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Title: 'Get' in Burmese - grammaticalisation and diffusion in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The lexical verb meaning ‘to get’ appears in most (if not all) languages of Southeast Asia as a grammaticalised morpheme covering a number of related, but distinct, functions. The most common grammatical function of GET is as a postverbal modal expressing ability or possibility, originating in an earlier use as resultative verb compound. Languages such as Thai, Mon and Khmer that allow verbal operators to appear in preverbal as well as postverbal position have GET in both positions, with different but ill-defined and sometimes overlapping functions: ‘ABILITIVE’ marker in postverbal and ‘(result of) PRIOR event, manage/have a chance to V (and consequently V)’ in preverbal position. The latter function has often been described as ‘past’ by grammarians, although the ‘past’ reading is purely inferential in some contexts. A detailed study of this phenomenon in a number of Southeast Asian languages was published by N. J. Enfield (2003, *Linguistic Epidemiology*, London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon). Enfield’s study does not include Burmese and other languages of Burma, which are the main topic of the present paper.

In Burmese, auxiliaries including GET and other verbal operators follow the main verb, the preverbal slot being reserved for partially or completely grammaticalised serial verbs acting as modifiers of the main verb. In spite of this syntactic restriction, GET in Burmese exhibits three functionally and syntactically different uses as ‘POTENTIVE/ABILITIVE’, ‘DEBITIVE/OBLIGATIVE’ and a more restricted use as ‘PRIOR event’, corresponding to preverbal GET in languages like Thai and Khmer.

This paper investigates and looks for explanations of the syntactical and functional scope of GET in Burmese. Possible semantic and syntactic paths involved in the grammaticalisation process are traced with reference to old Burmese and neighbouring languages, putting the phenomenon in a broader areal context. In particular, Burmese influence can be shown in Shan/Tai languages spoken in Burma on the semantic level, while Mon might have influenced Burmese syntactically in one of the developments.

In none of the languages described has the lexeme ‘get’ undergone complete grammaticalisation. The constructions involved are therefore semantically (and syntactically) transparent to native speakers in all cases, thus facilitating reanalysis and restructuring as well as cross-linguistic diffusion.

The study is mostly based on data gathered by the author with language assistants in southern Burma and Thailand. Historical records as well as published texts are used as additional data sources. Previous studies of the constructions under discussion have been included where available.