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# DIFFERENTIAL OBJECT MARKING IN BURMESE

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## Argument marking in Burmese

- Postpositional markers (SYNTACTIC and SEMANTIC ROLES)

*ká*, *ha*, *θi* ‘SBJ’, *ko* ‘OBJ’, *ʔà* ‘RECIPIENT’, *yé* ‘POSS’, *hma* ‘LOC’,  
*né* ‘COM, INSTR’, *θó* ‘ALLATIVE’, *hmá* ‘ABLATIVE’, etc.

- Number marking in verbal predicates (PLURAL SUBJECT AGREEMENT)

*tcá* ‘PLURAL’

(1) *ʔè di phà-khəlè ko θu tó ha θei? tchi? tcá tε.*

ANA this frog-DIM OBJ 3 PL SBJ very love PL NFUT

‘They loved this little frog very much.’

## “Case markers”: Formal Burmese vs. Colloquial Burmese

<b>FB</b>	<b>CB</b>	<b>FUNCTION</b>
<i>θi, ká, hma</i>	<i>ha, ká</i>	SUBJECT
<i>ko</i>	<i>ko</i>	OBJECT
<i>ʔà</i>		RECIPIENT
<i>θó</i>		ALLATIVE (GOAL)
<i>hmá, ká</i>	<i>ká</i>	ABLATIVE (SOURCE)
<i>hnaiʔ, hma, twin</i>	<i>hma</i>	LOCATIVE
<i>hnín</i>	<i>né</i>	COMITATIVE
<i>phyín, hnín</i>		INSTRUMENTAL
<i>ʔí</i>	<i>yé</i>	POSSESSIVE

**THE OBJECT MARKER *ko***  
(Okell and Allott 2001:7f)

𑀓𑀺 /ko/

- (a) Marks N as direct object, CB and FB; regular equivalent of Pali accusative case in *nissaya* translation.

**Note 1: N-*ko* is optional. Direct objects are often left unmarked, more often in CB than in FB, and then more often when the object is adjacent to the verb.**

- (b) Marks N as **indirect object** with verbs of giving, telling, etc.

## Is *-ko* really an object marker?

(2) *khwè-khəlè (ha) tɛɛʔ (ko) laiʔ kaiʔ tɛ.*  
dog-DIM (SBJ) chicken (OBJ) follow bite NFUT  
'The dog is chasing and biting the chicken.'

(3) *khwè-khəlè ?(ha) tɛaun ?(ko) laiʔ kaiʔ tɛ.*  
dog-DIM (SBJ) cat (OBJ) follow bite NFUT  
'The dog is chasing and biting the cat.'

(4) *tɛɛʔ \*(ha) khwè-khəlè \*(ko) laiʔ kaiʔ tɛ.*  
chicken (SBJ) dog-DIM (OBJ) follow bite NFUT  
'The chicken is chasing and biting the dog.'

## **OBSERVATIONS:**

- Core arguments (SUBJECT, OBJECT) are normally overtly marked in FB, but often left unmarked in CB.

→ **Burmese has DIFFERENTIAL OBJECT MARKING (DOM)**

## **QUESTION TO BE ADDRESSED IN THIS STUDY:**

On which factors is the marking of objects in transitive clauses in colloquial Burmese based?

**Assumption:** Different linguistic constructions convey different meanings, i.e. there is an intrinsic semantic or pragmatic difference between marking and non-marking of an object.

## DOM - LOOKING AROUND:

**Lahu** (Matisoff 1973:155ff)

“thà? has an accusative function: it may **optionally** occur after a v which is in some sense the ‘object’ of the following verb. [...] thà? by no means occurs mechanically after every noun that is the ‘recipient of the action of the verb’. It is, rather, used quite sparingly, only where **clarity** demands or when **special emphasis** is desired.”

“When a sentence contains two NP’s that are both objects of the verb (one ‘direct’ and one ‘indirect’), it is **bad style** to use thà? after both, but unclear not to use it after one. It will usually appear **only after the indirect object** (generally the **person, not the thing**, acted upon).”

## **Dolakha Newari (Genetti 1997)**

“In Dolakha Newari, the dative case marks **recipients** of ditransitive verbs and **some patients** of monotransitive verbs.” (p. 37)

“Whereas all recipient arguments are indeed marked with the dative casemarker, only some patients of monotransitives are so marked; numerous examples of unmarked patients of monotransitives can be found. [...] The factors which trigger the appearance of the dative casemarker on patients are semantic and pragmatic in nature.” (p. 38)



Findings (p. 42):

▶ More than 2/3 of patient arguments are unmarked

▶ casemarked → animate: 100%

animate → casemarked: 62.7%

animate → unmarked: 37.3%

→ **1. Inanimates are never casemarked**

**2. Human referents are often casemarked (112:41)**

Casemarking on animate/human referents is triggered by givenness/relevance of referent in ongoing discourse (TOPICALITY).

**Hindi** (Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2007:34ff)

(5) *ilā-ne bacce-ko/\*baccā uṭhāyā.*

Ila-ERG child-OBJ/child lifted

‘Ila lifted the/a child.’

(6) *ravī-ne kaccā kelā kāṭā.*

Ravi-ERG unripe banana cut

‘Ravi cut the/a unripe banana.’

(7) *ravī-ne kaccā kele-ko kāṭā.*

Ravi-ERG unripe banana-OBJ cut

‘Ravi cut the/\*a unripe banana.’

## Factors triggering object marking in Hindi:

- Human (animate) objects are always case-marked with *-ko*, both definite and indefinite.
- Inanimate objects may be case-marked with *-ko* only if definite and not focussed.
- Indefinite inanimate objects are never case-marked.

## **Relevant features for overt object marking**

Scales of topic- and objectworthiness (Aissen 2003)

### **ANIMACY SCALE**

Human > Animate > Inanimate

### **DEFINITENESS SCALE**

Pronoun > Name > Definite > Indefinite Specific > Non-Specific

**Assumption:** The higher on the scale a referent, the more likely it is to function as SUBJECT of its clause and the more likely it is to be overtly case marked if it functions as OBJECT.

## Object marking in Burmese

### 1. GENERIC OBJECT: Never casemarked

- (8) *tə̀nə thəmìn (\*ko) sà mɛ.*  
1M rice (OBJ) eat FUT  
'I will eat (rice).'

### 2. PERSONAL PRONOUN: Always casemarked

- (9) *tə̀nə θú \*(ko) tɛai? tɛ.*  
1M 3:AT OBJ like NFUT  
'I like him/her.'

## Is the overt object marking

triggered by ANIMACY?

- (10) *tə̀nə̀ nà (\*ko) θwà hmyà mɛ.*  
1m frog(OBJ) go lure FUT  
'I will go fishing.'

**x**

Or HUMANNESS?

- (11) *θu lu (\*ko) θa? phù tɛ.*  
3 people (OBJ) kill EXPER NFUT  
'He has killed (people) before.'

**x**

### Or is it triggered by DEFINITENESS?

- (12) *kà tə=sì ko tɛənɔ́ tó ʔəkoun.lòun hɲà tɛ.* **x**  
car one=CL OBJ 1M PL all hire NFUT  
'We all hired a car.'

### Or POSITION?

- (13) *tɛənɔ́ di sa.ʔouʔ ko mə=phaʔ tɕhin phù.*  
1M this book OBJ NEG=read DES NEG


- (13') *di sa.ʔouʔ ko tɛənɔ́ mə=phaʔ tɕhin phù.*  
this book OBJ 1M NEG=read DES NEG

'I don't want to read this book.'

## What about SPECIFICITY, ...

(14) *θu mèin.má (tə=yau?) εa ne tε.*  
3 woman (one=CL) seek STAY NFUT  
'He is looking for a woman (any woman would do).'

(14') *θu mèin.má tə=yau? ko εa ne tε.*  
3 woman one=CL OBJ seek STAY NFUT  
'He is looking for a (certain) woman.'

(10') [after talking about a big fish in a pond]   
*tεənɔ (ʔè di) ηà ko θwà hmyà mε.*  
1M (ANA this) fish OBJ go lure FUT  
'I will go to catch that fish.'



### TOPICALITY...

(15) *ho ɛ̀-ɛ̀ toun ká ywa tə=ywa hma*  
that long.ago-RDP TEMP ABL village one-village LOC

*khwè-khəlè tə=kaun yɛ lu-khəlè tə=yau? yɛ*  
dog-DIM one=CL ENUM person-DIM one=CL ENUM

*ɛ́ θə=té. tə=né tó θu tó ha **phà** phàn*  
exist NFUT REP one=day CHNG 3 PL SBJ frog catch

*phó tò thè ko tò lɛ thwɛ? tɛ.*  
PURP forest inside ALL forest middle go.out NFUT

*di lo né θu tó ha tò thè ko yau? tó*  
 this manner COM 3 PL SBJ forest inside ALL arrive CHNG

*phà lai? εa tɛ́ tɛ. di lo né lu-khəlè ha*  
 frog follow seek PL NFUT this manner COM person-DIM SBJ

*phà εa yìn εa yìn tə=kaun hmá mə=yá tɛ ʔəshòun*  
 frog seek while seek while one=CL just NEG=get NFUT:ATTR end

*ye-ʔain nà hma phà tə=kaun ko θwà twé tɛ.*  
 water-pond near LOC frog one=CL OBJ go find NFUT

- All further occurrences of the frog are marked with OBJ (where occurring as object). ‘Frog’ is now both REFERENTIAL and TOPICAL.

‘Long time ago in a village there were a little dog and a little boy. One day they went into the forest to catch (a/some) frog(s)-Ø. So when they arrived in the forest, they went around looking for frogs-Ø. The boy, while looking for frogs for some time, in the end he found a frog-OBJ near a water pond.’

(16) [‘How much is that book?’]

*di sa.ʔou? ko mə=yàun phù.*

this book OBJ NEG=sell NEG

‘This book is not for sale.’

→ **Topical objects are usually marked.**

**Note: *ko* is also used as general TOPIC marker.**



## and FOCUS?

(17) *ba sà tchin lè? - khau?.shwè pè/\*ko sà tchin tɛ.*  
what eat DES Q noodles EXCL/OBJ eat DES NFUT  
'What would you like to eat?' - 'Noodles.'

(18) *bɛ sa.ʔou? pha? mə=lè? - di sa.ʔou? pè/ko pha? mɛ.*  
INTER book read FUT=Q this book EXCL/OBJ read FUT  
'Which book are you going to read?' - 'This one.'

(19) *ko-lè ko pè hlu?.*  
older.brother-DIM OBJ EXCL let.go  
'Let my big brother go.'



→ **Object marking is dispreferred on inanimate FOCAL OBJECTS.**

## **CONCLUSION:**

Overt object marking on patient arguments in spoken Burmese is triggered (favoured) mainly by two parameters:

- **SPECIFICITY/REFERENTIALITY: SPECIFIC > NON-SPECIFIC**
- **TOPICALITY: TOPIC > FOCUS**

**ANIMACY** is of secondary relevance in the choice of marking or non-marking. While (animate/human > inanimate) **SPECIFIC** and/or **TOPICAL** objects generally receive object marking, **FOCUSSED ANIMATE** or **HUMAN** objects may be marked, while **INANIMATE FOCUSSED** objects are usually unmarked.

**GENERIC** animate and inanimate objects are always unmarked.

**[+KO]**

**[-KO]**

**Pronoun > Name > Specific > Non-Specific**

**Topic > Focus**

**Human > Animate > Inanimate**

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