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The elusive figures of Burmese grammar: An essay[1]

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Chen
Painted the same bamboo-tree for ten years.
One day his wife looked on and shook her head.
"It's not much like our tree", she said.
Chen saw
How time and the bamboo-tree had scarred her:
"Please wait another ten", he said,
"Complete dissimilarity is harder".

Christopher Logan

Like most of the other papers in this volume, presented and then discussed at the Wenner-Gren conference on "The role of theory in language description", this essay is written in response to an assignment from the convener of the conference, William Foley. My assignment was to write about "an emic, Burmese-eye view of the Burmese verb phrase". My essay begins by separating an emic from a Burmese-eye view, then goes on to try to come to terms (English) with "the Burmese verb phrase".

1. Exuberance and deficiency[2]

The unavoidable problem we face in understanding a distant language is that our understanding begins within the bounds of our own language, and although we can try very hard to overcome this problem and with new experiences go beyond these bounds, we remain to the very end outsiders engaged in a utopian task – one of those many human tasks in which we must always settle for approximations.

This is not an exotic condition, faced only by explorers of distant wordscapes, but – as every linguist knows – the ordinary condition of using language, of *languaging*: our understanding of another person's words is always approximate, always on the one hand exuberant, for we

add much to what we hear or read, and, on the other hand, deficient, for there is much the sayer (or the writer) intended which we *miss*. In my experience, any translation of any sentence from Burmese, Malay or Javanese (the Southeast Asian languages I have studied) is always at least fifty per cent exuberant and fifty per cent deficient – that is, at least fifty per cent of the lingual material of the translation has no counterpart in the original and at least fifty per cent of the original has no counterpart in the translation. I would like to bring this disparity into the foreground.

For linguists there are two steps in analysis which put into the background most differences between unrelated languages. The first of these is glossing, a kind of "literal", word by word, morpheme by morpheme translation which, though it might be done with care, almost never is. Most of the analysis is done in the glossing, for the reader's understanding and hence, the analyst's argument depend on the familiarity of those glosses.

Glossing is clearly a political process. How often do two languages meet as equals, with equal and reciprocal authority? How often, for instance, are the root metaphors[3] of the "exotic" language considered equal in analytic power to those of the language of analysis? Many find the deepest metaphors of another language poetic and defamiliarizing, but few find them to be as useful in analysis as one's own, i. e., as pictures of the world "as it is". It takes considerable effort even to see one's own root metaphors as metaphors.

The second step in analysis by which dissimilarities are put into the background is abstraction or, as linguists call it, parsing – putting the glossed language into a grammatical framework, the terms of which are terms in the language of the glossing. This language about language or metalanguage is also rarely if ever seen as equal in power in the two languages, and so there is an interesting politics here, too, which is only beginning to be unfolded: the politics of claiming universal explanations from within a particular language.

One alternative is to look to local (versus universal) explanations. In Southeast Asia there is plenty of local language about language, much of it involving new metaphors for the shapes and uses of the many things people can do with words. And there are also plenty of local grammars, but in these grammars, with rare exceptions, the parsing is done with an imported metalanguage, Sanskritic or European. (The major exception I know of is Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad's introduction to Malay for schoolchildren, called *Pelita Bahasa Melayu*, which was written in the forties and fifties largely in reaction to colonial grammars of Malay.) And so,

although local language about language is rich and interesting in almost all societies, there are few independent analyses based on local traditions. The language game called parsing is not universally played.[4]

An emic understanding, then, is not an insider's understanding, for the insider may have no counterpart to the language game being played in the analysis, or the game itself may be a kind of calque of a borrowed game. Rather, emic understanding is a kind of self-conscious understanding, a process which the *outsider* undergoes: a deliberate process of foregrounding dissimilarity and self-consciously, methodically correcting the exuberances and deficiencies of one's outside understanding. As Chen said, "Complete dissimilarity is harder".

2. Defamiliarizing Burmese

I would like to describe some of this dissimilarity in modern Burmese by studying a narrative, the author of which I know and will send a copy of this essay to in hope of correction. It is a passage of about 134 sentences, a tentative number since Burmese punctuation does not consistently mark units we would call sentences. Let me illustrate this punctuation (and some of the dissimilarity it evokes) with the first sentence-like unit of the story. A narrator persona of the author is speaking.

... "ထားပါတော့လေ.... အဲဒါနဲ့ ရောက်ရောက်ချင်းမှာရေချိုး၊ နောက်
နှုတ်ဆက်ပွဲကို သွားရတယ်၊ အဲဒါ အတော်ဘဲ။

As I have written elsewhere,[5] transliteration of this passage into roman writing is not a "meaning preserving" act, for the writing system which one uses shapes the way one imagines one's language and thinks about it. Our linear representation of sound units underlies both our phonetic and our phonemic practice and becomes a root metaphor for the sequencing of language itself, as scholars like Jacques Derrida and Walter Ong have taught us to see more clearly. Without going into that here, where the distant goal is to describe "the Burmese verb phrase", suffice it to say that writing systems (and other systems of representation) are among the deepest metaphors in a language, that they resonate richly throughout a culture, and so for us to substitute one technology of writing for another is not a neutral act, a mere notational variation. It means to reimagine language itself.

One way to begin to do that is to look at a Burmese typewriter. A Burmese typewriter does not automatically move along to the next space when a letter is struck. It sits still. One strikes a central symbol, the syllable "initial" consonant in most cases, and then one may modify it by adding marks above, below, behind and in front of it. (I must add that for many Southeast Asians in my classes in Burma, Java, and Malaysia, the "front" of a word is the side facing the direction of writing, i. e., the right side; for most of us the "front" of a word is the side facing away from the direction of writing, i. e., the left side.) The central cultural metaphor, the figure of Burmese writing itself, at the level of morphemes and monosyllabic words, is much more one of center and periphery than linear sequence. I will return to this root metaphor later. The point here is that putting Burmese words into linear, phonemic writing (romanizing it) obliterates a very deep metaphor (center and periphery) which resonates widely in Burmese culture. Much traditional philology and modern linguistics depends upon this romanization as a first step (even before glossing) in analysis. The illusion is that nothing important is lost.

One clear indication of emic Burmese parsing is Burmese punctuation. It is influenced, in part, by roman conventions: there are quotation marks and an ellipsis in the passage quoted above, probably borrowed from English punctuation. There is also in the text of this story an interesting new convention of putting commas between serial verbs, marking open rather than close phonological juncture. The traditional Burmese marks (which have Indic origins) include spacing between phrases (not words) and single or double vertical lines, marking what might in translation be called clauses and sentences respectively. Let me now just go ahead and romanize and gloss this passage (retaining the original punctuation), and then discuss some more of the exuberances and deficiencies of the translation.

'hta:bato.le ... e:dane. yau'yau'hcin: yeihco: \
put this with arrive arrive bathe
nau'mei'hse'pweko thwa:yate \
after reception to go must
e:da atobe: \\
this just right
'Let that be ... as soon as we arrived we bathed\
After that we had a reception\
That's just what I wanted\\ ...'

The point here is not to argue that, for instance, *hta:* has a different range of meaning from English "put", although that is certainly true. It is rather that many of the English words in the translation have no counterpart in the Burmese text at all, words like: "be", "as", "we", "a", "is", "I", and past tense. I don't think it possible to say that these words are somehow "understood" from the context in the Burmese text. They just aren't there, necessary as they may be to the coherence of English, for it is the English gloss which implies them, not the Burmese original. Concerning things like copula, articles, and tense Burmese is silent.[6] These are some of the exuberances of the English translation, and it is important, I think, that they represent the core of the English system of discourse coherence: tense, copula, pronouns, and articles.

The deficiencies of the translation – those things in the Burmese which have no counterpart in the translation – include things at the core of the Burmese system of discourse coherence. These are primarily nonreferential terms in the sector of clauses which might be parsed as the predicate or the verb phrase. In typological terms, Burmese is O(bject) V(erb) and S(ubject) anywhere before V when it's there at all. (S seems more nearly a sentential rather than a clausal constituent in Burmese.) The Burmese words I am narrowing in on are in the sector labeled by V, the predicate.

Many parts of the predicate have relevance to functions well outside that sector, at many different levels of context. For instances, one might parse the first clause in the example above as

(hta:)ba)to.)lei) ...
(put)polite)change of state)persistive) ...
'Let that be ...'

Imagine concentric circles: the openness of the last three parentheses is meant to suggest that the last three terms have relevance to context outside the clause and, in part, outside the text. The second word, *ba*, takes us to the level of the speech situation of the narrator, since it marks politeness of the utterance vis-a-vis the recipient, i. e., the one the narrator is talking to within the story. The third word, *to.* is described in Judson's (1852) dictionary as "verb affix, denoting a slight necessity" but more recent descriptions[7] agree that it marks an imminent (as here) or recent change-of-state, which perhaps gives, in Judson's (1852) terms, "slightly necessity" to the request to "put something aside, please". The final term, *lei* is tough to gloss: it has been called "euphonic", "slightly emphatic or

persistive". It makes the clause a little longer and the imperative perhaps a little more gentle, more friendly.

Although their dynamics can be suggested in English, these terms have no clear English counterparts. Like English tense, they follow the verb but have reference to the speech act: the speaker is being persistent, not saying what the subject of the sentence should be; the speaker is being polite and is marking a change of state in the telling of the story. In Foley and Van Valin's (1984) terms, their position is near the nucleus of the clause but they are functionally part of the periphery and beyond.[8] Their use is to put the clause into context.

3. On defining "context"

I would like to explore for a moment what "putting a clause into context" might mean, before going further into the parsing and analysis of "the Burmese verb phrase".

Linguists and philologists would recognize, I think, at least six different kinds of context for any chunk of language from sentences on up to whole texts: 1) the context of other language before this chunk or after it within the text (thinking of text as any recorded instance of languaging); 2) the context of the language act itself in which someone is languaging to someone, somewhere, sometime; 3) the context of memory — the prior texts and remembered contexts this bit has the power to evoke; 4) the context of a world beyond languaging, a world we observe through words, whatever we may believe about the ontology of that world — so that if I say "Look at Bill over there", I don't normally mean for you to look at my words but through them, I mean them to be transparent; 5) the context of the medium — sound, inscription gesture, and the neural medium of inner languaging we call thought. None of these five kinds of context can be reduced to one of the others, and all are within a context we might call 6) the context of silence — the unsaid (in any particular utterance) and the unsayable (in any particular language).

"Putting a clause into context", to return then to the question of what that can mean, can mean relating that clause to 1) other parts of the text, including other clauses; to 2) the language act; to 3) the memories it evokes; to 4) a world beyond language; to 5) a medium; and 6) silence. Languages may differ in all these six kinds of relation to context, I believe, and so describing "the verb phrase in Burmese" means describing

dissimilarities in all six. Various parts of "the verb phrase" relate to various kinds of context.

One more word, an aside, about the six kinds of context, before I start to use them. I hope that they are clear. They are meant to be noncontroversial, though I realize that they are merely one "take" on languaging. It is a Deweyan take[9] in which one focuses on languaging as one means by which a live-being attunes itself to context. Animals and plants also can be seen as relating to context in all these six ways: they build structures; form communities; have memories; construe worlds; manipulate media; and live against a background of emptiness. For humans, of course, all six are more complex than for algae, although that belief, too, may rest on too much exuberant universalizing. Each of us is thrown at birth into a particular tradition of attunement, a philology (or language considered over time). English and Burmese are two different traditions of attunement, two different philologies which only recently in human history have come to interact.

4. Framing Burmese in English

The picture of Burmese which has developed in English, in spite of important differences of detail, has been rather consistent from the beginning of the historic interaction of the two, from the time Carey and Judson first began to familiarize Burmese to speakers and readers of English in the early 19th century to, in our own day, the recent, very thoughtful descriptions by Okell (1969); Allott (1965); and Wheatley (1982). I do not mean to be negative about that tradition, for it is my own; however, by taking our tradition itself to be within the scope of study, it may seem negative at first. One major goal, however, of many modern philologists and anthropological linguists is to be as self-conscious about our own traditions as we can be, in a move toward emic understanding. A powerful quotation from Wittgenstein says it well and memorably: "One thinks one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it". (Philosophical Investigations, 114)

The discipline in this self-conscious endeavor is not to be taken from theory, i. e., from the metalanguage, since that metalanguage is part of what is being examined. Rather, the discipline for the philologist is of another kind: the discipline of particular texts, in particular places and particular times, so that as much of the context as possible is made

accessible for study. Here I will describe "the verb phrase in Burmese" in the context of a five page excerpt from an account of a trip which a group of students from Burma took to the Edinburgh Festival. It was written by Dr. Maung Maung Nyo (a well-known Burmese author and professor of medicine), who is narrating the story. He is frequently interrupted by friends who are joking with him about his relationship with one of the group, a young Chinese woman. Burmese friends assure me that Dr. Maung Maung Nyo's prose is good modern colloquial writing.[10]

For about four months I read over this little text nearly every day, until its dissimilarities began to emerge. Using the six different kinds context as a heuristic, I will try to describe some of the exuberances and deficiencies I have noticed.

5. A string of metaphors

Let me return to that first clause, an imperative which might be translated, 'Let that be ...'

The whole thing can be seen as a string of metaphors:

hta: ('put') is a metaphoric 'putting down' of a topic of discourse prior to picking up a new one. The context it relates to is prior discourse, although the object is unsaid.

ba (polite) is a metaphoric use of a verb which we might translate as 'include', 'be with', 'accompany'. It is a very old metaphor for politeness, with no originality at all, except to the foreign learner for whom it is fresh and exotic. The context it relates to is the social situation, the language act.

to. (change of state) is a metaphoric use of a verb which describes the act of hitting something into the air with hand, foot, or stick – as in the widespread Southeast Asian game (Burmese *hcin:loun:*) in which the players, either singly or in a group, keep a rattan ball in the air with their feet. The context it relates to is, again, the discourse itself, as an 'object'.

lei (euphonic) is a metaphoric use of a verb which Judson (1852) translates as 'to be scattered, lost, evaporated, as camphor, quicksilver, etc.' The verb seems close, too, to a noun meaning 'air, wind'. It seems appropriate at the very end of a clause, and it seems to relate to the texture of the discourse itself.

To think of "the verb phrase in Burmese" as a string of metaphors foregrounds dissimilarity. For many linguists it may seem to exoticize Burmese in a way that is perhaps historically accurate (and perhaps not) but it is certainly not the way native speakers would imagine their own language. Over time, as one learns the language, the recurring metaphors become bleached and ordinary, but for the comparative philologist (interested in how that ordinariness came about), it seems emic and right to try to see the elasticity of the metaphors first and then to see their present use as extensions (or deviations) into new contexts. I realize I am skating on thin ice in ascribing particular metaphors in English to these Burmese terms, and I am far surer that it is warranted to see them as a string of metaphors than I am of my own glossing of them.

The study of the rhetoric of metaphor traditionally focuses on single words and has usually been classed, since Aristotle, as a single-word figure in which there is a displacement and extension of a word from one context into another. (One notices that our English metalanguage here, like that of most European languages, is built around metaphors of spacial movement: meta-*phor*, dis-*place*, rhetorical *moves*.) A verb phrase, however, is a more complex figure than a single word, often even an overlay of figures. Paul Ricoeur (1975) makes much of the distinction between metaphors as words and metaphors in sentences (thinking of sentences as the minimal units of discourse, i. e., the minimal units with full context, as context is defined above). This distinction parallels Benveniste's between semiotics (the study of signs in a code) and semantics (the study of sentences in context).[11]

Let's look at these words at first semiotically (i. e., as individual words and as sets of words), not semantically as parts of a particular verb phrase. There is much that can be said about them as metaphors. As many have noted, almost all the "auxiliary verbs" and "particles" have or once had status as main verbs. There are probably about a hundred of these and the sets may be open.[12] Here are some of them which seem transparent:

Main verb (with gloss)	Used as auxiliary or particle
thwa: 'go'	'arrive in a state'
la 'come'	'becoming'
mi. 'catch'	'inadvertent'
pi: 'finish'	'and'
pyan 'return'	'repeat, [go] back'

pei: 'give'	'[do] for'
ci. 'look at'	'try to'
san: 'try, test'	'polite urgency'

In these cases we either have English counterparts which resemble these Burmese root metaphors or know languages which do, or can easily imaging how they might make sense. The following are some that are less transparent:

to. 'to hit in air with foot, hand, or stick'	'change of state'
lei 'to be scattered, lost, evaporated'	'persistive'
hpu: 'to behold'	'already achieved'
thei: 'small, insignificant'	'still, yet'
hke. 'do bit by bit'	'different time, place'
oun: 'surround, cover'	'further action'

One might classify these and the other metaphors of the Burmese verb phrase in various ways, perhaps sketching out semiotic fields, e. g., the metaphoric extensions of movement or of vision. It certainly is possible to create semiotic paradigms of these verbs and imagine a kind of map of Burmese "thought" in terms of root metaphors.[13] However, the focus here is their use in a particular Burmese Verb Phrase.

6. Metaphors in context: The verb phrase

At its simplest, a Burmese sentence is a verb phrase and the simplest verb phrase has two parts, like many Burmese grammatical phenomena: a VERB and a FINAL. Around these two the structure is built.

The two, VERB and FINAL, do not stand in any dependency relationship to each other but rather might be described as making a polarity, between more referential and less referential, or least grammatical and most. The problem with these terms "referential" and "grammatical" is that both poles of the Burmese verb phrase *refer*, and both have grammatical roles. In terms of the six kinds of context presented above, it might be better to say (putting aside cases of self-reflexivity) that the VERB refers primarily to the context of the world outside the language act and the FINAL refers primarily to the context of the language act itself. What constrains the VERB (again, putting aside self-reflexivity) is

what I'll call (after Emerson) Nature, and what constrains the FINAL is the particular social event of languaging.

Around the VERB, before and after it, cluster the words (many used figuratively) which particularlize the natural event by identifing and specifying it.

Around the FINAL, before and after it, cluster the words (also usually figurative) which particularize the language event by identifying and specifying it.

Between the VERB and the FINAL, things are not all that tidy. A lot of the elusiveness happens there.

If the poles of the verb phrase have their feet in two different contexts, the one in the natural event, the other in the language event, where do the other four kinds of context come in: intertextual relations (memory), intra-text relations (structure), medium, and silence? Some, as we will see, work on the very edges, some at the center, of this polarity between VERB and FINAL.

7. The right pole: The FINAL

The set of VERBS is open-ended, that of FINALS rather small though there are many variant forms of the latter. Julian Wheatley (1982) lays out the final particles this way:

INDICATIVE		
	positive	negative
actual	*-te*	
hypothetical	*-me*	*-hpu:*
change of state	*-pi*	
IMPERATIVE		
	-∅	*-ne.*

In consideration of the self-consciousness that an emic ideal requires of us, we must not give too much power to those latinate English terms in the chart above, as familiarizing as they are, but see them, too, as metaphors, brought over into an alien wordscape. Among these final particles, the oddest and least familiar is probably *pi.* Among realis–irrealis, mood, and negative–positive polarity, we find "change of state" – which seems like a displaced aspect. Allott calls that same *pi* "punc-

tative". As Professor Allott writes (1965: 289), "... *pi* has caused much trouble to grammarians and students alike. It is difficult to describe in terms of English grammatical categories the type of sentence marked by the final particle *pi* in Burmese".

There is not time now to go through the history of that trouble, except to note that *pi* was enough like 'tense' for Judson (1853) to call it 'past' in the last century, and Stewart (1936) to call it 'perfect' in this, and for traditional Burmese translators to use it to represent a Pali past participle.[14] A modern Burmese grammarian, U Pe Maung Tin, has said (quoted and translated by Allott 1965: 290), "*pi* shows that a different situation, indicated by the verb, has really been reached". It is clear that the final particle *pi* is like a tense particle in at least two ways: 1) it has reference to the moment of speaking; 2) it marks an act as specific. The important thing seems to be that, with *pi*, some specific thing either has happened or is happening. Here, again, we meet tenselessness; we already met it in discussing the "change of state" particle (i. e., tossing the rattan ball) *to.*, which (from our perspective) does not distinguish an accomplished change of state from an imminent one. Another way to say this (to extend the metaphor of the writing system) is that the event of speech is not a moving point but a center.[15]

Let me now put aside details about individual particles in order to fill in some of the grammatical space around and between the two obligatory poles of the Verb Phrase, the VERB and the FINAL. As we will see, elements of the verb phrase (now better called the two-headed verb + final phrase) cluster around the two poles.

8. Categories close to the FINAL

Close to the FINAL cluster "optional" words that have been called evidentials, references to the speech event, politeness markers, vague words called euphonic or "intonation carriers" and an interesting small set of mutually exclusive (nearly) words which, according to Allott (1965) mark "aspect", although this term may clash somewhat with more recent definitions of aspect. There are three words in this category: *to.* (which we have seen several times already), *oun:*, and *thei:*. They occur just before or just after the FINAL in the verb phrase.

The first of these (*to.*) marks something we have called a change-of-state, either already accomplished or imminent. It is very like *pi* and never (or very rarely) co-occurs with *pi.* Like *pi* it seems to say that

something happening is stopping or something new is beginning. Unlike *pi* it can occur with negatives and other final particles. Allott (1965) calls it "culminative".

The other two (*oun:* and *thei:*) she calls "cumulative". They both mark continuation of an occurrence, and as Okell (1973) has shown continuation of a non-occurence, essentially the opposite of a change of state. One of them, *oun:*, marks imperatives and hypotheticals, the other, *thei:* marks indicatives.

With imperatives, *to.* and *oun:* occur after the final particle. With indicatives, *to.* and *thei:* occur before the final particle. We can only speculate why this should be.[16] What it does, however, is complicate the act of describing the Burmese verb + final phrase since there are now two positions for this category which Allott (1965) calls "aspect". As we will see, this is not unusual in Burmese and it reinforces, I think, the image of the verb + final phrase not as a linear sequence but as two polarities with elements clustering around each, in orbits.

As with *pi*, the point of reference for these "aspect" particles is the speech event. There is another category which has reference to the speech event. There are only two particles in the category. Allot (1965) calls them "location" and distinguishes them as "junctive" and "non-junctive". They occur with all finals (but not after stative verbs), and they are mutually exclusive. They occur before optional "aspect" particles, near the FINAL. Allott (1965: 299) writes "Without one of these two particles a verbal sentence does not refer to one specific action. (There are other ways, however, of specifying a definite action ...)".

The one, which she calls "junctive" (*hke.*), says there are two locations involved in the specific event, one of them associated with the speaker. The other, which she calls "non-junctive" (*lai'*), says that the specific event is carried through and finished with.

One might represent the Burmese verb + final phrase described so far as:

(VERB) ... (junctive (change of state (FINAL)))

Let us continue to look at the things which cluster around the FINAL a bit longer, before turning to the VERB end of the phrase. We have seen some things which occur just before the FINAL (junctive, change of state). After the FINAL there are 1) question markers; 2) tags (e. g., *hsou* 'It is said'); 3) evidentials, like *hpe:* ('really'), *po* ('for sure'); 4) a quotative (*te.*); and 5) an array of "euphonic", "emphatic" of "intonation-

bearing" particles whose meanings remain elusive and which may have more to do with the medium than the other contexts. One always feels defeated by these last things, as if there were more to them than appears. Perhaps not.

At the very end of the phrase, there can be a formal pronoun for the second person, so that men use a masculine for 'you' (*hkinbya*) and women a feminine 'you' (*shin*). A proper name for the addressee, too, might go into that final slot.

One might argue that all of these are outside the verb + final phrase, even outside the clause, and that they mark the closure of the sentence. Functionally, they are certainly peripheral operators, but so are many of the final particles. It is impossible, I think, in a verb-final language, ultimately, to define the end of the verb phrase and the beginning of the sentence operators. They may be in double function. And it may well be that this diffuse boundary makes no trouble for anyone except philologists.

All of these things cluster on the right polarity of the phrase and are related to the speech event – identifying it and expressing attitudes toward it – except tags like 'it is said' (*hsou*) and the quotative particle (*te.*). These two explicitly relate the sentence to prior text, the context of memory.

It was mentioned earlier that there are variant forms of the final particles. These different forms serve two major purposes: 1) the variant forms serve to mark the phrase or clause as a part of a larger structure: coordinate, subordinate, or cosubordinate (Foley and Van Valin 1984); 2) the variant forms serve to distinguish spoken and written language. The story under examination here uses this latter phenomenon to good purpose. Most of the story is written in spoken Burmese, but when the author wants to make a comment outside the story, he shifts to written Burmese, marked only by the written variant of final particles (i. e., the spoken final particle *te* becomes the written form *thi*).

There is one word which seems to wander about in this righthand polarity of the double-headed verb + final phrase. It is *pa*, the "polite" particle, although the term "polite" in English fails to convey the importance of this word. It might be better to think of it as "inclusive", on the basis of the meaning of the corresponding independent verb, as discussed above. Allott (1965: 302) states bluntly that it "occupies a position third from the end". By "the end" she means the final particle, which she takes as the end of the verb phrase (the verbal syntagma). She goes on, "... *pa* precedes the category of aspect with all final verb particles except *hpu:*,

when it follows it". (*hpu:*, you may recall, marks a negative assertive. It probably attracts *pa* for reasons of sound – a constraint of the medium itself.) Allott (1965: 302) also says, "Starting from *pa* to the end of the sentence, we have particles whose function is to establish the nature and purpose of the sentence in relation to the situational context". We might then think of *pa* (except with *hpu:*) as marking a boundary between the two polarities of the verb + final phrase, a kind of transition from the context of Nature to the context of the speech event.

9. The left pole: The VERB

I would like to make that transition myself now and begin to describe the other end of the phrase, the VERB and the things which cluster around it.

Distinctions like transitive and intransitive seem to play as little part in Burmese as tense. In describing the particles, it does seem useful to distinguish active and stative verbs: the junctive/non-junctive category, for instance, never occurs with stative verbs. This seems, however, more a matter of the unlikeliness of a junctive/non-junctive "state" than an important grammatical constraint.

What is interesting – and dissimilar – about the Burmese verb is how seldom it is single and simple, one verb with one final particle. In the story under consideration here, only 12 out of 134 sentences have a single, simple verb, and 8 of those are verbs which take sentence complements (i. e., *pyo:* 'say'; *me:* 'ask'; and *thi.* 'know'). Usually the verb is part of a compound verb or is modified by an auxiliary (i. e., cosubordinate) verb, or both. Like the verb phrase as a whole, the verb itself is almost always made of two parts.

Word building itself, in Burmese, seems to happen by compounding, so that there are not just transparent serial compounds like *thwa:we* ('go' + 'buy') but also many non-serial pairs like *ceina'* ('be ground down' + 'be cooked') meaning 'to be satisfied, contented', or *hma:ywin:* ('error' + 'misplace') meaning 'mistake', or *neihtain* ('stay' + 'sit') meaning 'reside'. In the serial compounds, there is an optional particle 'pi:' ('and' < pi: 'finish') which can be put between the two verbs without altering the meaning: *thwa:pi:we* ('go and buy'). This particle cannot be inserted between non-serial pairs.

There are many interesting things to say about these compounds. For instance, some are formed artificially, in which case the second member

of the compound is a rhyme syllable or a reduplication, not an independent word at all: e. g., *ne'ne:* (from *ne'* 'deep' + *ne:* rhyme syllable) = 'profound'. In some, the two words are of nearly identical meaning: e. g. *pyo:hsou* ('speak' + 'speak') = 'speak'. Okell (1969) has described these compounds in detail, and most of the examples here have been taken from his study. The point is not that Burmese has compound verbs and English doesn't, for we clearly do, but rather that Burmese does it so much and so freely, almost as if there were, in a monosyllabic language, pressure from the medium itself to make words weightier and a little slower in passing. Whatever the reason, there seems to be a pressure toward double-headedness throughout the language. For us to speak Burmese is to learn to use two or more words where, in our own noetic economy, one would do.[17]

This pervasive compounding gives rise to a major problem in describing the verb + final phrase: how does one distinguish a compound of verb + verb from verb + auxiliary, given the fact that most auxiliaries are also regular verbs and many can occur both after and before the main verb? Some combinations are clearly compounds, for neither the first or the second member occurs frequently with other verbs. Some combinations are clearly verb + auxiliary, for the auxiliary in these cases either does not occur independently as a regular verb or else it occurs with almost any verb. Most combinations, however, fall somewhere between. Again the picture is not very tidy.

There are a few interesting tests, none of them conclusive. One of them is the placement of the negative marker *ma*. We have already seen that one of the final particles is another negative marker (*hpu:*), which, as discussed above, attracts the polite word *pa*. Negation, it should come as no surprise to notice, is also a double-headed structure: one foot (*ma*) marks the verb and the other (*hpu:*) is a final particle. The placement of *ma*, then, should tell us where the main verb is. There are some interesting complications, however.

With an ordinary, lexical compound (as with a single verb) the negative *ma* precedes it, or in some cased is prefixed to both members, as in:

ma-hsaun-ywe' ('not-bear-carry on head') 'not execute, carry out.'
ma-htein:-ma-thein: ('not-restrain-not put away') 'not put under detention'

When there is a verb followed by an auxiliary, the negative *ma* either precedes the verb or the auxiliary. John Okell (1969), whose explanations

and examples I am using at this point, considers the order neg-verb-aux to be the general rule and verb-neg-aux to be the exception, but then goes on to list 22 exceptional auxiliaries which seem to attract the negative. As far as I know, no one has yet described the significance of this variation. It seems to make no difference if you say: *ma-yu-thwa:* (not-take-go) 'not take away' or: *yu-ma-thwa:* (take-not-go) 'not take away'. That is to say, the scope of the negative does not change with its position.

One solution, essentially the one suggested by Allott (1965), is to consider that any erstwhile auxiliary becomes a main verb if it attracts the negative, and this makes perfect sense when you consider that almost all auxiliaries also occur as main verbs, certainly all those which attract negatives occur as main verbs. Wheatley's (1982) argument against this, that even under negation these auxiliaries retain their auxiliary meaning, makes sense, too.

Perhaps the problem, once again, is trying to think of a single headword in the basic grammatical configuration. Perhaps there is something like a grammatical pressure (or a deeply resonant metaphor) in Burmese toward building double-headed figures, so that where English tends towards modifier-head relations, Burmese tends toward double-headed ones.

This negation of the second verb, then, becomes like several other processes which are possible at this position in the verb + final phrase in Burmese. Like negation of the auxiliary verb, all these other optional alternatives also seem to give prominence to the erstwhile auxiliary, without any apparent change of meaning. So that, according to Okell (1969: 33), one can say either: *pou.hkain:* ('send' + 'tell') (verb + AUX) or: *pou.hpou.hkain:* (('send' + 'to') + 'tell') (COMPL + verb) and both would be in English, 'tell (him) to send (it)'. Note that in the first form, 'send' is the main verb, while in the second 'tell' is – suggesting, among other things that either position in the figure could be prominent. What is not at all clear is what this area of apparent optionality really does in Burmese, i. e., what kind of context it relates to.

And if *pou.hkain:* is an instance of verb + auxiliary, then one of the other things this figure suggests is that verb and auxiliary need not have the same agent. And if the verb and auxiliary need not have the same agent, then we are pushing the notion of auxiliary too far. This is clausal nexus. And yet ...

And yet at this point Burmese remains elusive, as if we had not yet asked of it the right questions. Or asked softly enough.

There can be more than one "auxiliary" and it is difficult finding any other general constraint on their order than scope: each new verb seems to include all to the left of it, so that a reversal of order produces a reversal of scope. For example, from Wheatley (1982: 230):

-hcin hpu: = 'have wanted to-'
'want' 'already'

while:

-hpu: hcin = 'wanted to have -'

But consider such phrases as the following, quoted (from literary Burmese) in Okell (1969: 39):

ca.yau'kwe:hmanhti.hkai'hya.na.cou:kan:sou'pya'theiceipye'si
drop-explode-strike-splinter-break-tear-die-perish
(describing an armed attack on a garrison)

or:

su.hsaun:siyinhnyi.hnain:thou'thinye:ku:mutinti:hpya'pyinhsi
collect-arrange-compare-purify-write-setdown-edit-amend
(describing the compilation of a learned book)[18]

These are extreme cases. There are ordering constraints on the auxiliaries in spoken Burmese, but since there are over 50 auxiliaries (59 in Okell) let me only say in this essay that within the continuum between the verb (or verb cluster) and the final (or final cluster), those things closer to the verb have more to do with the event beyond language (Nature) and those closer to the final have more to do with the language event.

There are many more things of note in the Burmese verb + final phrase which have been described in English by Okell (1969); Allott (1965); and Wheatley (1982) (and in French by Denise Bernot 1980).[19] There are several types of "pre-verbs" which occur before the main verb (both intensifiers and "pre-auxiliaries"), incorporated objects, and the frozen relic of a prefix (*h-*) on the verb which once marked an active–stative distinction. And there are all the ways verb + final phrases can be subordinated and embedded. None of these things have been discussed

here. I invite the reader to learn of them from the four fine scholars I have mentioned above and whose work I have drawn upon throughout. What has been discussed here has been enough, I hope, to begin to shape a picture of the area between the verb and the final particle in a Burmese sentence. It is a grammatical landscape altogether different from anything we have in English. It has two centers, like many of the elusive figures of Burmese, and because of that there are different possibilities – different things you can do – with a Burmese verb + final phrase than with an English verb phrase.

10. Some examples

But rather than describe further complexities it may be more useful here to present a few more examples, drawn from the story which I have used as my discipline in this study, about Dr. Maung Maung Nyo in England, pursuing a Chinese girl. I would like to describe in context, by way of summary and illustration, a couple of the more interesting verb + final phrases.

We have already looked at the first clause of the story and described it as a string of metaphors:

hta:bato.le
PUT INCLUDE TOSS EVAPORATE
'Let that be ...'

I have argued that auxiliary verbs work, in part, as metaphors. They retain echoes of their non-metaphoric uses now displaced into new contexts. That is, words which have non-metaphoric uses in identifying and specifying acts and events in Nature (PUT INCLUDE TOSS EVAPORATE) have been displaced in order to identify and specify acts and events in the management of the text and the speech event itself. What are PUT, TOSSed, and EVAPORATEd are other words. We all wince, of course, when the everyday metaphors which language uses to manage itself are uncovered: they are things to be seen only, as Gregory Bateson used to say, from the corner of the eye.

And so to translate the passage above as PUT INCLUDE TOSS EVAPORATE is not an acceptable English translation of the Burmese. I would only argue that an acceptable translation may well have to pass

by that blatant string of metaphors and note them and hear their echo, "under erasure".

A more grammatical view of the passage might describe the Burmese as:

PUT polite change-of-state persistive;

or as:

VERB aux (FINAL-∅) aspect euphonic.

But "let that be".

Let me turn to another interesting example, later in the episode. The narrator is interrupted here for a bit of teasing about his skill in interacting with women, and someone says what might be translated as, "After all he's doing a Ph. D". What the Burmese says (retaining Ph. D. in English) is:

Ph. D. *lou'netapo.*
DO STAY FINAL LIGHT (i.e., not heavy)

or:

VERB aux FINAL evidential

or:

Do-ing-assert-obvious

In this verb + final phrase there is a focus-shifting variant of the final particle (*te* > *ta*) and a strong evidential. The two parts are clear: verb + aux (DO STAY) and FINAL + evidential (ASSERT + OBVIOUS). Here we see how the FINAL part of the phrase can have two parts, with emphasis shifted away from the final to the evidential. This is another example of shifting focus or emphasis in the phrase. We have seen shift of focus from VERB to aux and now, from FINAL to evidential.

One more. The narrator has a difficult time with a rival, a young Chinese who speaks with the girl in Chinese so that he can't understand. Then she says she's thirsty and he says he bought her some orangeade, ending the sentence with the phrase

welai'thei:te
BUY FOLLOW SMALL ASSERT
VERB AUX ASPECT FINAL
BUY do-to-completion[20] no-change-of-state ASSERT
'(I) just went ahead and bought (it).'

Here is an example of an "unsaid", a silence which is possible with this verbal technology. What was the change of state which did *not* happen? I think it is that he did not give in to the provoking situation, i.e., his not understanding the Chinese conversation.

11. In conclusion

And still there are many things which remain elusive – persistently dissimilar. Particularly now, having brought in the notion of unsaids, I am well over my head in Burmese and it is time to bring things together and to a close.

The study of another language is always comparative, one language in terms of another. Between the two languages there are always two kinds of dissimilarities: exuberances and deficiencies. An important role of theory in language descriptions is to bring to the foreground both exuberances and deficiencies.

The theory sketched here is a theory of contexts, based on the notion that the meaning of anything is its relation to context and that context is multiple and that dissimilarities between languages are to be expected in all of them: dissimilarities in intratextual relations (structure); in interpersonal relations (the speech event); in intertextual relations (memory of prior text); in constituting a world of Nature believed to exist beyond language; in shaping media; and in what is said or unsaid, sayable or unsayable. All of these dissimilarities may lead one to a relativistic, non-universalist attitude toward languages which Kenneth Pike called "emic".

An English interpretation of Burmese has evolved over the past century and a half and throughout that time the verb and verb phrase have remained elusive, due to basic dissimilarities of all these sorts. I have tried to describe a few of them, particularly the two-poled or double-headed structure of the verb phrase, with one pole, the verb, related to the world outside language; the other, the final, related to the language event and the shaping of coherent text. This double figure can be found

throughout Burmese: in compounds, in negation, in classifier constructions, and elsewhere. Identifying and specifying both poles are several categories of verbs used metaphorically: words refering to natural events which are used to define language events. Finally, I gave a few examples of this two-poled figure from a particular text, in order to demonstrate some of the things which can be done with it.

I cannot resist adding one more.

12. Coda

The final sentence of the story ends:

yeneiya.leithi

It is a comment by the author on the story, since the phrase ends with the literary final particle *thi* rather than the spoken final particle *te* which is used elsewhere.

As metaphors it is:

LAUGH STAY GET EVAPORATE ASSERT
VERB AUX AUX euphonic FINAL

or:

Laugh-ing-had to-really
Really had to keep on laughing ...
(at himself, in pursuit of ...

An emic view demands no less.

Notes

1. Acknowledgements: Besides the participants in the Wenner-Gren seminar, and in particular William Foley, I received generous help from John Okell and Fred Lupke, neither of whom would be comfortable with all that is written here.
2. Several terms in this section, including "exuberance", "deficiency", and "utopian task" are taken from the work of the Spanish philologist, Jose Ortega y Gasset. See particularly Ortega y Gasset (1959) and (1957: Chapter 11).
3. For further elaboration of this term, root metaphors, see Pepper (1952). One's own root metaphors are not normally seen as metaphors. See also Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

4. Kroeber (1944) discusses philology as a cultural system. For Kroeber a philology of a culture is its accumulation of prior texts plus the means of sustaining access to them. Across cultures, we may notice, philology (grammar writing, lexicography, translation, etc.) is also a means of sustaining access. Within an indigenous philology, built to sustain access to its own past, it doesn't usually matter that the access is one way (now to then), while across cultures (here to there) it almost always does matter. For a study of English philology at the time when Burmese was first being analyzed in English, see Aarsleff (1983) and Becker (1986).
5. See Becker (1983, 1984, 1986).
6. As Ortega (1957: 246) writes, "The stupendous reality that is language cannot be understood unless we begin by observing that speech consists above all in silences ... And each language represents a different equation between manifestations and silences. Each people leaves some things unsaid *in order to* be able to say others ... Hence the immense difficulty of translation: translation is a matter of saying in a language precisely what that language tends to pass over in silence".
7. Four works which describe Burmese in English cited throughout this essay are Judson (1852); Allott (1965); Okell (1969); and Wheatley (1982).
8. Grammatical terms used here (e. g., periphery and nucleus) are defined in Foley and Van Valin (1984). Closely parallel terms in tagmemics are clause margin, clause root, and clause nucleus.
9. See also Rorty, (1989). Dewey's observations about language are scattered throughout his work, but see, in particular, references to language in his correspondence with Arthur Bentley in Ratner–Altman–Wheeler, 1964.
10. The passage is from Dr. Maung Maung Nyo, *ingalan ameiyikanhnin. myanmapyitha:* ('A Burmese in England and America') (Rangoon, 1977) page 155 and following. It was excerpted, copied, translated, and used pedagogically by John Okell, who passed it on to me.
11. Benveniste is quoted in Ricoeur (1975).
12. These lists, including the glosses, are based on Wheatley (1982: 234–248).
13. I have attempted this in Becker (1975).
14. Burmese evolved a literary language especially for translating Pali texts and this is described in Okell (1965). The title for this present essay is taken from that most excellent work, page 191.
15. For detailed discussion of *pi*, see Allott (1965: 289–292); Okell (1969: 382–386); and Wheatley (1982: 219–222).
16. See Allott (1965: 295–6) for a historical interpretation.
17. This point is the basis for very different literary esthetics in Burmese and English. When I was teaching in Burma (1958–1961) I noticed that my students write very "wordy" English, and they noticed I spoke very "thin" Burmese. I think now that these different tendencies are "in" the languages.
18. It is worth noting that in these long strings all of the verbs fall into pairs (e. g., drop–explode; strike–splinter; break–tear; die–perish) and that each member of a pair is itself a compound, so that the pair "drop–explode" is made up of what one might more literally translate as "fall–arrive" (= drop) and "divide–hit mark" (= explode). This is further instance of embedded double-headedness as a grammatical figure.
19. I have not discussed this excellent study since I am focused here on familiarization between English and Burmese.

20. Okell (private communication) questions the glossing of *lai'* as 'to completion'. He writes, "I think there's a temptation to overdo the 'completion' idea. *V lai'* often seems to me to have the effect of minimalizing the fuss and effort involved in the verb ... I agree that 'completion' is often (perhaps always) there, but perhaps it isn't the only message".

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