

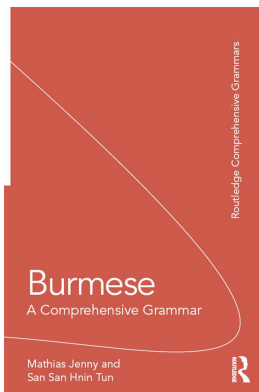
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Burmese **A Comprehensive Grammar**

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Parts of speech

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Parts of speech

Parts of speech in Burmese are not always definable as clear-cut groups with exclusive membership. This chapter gives an overview of semantic and syntactic characteristics. The goal of the chapter is to lay out the basis for the following chapters by presenting the identifying semantic and syntactic features of the major lexical categories that can be postulated for Burmese, namely nominals, verbs, adverbs, and particles. These four categories are important in the description of Burmese on different levels, though the assignment to one group or the other is not always uncontroversial.

3.1 Nominals

Nominals include the open class of nouns, the closed class of pronouns, as well as measure words and classifiers. Pronouns can be used to replace nouns or noun phrases. Measure words occupy a position between nouns and classifiers, as they are semantically full like the former and combine directly with numerals like the latter. Classifiers form an important class in Burmese, as they are obligatory when counting common nouns. Classifiers share some features with nouns, while they differ in others. They are therefore treated as a subcategory of nominals in this grammar.

Characteristics of nominals are semantically that they are mainly used to refer to entities, and syntactically that they combine with demonstratives like *di* ‘this’ and *ho* ‘that’, as well as with possessive phrases such as *ŋá* ‘my’, but not with verbal markers such as the negation prefix *mə-* ‘not’ and the verbal tense/status markers *-tɛ/de* ‘non-future’, *-mɛ* ‘future’, and others. Another common feature of nouns and pronouns is the possibility to occur with quantifier expressions, such as numerals and classifiers. Being used in quantifier expressions themselves, the measure words and classifiers do not share this feature. While the impossibility to occur with verbal markers is common

to all nominals, this is not true for the possibility to occur with the demonstratives and interrogatives. Most types of nominals are free morphemes, but this is only partly true for the classifiers, which generally always occur with numerals.

3.1.1 Nouns

Common nouns in Burmese are used to refer to things, phenomena, situations, qualities, and other entities and ideas. They can be either simple, like *ʔein* ‘house’ and *kʰəlè* ‘child’, morphologically derived, like *ʔətʰiʔ* ‘love’ from the verb *tʰiʔ* ‘to love’ and *kàun-hmú* ‘merit, good deed’ from *kàun* ‘be good’, or compound, like *tʰàun-sʰəya* ‘school-teacher’ and *lu-dəi* ‘adult, senior’, literally ‘big person’. Common nouns can be modified or specified by attributive elements such as demonstratives, interrogatives, possessives, and relative expressions.

Common nouns can be either countable, referring to individual entities, such as *kà* ‘car’ and *θiʔ-pin* ‘tree’, or non-countable, referring to non-individuated masses, like *ye* ‘water’ and *sʰan* ‘husked rice, uncooked rice’. The referents of count nouns cannot be divided without affecting the appropriate expression, while mass nouns can be divided and retain the same expression. If a car is cut in half it cannot felicitously be called a car anymore, but water remains water, irrespective of its quantity. Count nouns are combined with classifiers and numerals, mass nouns with measure words and numerals. Count nouns are not specified with respect to number and can occur either as unmarked singular/plural or as marked plural. Unlike in English, in Burmese mass nouns can occur with plural markers, such as *ye-dwe* ‘water’ *ʔətʰiʔ-twe* ‘love’, which can be interpreted as ‘all the water’ and ‘all my love’, respectively.

The common nouns form an open class, to which new members are easily added either by morphological means, such as derivation and compounding, or by borrowing from other languages.

Proper names refer to people, places, and other entities that are uniquely specified. They include Burmese and foreign personal names, such as *ko maun win* ‘Ko Maung Win’ and *dəun* ‘John’, names of countries, such as *myanma nain.ŋan* ‘Myanmar’, towns, such as *māndələ* ‘Mandalay’, rivers, such as *ʔeyawədi* ‘Irrawaddy’, mountains, such as *pouʔpà* ‘Popa’, and others, as well as astronomical bodies, such as *ʔinga-dəo* ‘Mars’. Proper names may consist of one or more elements, some or all of which may be common nouns or verbs. In the case of geographic and topological names, the name is frequently accompanied by a general denominator, such as *myó* ‘town, city’, *ywa* ‘village’, *taun* ‘mountain’, *myiʔ* ‘river’, or others.

Proper names are not usually translatable and they do not convey any other meaning apart from referring to a specific and unique entity, though they may be made up of meaningful elements, which may or may not have descriptive value. In many cases, proper names are semantically opaque.

Unlike common nouns, proper names cannot normally be combined with quantifier expressions apart from ‘one’. They co-occur with other attributive expressions mostly in special contexts and with special interpretations. Relative expressions with proper names are rare and almost always have non-restrictive reading, and possessive expressions with proper names usually lead to an emotional interpretation of high (or exaggerated) involvement on the part of the possessor.

ကိုအဏ္ဏဝါတစ်ယောက်ကတော့ လုပ်ပြီ။
ko ?annəwa tə-yau?-ká-dó lou?-pi.
 older.brother Annawa one-CLF-SBJ-CONTR do-NSIT
 ‘Oh this Ko Annawa is doing it again!’

ခင်လှတစ်ယောက် မလာသေးပါလား။
k^hin.hlá tə-yau? mə-la-ðè-ba là.
 Khin.Hla one-CLF NEG-come-yet-IMPORT PQ
 ‘Khin Hla hasn’t come yet!’

ငါတို့မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော်
ŋa-dó myanma nain.ŋan-də
 1FAM-ASS.PL Myanmar country-ROY
 ‘our Myanmar’

မြန်မာတွေရဲ့မိခင် ဧရာဝတီမြစ်
myanma-dwe-yé mí.k^hin ?eyawədi-myi?
 Myanmar-PL-POSS mother Irrawaddy-river
 ‘Irrawaddy, the Mother of the Burmese people’

မင်းတို့ရန်ကုန်က ကားရှုပ်လိုက်တာ။
mìn-dó yangoun-gá kà ɕou?-lai?-ta.
 2FAM-ASS.PL Yangon-SBJ car entangled-follow-NFUT.NML
 ‘The traffic is really bad in your Yangon!’

3.1.2 Pronouns

Pronouns form an originally closed class with a small number of elements, such as personal pronouns like *ŋa* ‘I, me’, *θu* ‘he’, and *da* ‘this one’. They replace nouns or noun phrases.

Pronouns can occur either as singular or plural, and they can combine with quantifier expressions. On the other hand, pronouns do not occur with demonstratives, nor with possessive expressions, which distinguishes them from common nouns.

The original set of pronouns has been expanded in Burmese by a rather big, probably open, class of kinship, professional, and social terms that are used in the place of pronouns. The same term can stand for first, second, or third person, depending on the context. In this use, the same restrictions apply concerning the co-occurrence with demonstratives and possessives.

3.1.3 Measure words

Measure words are words indicating exact or approximate quantities of mass nouns, such as *mita* ‘meter’, *pei?θa* ‘viss, 1.63 kg’, *k^hwε?/gwε?* ‘glass, cup’, and *pwε/bwε* ‘dish, plate’.

The measure nouns form an open class and many also function as common nouns. Generally, any noun that can be conceived as expressing a quantity of some kind may be used as a measure word. Unlike common nouns, measure nouns combine directly with numerals, that is, they don’t require a classifier. Measure words do not usually co-occur with demonstratives and possessive expressions.

3.1.4 Classifiers

Classifiers are basically a closed class of nominal words the function of which is to link nouns and personal pronouns to numerals. New elements can be introduced to this class through borrowing, but this is much more restricted than in the case of nouns. Classifiers behave like other nominals in that they occur with case markers.

Unlike nouns and pronouns, classifiers do not generally occur on their own, and they do not normally combine with demonstratives and possessives. Plural marking is not possible with classifiers. The semantics of the classifiers is often underspecified and synchronically no lexical meaning is evident. The classifier *k^hú/gú* may be translated as ‘unit, item’, and it is used to count

small, unclassified things, *lòun* ‘classifier for round things, furniture, letters of the alphabet’, while *yau?* is the general classifier used for counting humans, though its lexical meaning cannot be claimed to be ‘human, man’, at least not synchronically.

3.2 Verbs

Verbs in Burmese comprise different types and subtypes, including active vs. stative verbs and transitive vs. intransitive verbs. Many verbs can occur as auxiliaries with modifying or specifying function. The main distinguishing syntactic characteristic of verbs is the possibility to take the negative prefix *mə-* ‘not’, and to combine with the verbal markers indicating number, such as the plural marker *-tá/á*, aspectuals, like *-kʰé/gé* ‘displacement in space and time toward the speaker’, *-θè/ðè* ‘still, yet’, and tense and status, like *-te/dé* ‘non-future’, *-mɛ* ‘future’, *-pʰi/bi* ‘new situation’, and *-pʰù/bù* ‘negated’.

Verbs generally denote activities, situations, or events, which can be categorized according to the number of participants. Intransitive verbs describe events with one participant, transitive verbs describe events with two participants, and ditransitive verbs describe events with three participants. A subclass of verbs are the property verbs, which are often translation equivalents of adjectives in English. This group includes verbs like *kàun* ‘be good’, *hlá* ‘be beautiful, pretty’, *sʰò* ‘be bad’, and others. The category of verbs is an open class, though loanwords enter this class less readily than the class of nominals, especially nouns.

3.2.1 Main verbs

General verbs describe dynamic activities or events, such as *sà* ‘eat’, *θwà* ‘go’, *pʰa?* ‘read’, and *θe* ‘die’, or stative situations, such as *?ei?* ‘sleep’, *pʰyà* ‘be sick, have a fever’, and *py?* ‘be happy’. Besides simple verbs, Burmese also has compound verbs consisting of two parts, which together make up a new meaning. Examples of these are *sʰòun-pʰya?* ‘decide’ from *sʰòun* ‘come to an end’ and *pʰya?* ‘cut, cut off’ and *soun-zàn* ‘investigate, make enquiries’, from *soun* ‘be complete, sufficient’ and *sàn* ‘try, test, feel’.

Verbs usually have an inherent temporal structure, that is, they can be momentary or have a certain duration, and they may or may not have an inherent endpoint. The addition of objects and aspectual secondary verbs can change the temporal structure of a verb, or it can highlight a certain part of the temporal structure. The verb *pya?* ‘break (off)’ describes a momentary event, but with the addition of *ne* ‘stay’, the situation is described as having

a longer duration, namely the state resulting from the one-time event: *pya?ne-de* ‘be broken’. The verbal expression *t^həmìn sà* ‘eat rice’ does not include a natural endpoint, as the eating can stop at any given point in time without affecting the meaning of the expression, but the addition of the specific object *t^həmìn də-bwè* ‘a dish of rice’ also adds an endpoint to the activity. In this case the eating cannot be stopped before one dish of rice is finished, otherwise the situation cannot be felicitously described as *t^həmìn də-bwè sà-de* ‘eat one dish of rice’.

Several verbs can be strung together to form a complex verbal predicate, also called serial verb construction in the literature. These strings of verbs usually describe a complex event, possibly with different sub-events, but they still function as one predicate, with shared polarity, modality, and tense.

3.2.2 Auxiliaries

A number of verbs occur as secondary elements in predicates, either as modals, like *yá* ‘get; may, must’ and *nain* ‘win; be capable, able, possible’, as directionals, like *la* ‘come; towards center of interest’ and *θwà* ‘go; away from center of interest’, or as aspectual or other modifiers, like *t^hà* ‘keep, put, place; resultative state’ and *lai?* ‘follow; do impulsively, completely, suddenly’. The position of these secondary verbs is usually after the main verb, though a few occur before the main verb, like *pyan* ‘return; do again, do in turn’ and *s^hε?* ‘connect; continue doing’.

The function of the secondary verbs may be more or less closely related to their lexical meaning. Some of the secondary verbs have attained purely grammatical status, that is, they do not occur as free forms anymore and can be labeled verbal markers, as is the case with the desiderative *-t^hin/əzin* ‘want to’ and causative *-se/ze* ‘let’ (originally ‘command, order’), while others have full lexical counterparts. We use the term auxiliary for all those verbs that attach to a main verb and don’t have full lexical meaning.

3.2.3 Types of verbs

3.2.3.1 Intransitive verbs

Intransitive verbs in Burmese behave syntactically differently from transitive verbs in a number of syntactic respects. They take only one nominal argument, the subject, which may be either the agent or the patient of the event, that is, the subject may be the person or thing doing something, or the person or thing to which something is done or which is in a certain passive state.

The situation described by an intransitive verb may be either an activity or a state, and it may be either punctual or durative. The combination of intransitive verbs with some aspectual secondary verbs is restricted or leads to different readings from the combination of the same aspectuals with transitive verbs. For example, the intransitive *pau?* ‘burst’ does not combine with the resultative secondary verb *t^hà* ‘keep’, which is possible with its transitive counterpart *p^hau?* ‘break, punctuate’, as in *p^hau?-t^hà-dε* ‘have punctuated, broken’. The resultative state of intransitive verbs is expressed by the secondary verb *ne* ‘stay’, as in *pau?-ne-dε* ‘be punctuated, broken’.

3.2.3.2 Transitive verbs

Transitive verbs describe situations, both activities and states, that involve two or three participants. In the latter case, the verb is ditransitive, taking three participants (arguments), with the recipient (indirect object) normally being marked by a postposition, *-ko/go* in Colloquial Burmese, *-?à* in Literary Burmese. Though transitive verbs take two or three participants, namely subject, object, and recipient, not all of these have to be expressed in a sentence. Both transitive and intransitive verbs may occur without any mentioned participant, so the difference is in the possibility, rather than the actual occurrence of the participants.

The combination of transitive verbs with aspectual secondary verbs can lead to readings different from intransitive verbs, as in the transitive *p^hwín-ne-dε* ‘is opening’ with dynamic reading and the intransitive *p^hwín-ne-dε* ‘is open’ with resultative stative reading. The transitive verb receives active resultative reading in combination with *t^hà* ‘keep’, as in *p^hwín-t^hà-dε* ‘have opened (and it’s open now)’.

3.2.3.3 Property verbs (adjectives)

A subclass of verbs are the property verbs, which mostly correspond to adjectives in English and other western languages. Property verbs are verbal in that they take the negative prefix *mə-* ‘not’, as well as the aspectual and status markers. There are a number of syntactic differences between property verbs and activity verbs. Property verbs, unlike other types of verbs, can be reduplicated in attributive function after a noun, as in *?ein tɕì-dɕì* ‘a big house’, or in adverbial function before another verb, as in *myan-myan θwà* ‘go quickly’. In Literary Burmese, adverbs are formed from property verbs, but not activity verbs, by adding the suffix *-swa/zwa*, as in *kàun-zwa* ‘well’.

Property verbs are generally gradable, that is, they can occur in comparative constructions, as in *po kàun-dε* ‘better’, and *?əkàun-zòun* ‘the best’. While the

comparative stage is possible with some activity verbs, the superlative commonly occurs with property verbs. The comparative and superlative forms with transitive verbs describe the object, rather than the subject. The expression *po t̄c̄ai?-t̄e* ‘I like it more (than the other one)’, not ‘I like it more than someone else does’, and *?ət̄c̄ai?-s^h̀d̄un* usually is understood as ‘the most liked one’, rather than ‘the one who likes most’. On the other hand, with some transitive verbs the comparative and superlative usually refer to the subject, not the object, as in *po θ̄t̄-d̄e* ‘know more/better’ and *?əθ̄t̄-z̄d̄un* ‘the one who knows best’.

3.3 Adverbs

Adverbs are taken here to cover lexical elements that modify predicates or adnominal modifiers (adjectives), or clauses or sentences. The former can be called phrasal adverbs, the latter clausal adverbs. Unlike nouns and verbs, adverbs do not combine with nominal nor verbal markers. The difference between adverbs and particles is that adverbs generally have more semantic content, and that they are conceived as independent forms, that is, they can form a one-word utterance on their own, at least in some cases. The distinction is not clear-cut in all cases, though, and the assignment of a word to the class of adverbs may be to some extent arbitrary.

A number of adverbs may occur as either phrasal or clausal adverbs. Adverbs can be simple or derived forms. The latter include reduplicated property verbs and derivatives of property verbs followed by grammatical elements such as the suffix *-swa/zwa*, and the marker *-θ̄ə/θ̄ə p^h̀ȳn* in Literary Burmese, among others.

There is a difference between adverb as part of speech and adverbial as syntactic function. Apart from lexical adverbs, which are restricted to adverbial function, a number of phrases, both verbal and nominal, and clauses can have adverbial function. This section deals only with the former. Larger units that take the function of adverbials will be discussed in the sections on phrase structure and clause structure.

3.3.1 Phrasal adverbs

Phrasal adverbs modify or specify a verb phrase or an attributive modifier of a noun phrase. They cannot occur alone in a statement or question, but are always combined with a verbal element, either in predicative or in attributive function. Common phrasal adverbs are the intensifiers *θ̄ei?* ‘very’, *?əȳàn* ‘extremely’.

Though not adverbial in the strict sense of the word, a number of adnominal modifiers could be included in this category. These include the demonstratives *di* ‘this’ and *ho* ‘that’, as well as words like *ʔətɕ^hà/tətɕ^hà* ‘other’, *ʔətɕ^hó/tətɕ^hó* ‘some’, *ʔayin* ‘original, former’, among others. They share with phrasal adverbs the facts that they cannot occur alone and that their position in the phrase is in most cases fixed.

3.3.2 Clausal adverbs

Clausal adverbs modify or specify whole clauses or sentences. They can position an event in time and space, like *ʔək^hú* ‘now’, *k^həná* ‘a moment’, and *k^húná.gá* ‘a moment ago, just now’. Clausal adverbs can also express the speaker’s attitude, like *dəge* ‘really, indeed, in fact’. This adverb is also used as phrasal adverb, similar to the intensifiers.

Compared to particles and markers, as well as phrasal adverbs, clausal adverbs have some freedom of movement within a clause, and some of them can occur as short, one-word sentences and questions with the question marker *lâ*, as in *ʔək^hú lâ* ‘now?’ and *dəge lâ* ‘really?’. Clausal adverbs can be combined with discourse particles, such as the exclusive marker *pè/bè* ‘only, just’, the restrictive *hmá* ‘not more than, not before’, and *tí/dí* ‘contrastive change’.

3.4 Markers and particles

Burmese has a great number of markers and particles. These cover a wide range of functions, which in many cases overlap. We make a general distinction between grammatical markers, such as case and tense/mode markers, and discourse pragmatic particles. A further distinction can be made within the two groups between markers and particles operating on the phrase level and those operating on the clause (or sentence) level. It should be kept in mind that these distinctions are not absolute and many markers and particles cannot be clearly and exclusively assigned to one of the categories. In the following sections the markers are listed according to their most natural or common use, though there is a certain degree of arbitrariness.

3.4.1 Grammatical markers

3.4.1.1 Phrasal markers

Phrasal markers are elements that attach to noun phrases or verb phrases to express a wide range of grammatical functions. Nominal markers include

the plural markers *-twe/dwe* ‘plural’ and *-tó/dó* ‘associative plural’, augmentative/feminine *-má* ‘female; big, main’, diminutive *-lè* ‘small, little’, as well as the postpositional case markers *-ká/gá* ‘ablative; subject’, *-ko/go* ‘goal; object’, *-hma* ‘locative’, *-né* ‘instrumental’, and others.

Verbal markers include the plural marker *-tɕá/ɕá* ‘plural subject’, aspectuals like *-θè/ðè* ‘still, yet’ and *-ɖoun* ‘more, again’, and the tense/status markers like *-tɛ/de* ‘non-future’, *-mɛ* ‘future’, and *-p^hù/bù* ‘not’. Some fully grammaticalized secondary verbs like *-tɕ^hin/ɕin* ‘want to’ and *-se/ze* ‘let’ can also be included in the verbal markers.

A number of markers can occur with nominal and verbal elements, such as *lau?* ‘as much as’, *lo* ‘like, as, in the manner of’, which attach to a verb with the reduced non-future marker *-θə/ðə*, as well as *-p^hó/bó* ‘for, in order to’, *-kəðɛ.gá/gəðɛ.gá* ‘since, from’, and *-tàin/dàin* ‘each, each time that’, among others.

3.4.1.2 Clausal markers

Clausal markers express relations between clauses or specify the grammatical function of a clause or sentence. They can correspond to English subordinators, like *ló* ‘that; because’, *-pe.mé/be.mé* ‘though’, and *yin* ‘if, when’. Unlike English subordinators, these markers always appear at the end of the subordinate expression.

Other linkers correspond to English coordinators like *da-be.mé* ‘but’, *da-s^ho* ‘so, in this case’, and *da-né* ‘by the way’, which appear between two linked clauses. These are syntactic phrases, which are semantically transparent as ‘despite this’, ‘saying this’, and ‘with this’, respectively.

Some clause connectors can occur either between two linked clauses, or at the beginning of a clause. In the latter case, a preceding clause or event is implicitly understood. Linkers of this type include *nau?-pì-dɔ́* ‘after that’ and *pì-dɔ́* ‘and then’.

One clausal marker appears at the end of a sentence or a phrase, namely *té/dé*, which indicates that the preceding utterance is reported speech. It can be translated as ‘they say, it is said’ and indicates indirect evidence on the part of the speaker. As this function is a borderline case between grammatical marker and discourse pragmatic particle, it could also be seen as an instance of the latter category. Unlike subordinating linkers, this marker attaches to an independent (finite) clause.

3.4.2 Pragmatic particles

Pragmatic particles are used to express a wide range of discourse pragmatic functions. Like grammatical markers, they appear on the phrase level as well as on the clause and sentence level, and in many cases the same particle may be either phrasal or clausal. Unlike grammatical markers, the pragmatic particles do not express fixed grammatical notions and are generally optional.

3.4.2.1 Phrasal particles

Phrasal particles add discourse pragmatic information to noun phrases, verb phrases, or adverbials. They express notions such as contrast with other referents or situations, like *tɔ́/dɔ́* ‘contrastive marker’, which also occurs as aspectual marker in the verb phrase, inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the referents, like *pè/bè* ‘exclusive marker’ and *lè* ‘additive marker’.

3.4.2.2 Clausal particles

Clausal particles usually occur at the end of a clause or sentence, expressing different notions such as insistence and general emphasis, like *pɔ́/bɔ́* ‘particle expressing insistence’ and *le* ‘emphatic particle’, speakers’ attitude towards the situation, such as *s^ho* ‘didn’t you say that ...’, as well as illocutionary force, like *là* ‘polar question marker’ and *lè* ‘content question marker’.

Other clausal particles indicate respect towards the addressee, such as *k^həmya* and *çin*, used by male and female speakers, respectively, having a function similar to English *sir* and *ma’am*. The politeness particles, as well as the shortened forms of *k^həmya*, namely *byá* and *bya*, can also be used to reply to a call, making them stand-alone forms. To add an informal aspect to an utterance, the particles *kwɛ* or *kwá/kwá* can occur in the clause-final position.