Syntax of the World's Languages III

Title: « Information structure in Colloquial Burmese, a highly contextual language »

Abstract:
Burmese is a Tibeto-burman language spoken almost exclusively in Burma (Myanmar). A typological sketch will describe Burmese as a tonal language with a strong tendency to monosyllabicity, without inflection morphology (gender, number, agreement...), without overt-marking for grammatical tense, and with a ‘optionality’ of grammatical markers as many others SouthEast Asian languages (ref. Bisang 1996, Enfield 2003, Matisoff 1989).
Syntactically, it is a Verb-final language with mainly modifier-head order. Moreover — or should we say given the previous morphosyntactic features — Burmese is also a highly contextual language, that is to say a language where many information does not appear formally and is inferred from the situational context, as shown by example (1), where the participants (‘Young Burmese women’) of the States of Affairs (SoAs) in the last sentences (b, b’ & c) are expressed neither as a NP, nor as an anaphoric pronoun.
Therefore, morphosyntactic structure is definitely linked to pragmatic one, and nominal markers may be analyzed as a syntactic device as well as pragmatic one as shown by example (2). In this example, the ‘Nominative/Source’ morpheme /Ka’/ appearing in the transitive SoA in (2a) is also used as the topicalizing marker of an intransitive SoA in (2b). However it is not obligatory as illustrated by (2c).

After a brief introduction to Burmese morphosyntax, we will first show the strategy used by Burmese to indicate the topic referent, and the means to mark a linguistic expression explicitly as a topic (i.e. topicalization).
Then, we will examine different types of focus — i.e. narrow focus, broad focus and contrastive focus — some of which involve morphosyntactic device such as nominalization (example 3).
Finally, we will focus on the nominal marker /ko/, that illustrates perfectly the deep links between morphosyntax and pragmatic given his polyfunctionality: indeed it is used:
- as a directional marker of an motion verb argument,
- as an optional object marker in sentences with expected order of the constituents (SOV),
- as a topic marker in sentences with unexpected order of the constituents (OSV),
- as an emphatic marker in topcialized phrase already marked as a topic,
- as part of modal expressions conveying ‘definiteness’ (example 4).

Examples:
(1) a. myaNma’ quyo$e$mi-Twe ha qa$loq$ Sa Te
Myanmar.GEN young women - plur. TOP work to apply o.s. to PVF-REALIS
Burmese young women apply themselves to work.

b. qa$loq$ $i$ Te
chweTa Te
courage to have PVF: Realis.assert be thrifty PVF: REALIS
[They] are brave; [They] are thrifty;
c.  

məʔθāzú Ṕo ʔæchɛiŋ `pe Tɛ
family on time give PVF:REALIS

[They] spend time to [take care of] their families.

(2)  

wɪn’wɪn’mɔ K’a’ cama’ Ko ‘θu’shaN Tɛ’ neya-Twe Ko
Win Win Maw S. 1SG DAT be strange REL:R place-PLUR DIR
laiʔ-po’ `pe Tɛ
to drive s.o. AUX:benef. PVF:REALIS

Win Win Maw, (she) drive/drove me in strange places.

b.  

cama Ø jo’ ‘θwa Tɛ
1SG (F.P.) Ø VV:erratiq. to go PVF:REALIS

I go/went for a walk. [I traipsed round]

c.  

koNma’le K’a’ to Tɛ θi’ `la
young girl TOP be smart PVF:REALIS know QST

This young girl, (she) is smart, you know!!

(3)   

a.  

mənə’ka’ θu ne’ cəŋo twɛ’ Tɛ
yesterday 3SG with 1SG to meet PVF:REALIS

I met him yesterday.

b.  

θu ne’ cəŋo twɛ’ Ta mənə’ka’ Pa
[3SG with 1SG to meet NOM:REALIS]NP1 [yesterday]NP2 Politeness

It is yesterday that I met him [the fact I met him was yesterday]

(4)  

mənəʔphyaN sa-’me’-pwe jî Ko jî mɛ
tomorrow exam to have PTC to have PVF:IRREALIS

The exam will take place tomorrow for sure.

References cited:


