

# Modality in Burmese: ‘may’ or ‘must’ – grammaticalised uses of *yá* ‘get’

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## I. THE DATA

### a. Full verb *yá* ‘get’: Basic semantics:

BECOME have´ (x, y);

x = RECIPIENT (ACTOR) [-VOLITION], [-CONTROL], [+ HUMAN/HIGH ANIMATE]

y = THEME (UNDERGOER) [± DESIRABLE]

**Anticausative semantic component:** X gets Y → Z gives Y to X

(underlying ‘giver’ is backgrounded) X Y *yá* → Z X ko Y *pè*

### b. Grammatical functions of *yá*

- i. POTENTIAL MODALITY (DEONTIC)
- ii. NECESSITATIVE/OBLIGATIVE MODALITY (DEONTIC/EPISTEMIC)
- iii. TEMPORAL/MODAL FUNCTION (RESULT OF PRIOR EVENT, CAUSE)

## EXAMPLES

(1) *tɕənɔ di né pwè θwà ló yá θə là?*

1m this day festival go SUB GET NF Q

‘May I go to the temple fair today?’

(2) *tɕənɔ di né tɕàù tɕ? yá mə/θə là?*

1m this day school go.up GET FUT/NF Q

‘Do I have to go school today?’

(3) *tɕənɔ tɕàù mə-θwà yá θè phù.*

1m school NEG-go GET PERS NEG

‘I haven’t been to the temple/school yet.’

(1a) *θwà ló yá tɕ. θwà ló mə-yá phù.*

go SUB GET NF go SUB NEG-GET NEG

‘Yes, you may.’ ‘No, you may not.’

- (2a) *θwà yá mε/te. mə-θwà yá phù.*  
 go GET FUT/NF NEG-go GET NEG  
 ‘Yes, you must go.’ ‘No, you don’t have to go.’

**SYNTACTIC/SEMANTIC FEATURES:**

- (1): - *yá* occurs as free operator (with subordinator, negation)  
 - potential (abilitive, permissive) modality
- (2): - *yá* occurs as bound operator (negation on main verb)  
 - obligative/necessitative modality
- (3): - *yá* occurs as bound operator (negation on main verb)  
 - often negated in combination with PERSISTIVE marker *θè*  
 - expresses situation as result of or caused by prior event  
 (which is backgrounded, but implicit)

**II. FURTHER OBSERVATIONS**

1. In Old Burmese

- V-*yá* only used in POTENTIAL contexts
- always used as bound operator

2. In colloquial Burmese

- subordinator often dropped in context (1)
- distinction of function made by use of NON-FUTURE/FUTURE
- bound/free distinction retained, but not visible in all constructions

**Colloquial Burmese data:**

- (1') *tə̀nɔ di né pwè θwà yá là?*  
 1m this day festival go GET Q  
 ‘May I go to the temple fair today?’
- (2') *tə̀nɔ di né tɕáu tɛ? yá mə là?*  
 1m this day school go.up GET FUT Q  
 ‘Do I have to go school today?’

(1a') (θwà) yá te.                    (θwà)mə-yá phù.  
 go     GET NF                    go     NEG-GET NEG  
 'Yes, you may.'                'No, you may not.'

(2a') θwà yá mε.                    mə-θwà yá phù.  
 go     GET FUT                    NEG-go GET NEG  
 'Yes, you must go.'            'No, you don't have to go.'

### III. QUESTIONS: WHY...

1. Semantic extension from POTENTIAL to OBLIGATIVE and CAUSED BY PRIOR EVENT?
2. Development from bound to free operator?
3. Use of NON-FUTURE/FUTURE distinction for POTENTIAL – OBLIGATIVE?

### IV. POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

#### 1. Semantics of V yá constructions:

Anticausative: volition, control transferred from X to backgrounded Y  
 (parallel to semantics of main verb yá)

X (MAY/MUST/DO) V BECAUSE Y CAUSE X V  
 X V-yá                                    Y X-OBJ V-se (se = CAUSATIVE)

Causative can have permissive, jussive or neutral semantics →  
 three distinct functions: POTENTIAL, OBLIGATIVE, CAUSED BY PRIOR EVENT

#### 2. Development from bound to free operator

Serial verb constructions in Mon and Thai involving 'get'

(3) khǎw tòk plaa dǎy.  
 Thai 3hum catch fish get/GET  
 'He caught (and got) a fish.' → 'He can/may catch fish.'

(4) dέh rəp kə? ka?                    → dέh rəp ka? kə?  
 Mon 3 catch get fish                    3 catch fish GET  
 'He caught (and got) a fish.'            'He can/may catch fish.'

⇒ Development from 'successful attempt' to general possibility (root possibility)

## Newer Literary Burmese/Formal Burmese

- (5) *θu ηà hmyà ywé yá θi.*  
 3 fish catch SUB get/GET NF  
 ‘He caught a fish.’ / ‘He can/may catch fish.’

with *ywé* SEQUENTIAL and CAUSAL subordinator, i.e.

‘He got a fish after/because he tried to catch one.’

⇒ NOT bound operator to free operator, but **re-grammaticalisation**

### 3. NON-FUTURE/FUTURE distinction

**Cognitive/psychological connection between FUTURE and OBLIGATION:**

- Obligative modality can be used to express future tense (e.g. Romance languages)
- Some languages use future tense to express obligation (e.g. German)
- Obligations (negative experience) are rather seen as not yet present, permission/ability (positive experience) is construed as actual/present

## V. HISTORICAL SCENARIO

### 1. Summary of development

	POTENTIAL	OBLIGATIVE
OB (11 <sup>th</sup> c.)	V- <i>ra</i> [+ bound], NF (?)	(V- <i>rā</i> )
LB (19 <sup>th</sup> c.)	V- <i>yá</i> , [+ bound], NF (?)	V- <i>yá</i> , [+ bound], FUT (?)
FB (20 <sup>th</sup> c.)	V SUB <i>yá</i> [-bound]	V- <i>yá</i> [+ bound]
CB (21 <sup>st</sup> c.)	V (SUB) <i>yá</i> [-bound], NF	V- <i>yá</i> [+ bound], FUT

### 2. Stages of development

- V-*yá* expresses non-volitional, uncontrolled events (anticausative), usually positive for the actor → POTENTIAL modality (parallel to semantics of full verb *yá* with THEME wanted/desired by RECIPIENT).

- Use is extended to OBLIGATIVE modality (corresponding to main verb use of *yá* with THEME unwanted by RECIPIENT); old obligative marker is gradually replaced (still present in literary language).
- Potential modality is re-introduced from grammaticalised use of biclausal construction expressing ACTIVITY (volitional, conative) and RESULT (non-volitional, no control), possibly influenced by Mon and/or Thai usage (constructions semantically transparent in all languages) → new free operator for potential modality, occurring with subordinator.
- Subordinator is dropped in colloquial language, leading to ambiguity in some constructions → new distinction made based on pre-existing NON-FUTURE/FUTURE distinction (not fully grammaticalised, maybe dialectal), consistent mainly in present or general contexts, much less in past and future, where NONFUTURE and FUTURE are used to marked tense distinction.

## VI. FURTHER ISSUES TO BE INVESTIGATED

- Historical data and influence from neighbouring languages
- NON-FUTURE/FUTURE or REALIS/IRREALIS?
- Dropping of subordinator dialectal?
- How consequent is the NON-FUTURE/FUTURE distinction in the modal context? Dialectal?

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### Abbreviations

CB	colloquial Burmese
FB	formal Burmese
FUT	future
LB	literary Burmese
NEG	negation
NF	non-future
OB	old Burmese
PERS	persistive
Q	interrogative
SUB	subordinator

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