linguistics* (January 2-7, 1974) in Honolulu, Hawaii.

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classifiers — are to some extent complementary in the structures they establish.⁴

The two systems differ in other ways, as well. One system, the sets, appears to represent overt knowledge; they are easy to discuss — indeed, their primary value is that they are good to talk about. The other, the classifiers, represent covert knowledge; they are hard to talk about and the meanings of the individual classifiers — as independent words — are often obscure, just as *head* in “head of cattle” and *brace* in “brace of partridges” are obscure in English. It is often difficult for a non-specialist to say why a noun takes one classifier rather than another. Why not a head of partridge and a brace of cattle? There are historical reasons, but none available to the average man, who just accepts such things as facts.

2. TAXONOMY AND PARADIGM

The major difference between the two systems, however, is that they are different *kinds* of systems, taxonomic and paradigmatic. In the past both have been approached as taxonomies. In the case of numerative classifiers, the investigator lists words classified under a single classifier, searches for the common semantic element in the list and then posits that element as the meaning of the classifier. Thus, one classifier in Burmese is used with the sun, airplanes, the ocean, and needles, among other things. One may contrive a common meaning here, either for the whole class, or for part of the class, in which case there are some irregular or exceptional members of that class. This approach is backwards, both heuristically and phenomenologically: it leads to awkward results and people who use classifiers don't appear to think that way. The point here is that each numerative classifier is not independent of the others, nor is it derived inductively. Numerative classifiers are, rather, polarities in a structure one learns to apply to experience — a cultural artifact, not a crude natural science.

The numerative classifier system, then, is not a folk taxonomy, in which items are classified on the basis of objective features, but rather a system much more like a paradigm, in which items are located relationally. Library cataloguing systems or botanical keys

⁴ The kinds of semantic distinctions made in numerative classifier systems are discussed in Karen L. Adams and Nancy F. Conklin, “Toward a Theory of Natural Classification” in *Papers from the Ninth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society* (1973). See also Burling, *op cit.*, pp. 259-63.

are instances of taxonomic systems: each book or plant has a unique place within the hierarchical system. A paradigmatic system, on the other hand, is not inherently hierarchical, nor does each item have a unique place. Examples of paradigmatic systems are sets of pronouns or kinship systems, in which a given individual does not fit in just one place in the system, but is, rather, part of a shifting set of relationships, depending on who is speaking to whom, about what. A taxonomy is constructed on the principle of genus and differentia, a paradigm on the principle of reciprocal relationships, or, to use poetic terms, one might say taxonomies are metonymic, paradigms metaphoric.

Classifiers do not subclassify word classes in any syntactically relevant way.⁵ They do not operate like, for instance, noun subclassifications in English, which are syntactically relevant. In English, nouns are subclassified as singular, mass, or plural. In other Indo-European languages nouns are masculine, feminine, or neuter. These are two very different subclassification systems (number and gender) but they are all essentially taxonomic and syntactically relevant: they are overtly marked and serve to classify words. Thus the noun *rivers* in English is plural. *Rivières* in French is plural and feminine, while *Flüsse* in German is plural and masculine. Covert English gender, on the other hand, is paradigmatic and, hence, metaphoric. A river can be referred to as he, she, or it, depending on who is speaking to whom about what. A particular river can be considered as masculine, feminine, or neuter on different occasions, by different speakers. In a technical discussion, the river will probably be referred to as *it*; in a more personal description as *he* or *she*. The same water changes gender in Pittsburgh, where the feminine Allegheny River (she) merges with the neuter (sometimes feminine) Monongahela (it) and becomes the masculine Ohio River (he).⁶ One might write context sensitive syntactic rules specifying choice of gender in these contexts, but these rules would suggest that the choice is more determined than it actually is. It would be better to present the contextual constraints which describe how the speaker may relate to the river (and the hearer) in different contexts.

⁵ This point is made clearly and well in Burling, *op. cit.* Burling writes, "... problems present themselves if we insist that the choice of classifier depends strictly upon the noun class of the noun with which it is used. Perhaps the most evident problem is that a single noun can, on different occasions, be accompanied by different classifiers ..."

⁶ This example was given me by Nancy Conklin. The best discussion of covert gender in English remains that in Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Grammatical Categories", in *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1956).

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Covert gender, rather than number or overt gender, is typologically close to Burmese numerative classification. Both have to do with the universe of discourse in which a word is being mentioned. In Burmese, a given noun may be included appropriately in several different places in the classifier system. Furthermore, original classifications are possible in poetry and in other contexts in which linguistic invention is expected.⁷ The use of classifiers in Burmese — like the use of covert gender in English — is in part an art and not just a grammatical convention. People have varying degrees of skill in using them. There is, for instance, no single classification for river (*myi?*) in Burmese. The choice depends upon the universe of discourse. One might speak of a river in at least eight contexts:

<i>myi? tə ya?</i>	'river one place' (e.g., destination for a picnic)
<i>myi? tə tan</i>	'river one line' (e.g., on a map)
<i>myi? tə hntwa</i>	'river one section' (e.g., a fishing area)
<i>myi? tə 'sin</i>	'river one distant arc' (e.g., a path to the sea)
<i>myi? tə θwə</i>	'river one connection (e.g., tying two villages)
<i>myi? tə 'pa</i>	'river one sacred object' (e.g., in mythology)
<i>myi? tə khu'</i>	'river one conceptual unit' (e.g., in a discussion of rivers in general)
<i>myi? tə myi?</i>	'river one river' (the unmarked case)

The choice of classifier, then, is dependant on the speech act one is performing.⁸ The classifier is, in part, an indication of the context in which one is speaking about something. The goal of the rest of this discussion will be to describe one of the paradigms in which these choices are made.

3. ELEMENTARY SEMANTIC DIMENSIONS OF THE BURMESE CLASSIFIER SYSTEM

As stated briefly above, Burmese linguistic classifiers are most commonly found in numerative phrases, such as:

⁷ For examples of the poetic use of classifiers, see Hla Pe, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁸ The speech act intended by the speaker is overtly marked by sentence final particles, as well as by classifiers. A few of these sentence final particles, and the speech acts they identify are:

<i>tə</i>	statement
<i>'la</i>	yes/no question
<i>'le</i>	content question
<i>'saŋ</i>	plea
<i>tə'</i>	permission
<i>lai?</i>	demand

lu 'le *yau?*
person four (classifier)

Classifiers can also be used in compounds (e.g., *yau?* 'ca 'male') and in a few other syntactic patterns which will not be discussed here.⁹

Classifiers are usually distinguished from quantifiers, which measure a more or less precise quantity of the thing being referred to, as in

lu 'le 'tan
person four rows (e.g., rows of soldiers)
lu 'le souŋ
person four sets (e.g., four couples)

Probably the assumed distinction between classifiers proper and quantifiers is really best considered a continuum, for, while there are forms which are clearly classifiers and clearly quantifiers, there are some forms which are intermediary and not clearly one or the other, such as

ke' — an amount removed surreptitiously from a pile or a collection
phouŋ — a round heap

Professor Hla Pe lists *ke'* as a quantifier, *phouŋ* as a classifier, though the basis for this distinction is not clearly stated in his article. The fact probably is that *quantity* and *quality* are not discrete semantic classes but rather polarities in a semantic continuum. However, there is structural evidence — to be presented below — that classifiers are semantically different in some respects at least, from quantifiers.¹⁰

In analyzing a phrase like that cited above,

lu 'le *yau?*
person four (clf)

⁹ The syntax of classifiers is being explored in detail for a large number of languages by Adams and Conklin, op. cit., footnote 5.

¹⁰ Insight into the overlap between classifiers and quantifiers stems from an unpublished study by Norma Ware, "Numeral Classifiers in Minangkabau" and a paper by Benjamin K. T'sou, "The Structure of Nominal Classifier Systems" to be published along with the other papers presented at the First International Conference on Austronesian Linguistic, Honolulu, Hawaii, January, 1973. T'sou describes classifiers and quantifiers on the basis of two features EXACT and ENTITY, a very different approach from that to be developed here, i.e., a good deal more abstract.

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it should be stressed that here, even more than is usually the case, translation is a distortion. We can discuss the classifier *yau* in English, but we cannot translate it, for there are no syntactic or semantic equivalents in English. *Lu* 'person, man' has rough equivalents in English, 'le' 'four' a quite precise equivalent. The classifier *yau*, however, can only be explained as part of a conceptual structure which is non-English.

First of all, *yau* is not the name of a class to which men belong. It is not a genus, all members of which have some attribute, but rather a locus on a conceptual map. Animate beings are ordered according to distance from Buddhahood — which is not necessarily the same as social status. If we conceive of a Buddha (and his words, relics, and images) as the center, then all animate beings can be located in the network radiating out from the center. Furthest away are animals, ghosts, and base, depraved people. Closer are ordinary humans. Then come people with some spiritual status, and closest of all saints, monks, precious things, and members of the royalty. Spiritual progression is movement from animality to Buddhahood. People have no *fixed* position in this network. If one considered a king to be depraved, he might classify him in private as an animal, though it might be wise and safe to classify him in public as a saint.¹¹

It is interesting to consider the words used for these loci on the conceptual map. The meanings of these words gives us the key to the semantics of the classifier system, the basic dimensions of classification. Those closest to the center (Buddhahood) are classified as '*pa* — a word which also means, even in modern Burmese, 'close'. The meaning of this term suggests that one basic semantic dimension of classification is deictic. As we shall see, *all* classifiers (as opposed to quantifiers) have deictic implications. All things range out in relation to a conceptual center, which is Buddhahood in the classification of animate beings, and which is the self in the classification of most inanimate things. People (and holy things) which are closest to that center are classed simply as '*pa* 'close'.

People not yet close but considered to have status are classified as

¹¹ There is a well-known Burmese tale which establishes this epistemology: it is called The Five Brothers. A version is included in William S. Cornyn, *Burmese Chrestomathy* (Washington, 1957) pp. 27–29. The five brothers are the fingers and thumb, who quarrel about who is best. Each gives his argument based on his own uniqueness: special position, usefulness, height, beauty — excluding the little finger, who tries to make peace, but, failing that, establishes his own place in a hierarchy of distances from the Buddha. When the hands come together in prayer, it is the little finger who is closest to Buddha.

'*u*', which also means 'head' and also 'beginning', 'origin', 'top'. This term '*u*' is in contrast semantically with the term used for animals, ghosts, and depraved people – those furthest from the center, who are classified as *kaun* which also means 'body'. This opposition between head and body in the second basic semantic dimension of the classification system (and much of Burmese spiritualism, as well). In addition, all classifiers for inanimate things (as opposed to quantifiers) are related to this head-body opposition.

Between people of status ('head') and creatures of no status ('body') are ordinary people, those classified as *yau?*, as in

lu 'le *yau?*
person four (clf).

The term *yau?* apparently refers only to people in this position: unlike some of the other classifiers, it does not refer to anything else.

The classifier for the center, used for a Buddha, his relics, images, and his words – the Buddhist Law, is *shu*, a term of unclear origin. It may be related to the Kachin term *tsu*, meaning ghost or spirit (hence suggesting a pre-Buddhist origin) or it may be a loanword. It is important to note that this term *shu* can apply to the whole system itself (the field of human existence or the Law, the Dharma) and by metaphoric extension to items conceptually similar to the system with its center and measured distances, e.g., concentric networks like mosquito-nets and fishnets (both of which in traditional Burma were conical in shape), gardens (which were laid-out as a wheel), and staircases.

The conceptual world of animate beings implies by the classifier system (and mirrored in other Burmese symbolic systems) can be diagrammed as follows:

SYSTEM OF ANIMATE BEINGS

Center	1st Orbit	2nd Orbit	3rd Orbit	4th Orbit
<i>shu</i> Buddhas relics images The Law (secondarily, nets staircases gardens)	' <i>pa</i> (close) deities saints monks royalty (gems)	' <i>u</i> (head) people of status teachers scholars	<i>yau?</i> ordinary humans	<i>kaun</i> animals- ghosts dead bodies depraved people children

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The classifier *yau?* in the phrase,

lu 'le *yau?*
person four (clf)

is thus a local in a conceptual map, to be understood not as a genus, but as part of a paradigmatic system.

Now let us explore this system of classification in the inanimate world. The roots of the system have already been exposed in the system of animate classification. The process for extending the system is metaphoric, and the two basic dimensions on which the metaphor can be described are deixis or proximity (both physical and psychological) and person (the head and the body).

SYSTEM OF INANIMATE OBJECTS

Center	1st Orbit	2nd Orbit	3rd Orbit	4th Orbit
Self	Part of Self (inalienable)	On Self (alienable)	Nearby Self	Far from Self
Head	<i>ywe?</i> hair on head leaf	<i>paiŋ</i> head dress	<i>'louŋ</i> round, upper things: posts furniture cup script	<i>'siŋ</i> upper things which have circular orbit: sun rivers, sea arrows needles
Body	<i>'chaŋ</i> hair on body digits teeth <i>piŋ</i> sticks & twigs twigs pens	<i>kwiŋ</i> body dress body ornaments <i>the</i> folded clothes	<i>cha?</i> flat, lower things: boards mats saucer palmleaf for writing <i>le?</i> instruments used in the hand swords musical instruments puppets	<i>'si</i> lower things which move in straight lines: vehicles hunted animals horses dùpes <i>θwe</i> rivers roads

4. A LINGUISTIC MAP OF THE WORLD

Linguistic classifiers relate people to the world — not in a vague sense but quite literally, if we examine the way the Burmese language classifies inanimate objects. The structure underlying classification starts with the self at the center, divides the self into head and body, and then ranges objects at four distances from the self, associating them either with the head (metaphorically top, round) or with the body (metaphorically bottom, straight).

I would like to make several observations on the system of inanimate objects outlined in the chart above. First of all, it is not particularly neat and logical, and conceptual change over history has left some items obscure. For instance, unless one knows that the traditional Burmese pictorial map of the cosmos has man located on an island, from the center of which flows a river in a spiral course to the sea, one may question why rivers and oceans are classified here along with arrows and needles, which move in circular orbits.¹²

Secondly, the system depicted above is not an inductively derived taxonomy but an applied metaphor. Thus items located customarily at the same point in the system (e.g., fruit, cups, letters of the alphabet, wooden posts, furniture, machines, houses, stars, and electric lights, which are all *louŋ*) do not necessarily have any shared attribute — no common shape, size, or function — but are all relationally upper and not on the self but within view. In the relational logic of the metaphor:

Head is to Body

as: cup „ „ saucer
 letter „ „ page
 chair „ „ mat
 post „ „ floor

Thirdly, it is interesting that several of the classifiers are words for parts of a tree, so that one might say that the tree is the metaphor for the person, not vice-versa. As Adams and Conklin have pointed out,¹³ recurring shapes (and their names) in a great many classifier systems in Southeast Asia are round (often using the word for fruit), rod (stick), and flat (leaf). Here, however, the tree seems more an included metaphor which structures part of the classifier system (1st

¹² Depictions of Burmese cosmology are available in English in Sir R. C. Temple, *The Thirty-Seven Mats*, a phase of spirit-worship prevailing in Burma, (London, W. Griggs, 1906).

¹³ See Adams and Conklin, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

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Orbit, inalienable objects) than a metaphor which underlies the entire system.

Fourthly, the reader will note that several of the categories are subdivided. There seem to be two basic principles used in subclassification. One of these focuses on function, distinguishing the active use of a thing from the static thing not in use. Thus, in the 2nd Orbit a sarong folded and not worn is classified as a *thε* 'substance', while a sarong wrapped around the body, enclosing something, is a *kwiη*, 'encircling'. In the 3rd Orbit, an object held or manipulated in the hand is classed as a *lε?* 'hand'. In the 4th Orbit, vehicles and moving things (*'si*) are distinguished from static things (*θwε*). Besides this active-static subclassification, though perhaps related to it, is the subclassification based upon pliable versus stiff, which appears in the 1st Orbit. Parts of the body can be conceived of as *piη* (plants) or *chauη* (sticks):

<i>piη</i>	<i>chauη</i>
feathers	legs
animal fur	digits
(thread, rope)	tusks
	tails
	(pins, pens)

Once again, however, these terms 'pliable' and 'stiff' are not to be seen as attributes of objects themselves, but as universes of discourse in which the objects may be discussed. To list words under a classifier — as I have done above — is only to note where they are classified most of the time: in the more creative uses of language, objects and people can be conceived of — and hence classified — in original ways. Hla Pe writes of one instance of this original use of classifiers in which a poet uses a classifier to fit his imagery, referring to the five causes of a woman's insolent behavior toward her husband as "five rings of insolence" (ring — *kwiη*, 2nd Orbit). This was apparently an original use of *kwiη*. A grammar can describe constraints on the system, but not produce rules or predict actual language behavior.

5. CLASSIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

A third system of classifiers structures the realm of concepts, although, as observed above, concepts may be concretized as animate

or inanimate (e.g., *rings* of insolence). Once again the system is basically spatial and deictic. It shares with the system of animate classifiers the term '*pa*' "close" for sacred concepts associated with the Buddha. Secular concepts which are considered beyond the ordinary (concepts in arts and sciences) are classified as *yaŋ*, a term which means literally "place", further evidence that the system underlying classifiers is basically spatial or deictic.

The unmarked class is *khu'*, meaning a unit. This is the class into which one puts concepts and things which one does not know where else to put — a kind of conceptual limbo. In translating Buddhist works from Pali, which has no classifiers, Burmese traditionally used *khu'* for ideas and objects which had no clear Burmese counterpart. This use of *khu'* continues to the present. Wanting to test the analysis presented here in a way that might convince behaviorists, I made a list of objects which are not part of Burmese culture and asked Burmese what classifiers they would use. Without exception, stereo-headphones, contraceptives, aerosol throatsprays and the like were classified as *khu'*. They knew what these things were, but they did not know where to put them in the Burmese system (a further indication that things are not classified according to superficial attributes). Linguistic classification thus is a potential indication of the depth of the enculturation of borrowed objects and concepts. Change in the system of classification must represent deep conceptual change in the epistemology of a people. The first step has been to reveal the system, however, we must next study variation and change.

6. CONCLUSION

What I have attempted is to reveal a spatial metaphor, or rather some interrelated spatial metaphors. Revealing metaphors is an act of interpretation, of supplying information necessary for seeing the coherence and purpose of a phenomenon, in this case a particular set of Burmese words. The Burmese classifier system is coherent because it is based upon a single, elementary semantic dimension: deixis. On that dimension, four distances are distinguished, distances which metaphorically substitute for other conceptual relations between people and other living beings, people and things, and people and concepts.¹⁴ These distances are further subdivided by another spatial

¹⁴ The structural parallels between this analysis of Burmese classifiers and Leach's analysis of animal categories in English and Kachin are not coincidental.

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dimension: higher and lower, expressed concretely as head and body. Further subdivisions are in part obscure (i.e., remain incoherent to me) but can be explained in part as difference along another spatial dimension, static versus active (e.g., the sarong not being worn or the stick not being used, versus the sarong or stick in use).

The Burmese classifier system has purpose because it maps nature and expresses just where one is placing himself and what he is talking about. It establishes in the surface structure of the language the universe of discourse (i.e., the sense in which someone is speaking of something) of a speech act, within a culturally shared image of nature. As Emerson has succinctly put it, "The whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind."

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It was after reading Leach's work that I knew the right questions to ask about classification, and also some of the answers. See Edmund Leach, "Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse" in *New Directions in the Study of Language*, ed. by Eric H. Lenneberg (Cambridge, M.I.T. Press, 1964).