

Differential Object Marking in Burmese

Formal Burmese uses two different postpositional clitics to mark objects, viz. *=ko* for direct objects (patient, theme, etc.) and *=?à* for indirect objects (mostly recipients). In the colloquial language, only *=ko* is used, i.e. the distinction between direct and indirect objects is lost. The quasi obligatoriness of overt marking of arguments in formal Burmese is much less observed in spoken Burmese. In ditransitive clauses, it is always the recipient argument that receives the marking if it is overtly expressed, while in transitive clauses the object may or may not be overtly marked. The choice whether or not to mark a given object depends basically on its pragmatic status, rather than on inherent semantic features such as animacy, or what Bossong (1991:159) calls “domain of inherence”. Burmese thus can be described as a language with Differential Object Marking (DOM), in which the definiteness scale as given by Aissen (2003:444), or, in Bossong’s (1991:158ff) words, the “domain of reference”, is relevant to the choice of marking or not marking an object. How exactly the assignment works in spoken Burmese is far from clear, though, and this study hopes to shed some light on this issue, based on fresh data from colloquial Burmese collected with (monolingual) native speakers.

Another point of interest to be addressed in this paper is the marking of arguments in causative expressions. As there is an absolute constraint allowing only one *=ko* per clause, a conflict of marking arises in causatives of transitive simple expressions. If all arguments are overtly expressed, either the causee or the object of the causative clause receives the marker. This contradicts the universal tendency that the object argument retains its case while the causee is assigned “the first available relation in the hierarchy” (Comrie 1989:174ff, Blake 2001:87; s. Song 1996:166ff for an alternative view). It is not clear whether the assignment in Burmese is based on the definiteness scale, the animacy scale or on other (pragmatic?) considerations.

Points that also have to be considered in the analysis are the influence of standard formal Burmese, especially in the speech of educated speakers, and the multifunctionality of the marker *=ko*, for which Okell and Allott (2001:7ff) list two entries (thought to be related), both with various meanings, including marker for “object (direct or indirect), destination, distributive; emphatic, ‘as regards, in respect of, in the matter of’”. Especially the last explanation given by Okell and Allott suggests that *=ko* is also a topic marker, which fits in nicely with the function as marker of definite (or specific) objects.

The present study aims to address these questions in a descriptive functional perspective based on natural and elicited data from spoken Burmese.

Examples: (LB = Literary Burmese, SP = Spoken Burmese)

(1)

LB *tɕənɔ = θi di sa.ʔouʔ =ko ʔəmɛ = ʔà pè θi.*
SP *tɕənɔ = ha di sa.ʔouʔ ʔəmɛ =ko pè tɛ.*
1m = SBJ this book = OBJ mother:GEN = OBJ give NFUT
'I gave this book to my mother.'

(2a)

ʔəme θwà tɛ.
mother go NFUT
'Mother went.'

(2b)

tɕənɔ ʔəmɛ =ko θwà se tɕhĩ tɛ.
1m mother:GEN = OBJ go CAUS DES NFUT
'I want mother to go.'

(3a)

ʔəme θú =ko pyð tɛ.
mother 3:GEN = OBJ say NFUT
'Mother told him.'

(3b)

(tɕənɔ) ʔəme θú =ko pyð se tɕhĩ tɛ.
1m mother 3:GEN = OBJ say CAUS DES NFUT
'I want mother to tell him.'

(3c)

θú =ko pyð se tɕhĩ tɛ.
3:GEN = OBJ say CAUS DES NFUT
'(I) want him to speak.' or '(I) want (you) to tell him.'

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