

SEALS XXII

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Differential Subject Marking in Colloquial Burmese - uses and functions of *ká*

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I. 'Case' markers in Burmese

Optionally used for “flagging” of arguments in the case of S, A and O

(1) *phà tɛ̀ ká phà-khəlè ko kan tshá lai? tɛ.*
frog big SBJ frog-DIM OBJ kickCAUS.fall follow NFUT
'The big frog kicked the little frog down [into the water] at once.'

(2) *phà-khəlè ko θu ká kan tshá lai? tɛ.*
frog-DIM OBJ 3 SBJ kick CAUS:fall follow NFUT
'The big from kicked the little frog down [into the water] at once.'

(3) *tɛənɔ Ø khəlè Ø tshi pì θwà tɛ.*
1M child carry SEQ go NFUT
'I carried the child as we went.'

Markers for grammatical and pragmatic relations in Burmese

Function	CB	FB
TOPIC-CONTR	<i>tó, ká-tó</i>	<i>kà</i>
TOPIC/SUBJECT	<i>ha</i>	<i>hma</i>
SUBJECT	\emptyset	<i>θi</i>
SUBJECT-CONTR	<i>ká</i>	<i>ká</i>
SUBJECT-CONTR		<i>hmá</i>
ABLATIVE	<i>ká</i>	<i>hmá</i>

Marker *ká* usually described as

- ◆ Subject marker
- ◆ Contrastive (subject)
- ◆ Topic (subject)
- ◆ Subject of matrix clause: **SBJ_{MAT} ká** [SB]_{SUB} PRED_{SUB}]_{CL.SUB} **PRED_{MAT}**

II. Subject in Burmese

Constructions where {S, A} behaves differently from O, T and G:

Number agreement:

(4) *θu tó θwà tsá tε.*
3 PL go PL NFUT
'They went.'

(5) *θθηε.δζìn twe sa pha? ne tsá tε.*
friend PL text read stay PL NFUT
'The friends are reading.'

(6) *θu móun twe sà ne (*tsá) tε.*
3 sweets PL eat stay PL NFUT
'he is eating different sweets.'

SBJ = the NP that may trigger number agreement in the verb complex

Case marking:

- (7) *tə̀nɔ̃ tə̀ai? tɛ.*
 1_M like NFUT
 ‘I like it.’ (*‘They like me.’)
- (8) *tə̀nɔ̃ má.ʔè *(ko) pỳ mɛ.*
 1_M PN OBJ speak FUT
 ‘I will tell Ma Aye.’

SBJ = the human pronominal argument or personal name that can occur in preverbal position without any grammatical marker.

+ other syntactic constructions

→ the notion of subject as set of {S, A} is relevant in Burmese

III. The marker *ká* - data from the corpus

General subject marker?

(9) *ʔanɔyathà mìn Ø tɛ thà khé tɛ.*
PN lord build deposit DISPL NFUT
'King Anawrahta built it.'

(10) *ʔè=dí pyin mí.ǎ.zú twe Ø lè ʔè=lo*
ANA=this.DEP outside family PL ADD ANA=manner

yùn.dɛ louʔ tɛá tɛ.
lacquerware do PL NFUT

'Besides this, the families do lacquerware like this.'

► **Not all subjects are marked by *ká***

Contrastive (subject)?

- (11) *θύ* *γέ* *ῥαρῶ* *ká* *ha* *twe* *ká* *mwè* *pi* *πό.*
3.DEP POSS above ABL NML PL SBJ born NSIT INSIST
- ῥαυ?* *ká* *ha* *twe* *ká* *τό* *mə=mwè* *θè* *phù* *πό.*
below ABL NML PL SBJ CONTR NEG=born still NEG INSIST

‘The older ones were born already, you see. The younger ones, on the other hand, weren’t born yet.’

- (12) *da* *bəθu* *yè* *lè,*
this.NML who write Q
- ῥαphe* *(ká)* *là,* *ῥαme* *(ká)* *là.*
father SBJ Q mother SBJ Q
- ‘Who wrote this, the father or the mother?’

► ***ká* can optionally mark contrastive subjects**

(13) *ʔè=lo ha myò twe tɛəŋɔ tó ká ʔəmyè.tàn*
 ANA=manner NML type PL 1M PL SBJ always

tchein yá tɛ. sin pɔ hma tɛəŋɔ tó ká
 weigh get NFUT stage on LOC 1M PL SBJ

hmà ló mə=yá phù.
 wrong SUB NEG=get NEG.

‘We always have to think carefully about this. Once on stage, we cannot make any mistakes.’

► **Unchanged subject over two sentences → not contrastive**

⇒ ***ká* can be used with non-contrastive subjects**

Topic (subject)?

- (14) *ʔà.lòun ká θú ko má.khin.si ló khɔ tsá ta pa pɛ̃.*
all SBJ 3.DEP OBJ PN QUOT call PL NFUT.NML POL RSTR
'Everyone called her Ma Khin Si.' [First sentence in a short story]

- (15) *pwè tsí pərei?θa? ká θa θəbɔ̃.tu lɛʔ.khan mɛ*
performance look audience SBJ only agree accept FUT

sho yin θin Ø lè mìn.ǰà phyi? khwín ɛí pa tɛ.
say if 2 ADD actor be chance exist POL NFUT

'If the audience of the theater accept you, you have a chance to be an actor.'
[First sentence in a short story]

- **First sentence subjects in narrative not topical**

Subject of matrix clause?

- (16) [*di mèn.má* \emptyset *ŋwe mɛ?* *ló*] *di mèn.má ká*
 this woman money dream SUB this woman SBJ
- θìnbɔ̌.ðà tə=yau? ko lo tchin pa tɛ sho ló*
 sailor one=CL OBJ want DES POL NFUT say SUB

‘Since this woman wants (to marry) a sailor because she’s crazy about money ...’

- (17) [*?ame (?*ká)* *θe θwà toun.ká*] *lè tɛmá maun hnámá*
 mother die go when ADD 1F y.brother y.sister
- ŋà yau? ko ɛa tɛwè yá ta.*
 five CL OBJ seek feed get NFUT.NML

‘When mother passed away I had look after the five brothers and sisters.’

- **Matrix SBJ may be marked or unmarked, subordinate SBJ is unmarked**

- (18) *shəya-lè* *ká* *ŋwe* *hnə-ya* *pè* *tó*
 teacher-DIM SBJ silver two-hundred give CONTR
- θabyɔ̀* *∅* *ŋwe* *ko* *tó* *yu* *lai?* *tɛ.*
 PN silver OBJ CONTR take follow NFUT

‘As soon as the school teacher gave him two hundred Kyat, Thabyaw immediately took that money.’

- (19) *θu* *ká* *mə=θwà* *yin* *tɕənɔ* *ká* *lè* *mə=θwà* *phù.*
 3 SBJ NEG=go if 1M SBJ ADD NEG=go NEG
- ‘If he isn’t going, I’m not going either.’

- Subordinate subjects may be marked, though marking here seems to be generally dispreferred

Subject of non-verbal predicate and copula

(20) *da* *ká* *mì* *khan* *θiʔ.ta* *θó.*
this.NML SBJ fire accept box key
'This is the key of the fire-proof box.'

(21) *ʔè* *di* *hma* *shainke* *né* *ho* *dìn* *πό*
ANA this LOC motorbike INSTR that PRON INSIST

accident (**ká*) *phyiʔ* *θwà* *ta* *πό* *νω.*
accident be go NFUT.NML INSIST ASSNT

'Now, there, an accident happened with a motorbike and that thing, ok.'

(22) *θύ* *pyaʔθana* *ká* *kó* *pyaʔθana* *phyiʔ* *la* *τε.*
3.DEF problem SBJ body.DEF problem be come NFUT
'His problem has become one's own problem.'

- **Marking preferred with non-verbal predicate, dispreferred with copula (no marking on predicate complement)**

Frequency and text genres

TEXT CATEGORY	N OF WORDS	N OF TOKENS OF KÁ	FREQUENCY	RANK
<i>Spontaneous speech</i>	155'614	5'423	3.48%	
Narrative	36'014	1'406	3.90%	1
Interview	72'083	2'564	3.56%	2
Casual conversation	31'611	994	3.14%	3
Radio interview	15'906	459	2.89%	4
<i>Pre-fabricated speech</i>	95'730	2'136	2.23%	
Dialogue in fiction	20'840	539	2.59%	5
Radio play	40'811	1'005	2.46%	6
Film script	34'079	592	1.74%	7

Spontaneous speech 3.48%

Pre-fabricated speech 2.23%

IV. Summary and hypotheses (preliminary)

ká marks

some SBJ	→	not a general SBJ marker
some contrastive SBJ	→	not general SBJ.CONTR marker
some non-contrastive SBJ	→	not really a SBJ.CONTR marker
some topical SBJ	→	not a general SBJ.TOP marker
some non-topical SBJ	→	not really a SBJ.TOP marker

It seems that

<i>ká</i> is preferred on SBJ	in matrix clauses with non-verbal predicates
<i>ká</i> is dispreferred on SBJ	in subordinate clauses with copula predicates

Differential Subject Marking in Burmese

- Burmese marks some subjects in some contexts by *ká* → sbj
- The marking is not triggered by verb semantics or argument types
- DSM in Burmese is different from DAM
- DSM in Burmese is different from oblique subjects in other languages
- DSM in Burmese is homonymic with ablative marking
- DSM in Burmese is not explainable as underlying ergative or passive
- DSM in Burmese varies according to speech/text genre

DSM in Burmese has discourse pragmatic function, but what is it?

First hypotheses (awaiting further data, research, and insight)

1. Formal Burmese rather consistently uses case marking on arguments under Pali influence: *θi* for S/A, *ko* for O, *ʔà* for G.
2. Colloquial Burmese uses *ko* for G and some O (DOM) as sole 'case' marker.
3. Ablative constructions can be used to emphasize the source of an action or event, leading to some (contrastive) subjects being marked by *ká*, with semantics along the lines of 'from S's side' (cf. German *meinerseits*, etc.)
4. This use spread especially in spontaneous speech and serves in structuring information, as well as differentiating the subject from the object (when felt necessary), maybe partly influenced by FB *θi* as an instance of 'pivot matching'.
5. This spread lead to bleaching of the emphatic function (renewal by more elaborate *phɛʔ ká.ne* and others).

V. The way ahead

DSM is not well described in the linguistic literature apart from DAM, expressing agentivity of the subject (among others), and oblique subjects, based on the underlying semantic role of the subject. More cross-linguistic data is therefore desirable. The phenomenon seems to be much rarer than DOM.

More Burmese data needs to be examined in order to find regularities and factors triggering the marking of *ká*. It is to be expected that a number of factors are involved and interacting, without any single factor solely responsible for the occurrence of the marker.

This can be done only by looking at large corpora. Native speaker intuition alone is not enough to reach conclusions, especially in a phenomenon that is obviously located in the discourse pragmatic domain.

Native speakers' intuition will be important in judging the grammaticality and adequacy in given contexts of manipulated data, and assessing discourse functional differences between marked and unmarked subjects.