

Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area

Still and anymore in Burmese:
another look at /thei/, /oùn/ and /tó/

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1. Introduction

Writing about the English perfective in relation to still and anymore, Michael Morrissey (1973) made use of a helpful way of isolating certain semantic features associated with them. He pointed out, among other things, that sentences containing still and anymore have to do with a primary time of reference, often 'now', and a secondary time, which is previous to the first. If these two times are symbolized by x, for the primary time, and y, for the secondary time, then his example 'Mr. Jones is still tampering with the lock' can be represented as +y+x; i.e., by virtue of containing still, the sentence includes both 'Mr. Jones is (now) tampering', hence +x, and 'Mr. Jones was (previously) tampering', hence +y.

Similarly, 'Mr. Jones isn't tampering with the lock anymore' can be represented as +y-x: -x because he is not tampering (now)', and +y because 'he was tampering (previously)'

Morrissey also noted that the information relating to time x is 'new', while that for time y is not.

A similar treatment had occurred to me as a promising way of understanding Burmese /tɔ́/, an auxiliary verb which, used with a positive verb, has given some trouble to analysts. This paper suggests that it helps to clarify the meaning of /tó/ if one recognizes, both for sentences containing /tó/ and for sentences containing two other auxiliary verbs, /thei/ and /oùn/, two times of reference. The information relating to one of the times is new ('stated'), while that relating to the other is not ('implied'), and there may be a positive or negative 'truth value' for either time.

Looked at in this way, the system formed by /thei/, /oùn/ and /tó/ in combination with positive and negated verbs is strikingly close to that formed by still and anymore, but it is more complete since /tó/

with a positive verb fills a slot that is not comfortably filled in English.

2. Background

2.1 Auxiliary verbs

As a rule, verb sentences in Burmese end with, or consist of, a verb followed by one of a set of suffixes which may be called 'verb-sentence markers' - 'vsmkr' for short; e.g.

ein-au'hma hpya hkin-te
house-under-at mat spread - vsmkr
'(I) spread a mat under the house'

or:

pì-yò
finish-vsmkr
'(That)'s the end (of the matter)'

(The transcription used here is that called 'standard phonetic' in Okell 1972, with voicing marked and with accented tones)

Between the verb and the vsmkr there occurs a large set of items, some free, some bound, and some in between, which, on the strength of their productive occurrence in this position, may be grouped together and labelled 'auxiliary verbs'; e.g.

/pèi/ in: hkin-pèi-te
 spread-give-vsmkr
 '(I) spread (it) for (them)'

/thwà/ in: pì-thwà-yò
 finish-go-vsmkr
 '(That)'s the end (of the matter)'

/thèi/, /òùn/ and /tò/, the subject of this paper, can be placed in the class of 'auxiliary verbs' thus defined, though two of them (/òùn/ and /tò/) are exceptional in one respect: see 2.4.

2.2 /thèi/ = /òùn/

It should be mentioned at this stage that, as several writers have pointed out, /thèi/ and /òùn/ occur in complementary distribution. /òùn/ occurs where the vsmkr is /me/, /né/ or /(zero)/; and /thèi/ is used with the other vsmkr and before suffixes of classes other than vsmkr. (/(Zero)/, meaning 'no overt vsmkr' is used here for simplicity of statement despite the theoretical objections.)

So, instead of three items, we have in effect only two: /thei-oùn/ and /tó/.

2.3 The Literature. Most published accounts of what /thei/, /oùn/, and /tó/ mean - references are given in section 8 - treat them as more or less unconnected members of the large class of auxiliary verbs - or of partly identical classes under other names. /Thei/ and /oùn/ are given such labels as 'continuance', 'repetition', 'further action', 'still', 'yet', 'more', 'again', and so on; while /tó/ is said to indicate 'inevitability', 'imminence', 'permission', 'necessity', 'now', 'no longer', 'emphasis', and the like.

Glosses such as these are usually appropriate for the examples given, but such a piecemeal, ad hoc approach fails to reveal some important points of contrast between the two, and even obscures an important aspect of the meaning of /tó/.

My colleague Anna Allott, one of whose articles (1965) deals more fully with /thei/, /oùn/, and /tó/ than any other source, has taken a long step towards a more satisfactory description by pointing out that (with certain rare exceptions: section 7) /thei-oùn/ and /tó/ are mutually exclusive. She treats them together as contrasting exponents of a 'category of aspect', to which she allots two terms, 'cumulative' (/thei-oùn/ and 'culminative' (/tó/). She gives some examples to illustrate their use, and summarizes the meanings of her two terms as -

'(cumulative:) a continuation, a repetition, an adding of one state or action to another, an unfinished accumulation, as it were...

(culminative:) one thing inevitably or imminently leading on to, finishing, in fact culminating in a certain action or state'.

The postulation of a semantic link between /thei-oùn/ and /tó/, marching their mutual exclusion, seems well justified. It receives striking support from certain distributional peculiarities noted in the following section. The explanation of their meaning, however, can, I believe, be made more explicit by drawing attention to their double time reference.

2.4 Distributional peculiarities

While /thei-oùn/ and /tó/ behave in many respects like other auxiliary verbs, they have two distributional characteristics that set them apart from the rest. Both are matters of relative order.

First there is their order-relationship with the auxiliary verb /pa/ '(polite)': they follow /pa/ after a positive verb, but reverse the order after a negated verb - i.e. a verb with the prefix /mä/ 'not':

| | | |
|-----------|-----------------|---------------|
| positive: | V-pa-thei-te | V-pa-tó-te |
| negative: | mǎV-thei-pa-hpù | mǎV-tó-pa-hpù |

Secondly there is their order-relationship with vsmkr /né/: unlike other auxiliary verbs, /thei-òun/ and /tó/ follow /né/ instead of preceding it:

| | |
|------------|-----------|
| mǎV-né-òun | mǎV-né-tó |
|------------|-----------|

Contrast other auxiliary verbs -

| | |
|------------|-------------|
| mǎV-peì-né | mǎV-thwà-né |
|------------|-------------|

It does not of course necessarily follow from mutual exclusiveness or from unparalleled distributional characteristics that there will be a semantic contrast or complementarity. Such features are, however, suggestive, and in this case, it seems, it is rewarding to follow up the suggestion.

3. Implied preceding (in)action

3.1 /Thei-òun/

One common characteristic of sentences containing /thei-òun/ and /tó/ is that they not only inform the hearer of some action (or, with a negated verb, inaction), but also imply a relationship with some preceding action (or inaction) - if we limit ourselves for the time being to statements containing verbs of 'action'.

For example, a sentence without either -

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| pa'tǎlà | tì-me |
| xylophone | play-vsmkr |
| '(I) will play the xylophone' | |

- informs the hearer of some action to take place. The same sentence with /òun/, however -

| | |
|---------|-----------|
| pa'tǎlà | tì-òun-me |
|---------|-----------|

- not only informs as before, but also implies some preceding action of which the hearer knows, e.g. (according to context) that I have been playing the xylophone already. A possible translation for such a context is '(I) will go on playing the xylophone', or '(I) will play the xylophone again'.

/Thei/, in complementary distribution with /òun/, works in the same way: the sentence -

pa'tälà tì-thei-te

- likewise implies some preceding action, e.g. that I play on Saturday (as well as on Sunday). This sentence could therefore be translated '(I) also play the xylophone (on Sunday)'.

Using Morrissey's symbolization, modified slightly, we can represent the effect of /thei-oùn/ in the above examples by +:+, where the first '+' stands for 'implied preceding action'. The ':' stands for 'is quantitatively related to' (in the sense that action is 'added to' or 'followed by' action), and the second '+' stands for 'stated further action'.

What happens then when the verb is negated? We find the sentence -

pa'tälà mätì-thei-hpù
xylophone not play-/thei/-vsmkr

implies preceding inaction (not playing), and relates it ('adds' it) to stated further inaction. It can therefore be represented as -:-, and translated, in appropriate contexts, '(I) won't play the xylophone yet'.

/Oùn/ does not occur in statements with negated verbs, but the way its meaning matches that of /thei/ can be seen in commands, with vsmkr /nè/:

pa'tälà mätì-né-oùn

- i.e. implied: you haven't been playing; stated: don't play (now). Hence it too, like the example with /thei/ and a negated verb, can be represented -:-, translatable as 'Don't play the xylophone yet'.

In brief, a sentence with /thei-oùn/ and a positive verb states action at the primary time of reference and implies action at the secondary time (+:~); while a sentence with /thei-oùn/ and a negated verb states inaction at the primary time and implies inaction at the secondary time (-:-).

3.2 /Tó/

For English speakers /tó/ is more easily approached by way of negated verbs: the sentence -

pa'tälà mätì-tó-hpù

- implies preceding playing (+:), and informs of no further playing (: -), i.e. '(I) shan't play the xylophone any more'.

We are now in a position to consider the elusive /tó/ with a positive verb. So far we have contrived to symbolize certain sentences by +:+, -:-, and +:-. We have yet to find sentences to fit the symbolization -:+, and in fact, as persistent readers will have forseen, the sole remaining possibility, /tó/ with a positive verb, does seem to fit the bill. The sentence -

pa'tälà tì-tó-me

- implies: I haven't been playing the xylophone; and states: I shall play. It can therefore be symbolized -:+, and is translatable as '(I) shall play the xylophone'.

The difficulty of accounting for /tó/, evidenced by the variety of the translations and explanations given in the literature, presumably stems from the fact that the same sentence without /tó/ is also translatable as '(I) shall play the xylophone'. What then does /tó/ add?

The conclusion that these thoughts are pushing us towards seems, in the event, to be an illuminating one. It is that just as the use of /theì-òùn/ draws attention to the quantitative relation between implied precedent (in)action and stated further (in)action, so does /tó/ with positive verbs emphasise, more than the bare statement without /tó/, that the stated action follows inaction.

This would account for its occurrence in situations following frustrated action, where the actor has had to wait before acting, has had permission to act withheld till now, or has postponed action in the hope of carrying out some more ambitious plan. Hence presumably its characterization in the literature by such words as 'permission', 'inevitability', 'imminence'.

3.3 Summary

If the meanings of /theì-òùn/ and /tó/ are represented as suggested above, they can be neatly organized to show their contrasts as follows:

| | <u>positive verb</u> | <u>negative verb</u> |
|------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| /theì-òùn/ | +:+ | -:- |
| /tó/ | -:+ | +:- |

These examples used above are set out again here side by side for comparison:

| | | | |
|---------|---------------|----|----------------------------------|
| pa'tälà | tì-òùn-me | ++ | '(I) will go on playing the x.' |
| pa'tälà | mätì-theì-hpù | -- | '(I) won't play the x. yet' |
| pa'tälà | tì-tó-me | :+ | '(I) will play the x. at last' |
| pa'tälà | mätì-tó-hpù | +- | '(I) won't play the x. any more' |

We can conclude then that /theì-òùn/ and /tó/ are part of the surface representation of a set of oppositions concerning the quantitative relationship between state (in)action and implied preceding (in)action. /Theì-òùn/ can be said to represent a 'direct' relationship, i.e. implied + for a stated +, and implied - for a stated -. /Tó/ on the other hand represents an 'inverse' relationship: implied - for a stated +, and implied + for a stated -.

4. Conclusions

Section 3 above contains the gist of the suggestion put forward in these notes. It agrees well with most of the labels of the ad hoc literature ('continuance', 'repetition', 'more', etc., and 'imminence', 'now', 'no longer', etc.), but offers a more systematic statement of the meaning of the three terms, and one which illuminates /tó/ with a positive verb.

This statement is also, I would suggest, more explicit than Allott's (necessarily condensed) account of her two terms 'cumulative' and 'culminative', particularly with regard to the combinations of /theì-òùn/ and /tó/ with both positive and negated verbs.

Allott calls /theì-òùn/ and /tó/ exponents of a 'category of aspect'. The kind of relationship postulated here does not comfortably match any of the 'notions that are customarily brought together under the term "aspect" listed in Lyons (1968 p. 314f.), which are: completive, durative, iterative, progressive, punctual, habitual, and inchoative; but no doubt the language of linguists could accommodate the addition of a further term to this collection. Anna Allott herself uses 'linear' (p. 290, where it is in opposition to 'punctual'), and has subsequently suggested 'continuative' or 'quantitative' (personal communication). In the meantime, 'aspect' has been used (Cornyn 1970) for a suggested allocation of distinctive features among some of the vsmkrs.

Although Morrissey's analysis of 'still' and 'anymore' is stated in somewhat different terms, the similarity of this treatment to his is striking:

| | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------|---|----|
| Burmese positive verb with | /theì-òùn/ | } | ++ |
| English " " " | <u>still</u> | | |
| Burmese negated verb with | /theì-òùn/ | } | -- |
| English " " " | <u>still</u> | | |

| | | |
|--------------------------------|---|-----|
| Burmese negated verb with /tó/ | } | +:- |
| English " " " <u>anymore</u> | | |

Though there are some important differences between them, the Burmese auxiliary verbs and the English adverbs seem to point to a need felt by two quite different language communities to relate stated action to known preceding action. Perhaps a look further afield would show that the expression of this relationship is common to many languages. Morrissey's article was mainly a contribution to the dialogue about the English perfective: it might be interesting to see if the analogy can be pushed further in Burmese (cf. /məV-thei-hpù/vs./V-pi/); but that is another question.

After listing the three combinations of + and - given above, Morrissey said:

This does not exhaust the possibilities, since we could also have the situation represented by -y+x. This situation is probably best considered as realized in the surface structure by the adverbials now/then (e.g. The door is open now, Bob was singing then); but we are not concerned with these forms for the moment.

As has been seen above, if the analysis suggested here is accepted, there are no difficulties with the -:+ possibility in Burmese, where the system is more symmetrical than in English. It is presumably just this uncertainty about the surface realization of the -:+ possibility that has hampered the attempts of analysts to explain it.

An observation made at the Conference necessitates a narrower definition of the term 'English' here than one might at first assume: it was pointed out that a certain Western American dialect uses anymore with positive verbs in a way which seems to fill the -:+ slot in English and to parallel Burmese /to/; e.g.

I am living in La Jolla anymore (sc. I wasn't before).

If only a speaker of this dialect had studied Burmese, perhaps the meaning of /tó/ would not have held any problems. It is interesting, though, to have a case which suggests that certain speakers of English have felt the need to fill the gap, and have developed (or retained?) a specific structure that falls symmetrically into place with the other three possibilities.

This, however, is not the end of the matter. We must 'go on to see' (/cí-yá-òun-me/) if the quantitative relationship idea survives being tested on a wider range of examples. Parts of the following sections show that some modification is required. Similar modifications would probably be found necessary for still and anymore if one took into account the use of still in such sentences as 'This site is still

older', and of any more (? anymore for Morrissey) in 'I can't eat any more pudding'.

5. Ramifications

The handful of examples given above are mostly limited to statements, with action verbs, and a primary time of reference in the present or future. This section considers /thei-oùn/ and /tó/ in sentences and situations of other types.

5.1 Other than statements

Commands in Burmese are normally expressed by vsmkr /(zero)/ with positive verbs and vsmkr /né/ with negated verbs. Some writers have wanted to treat /thei-oùn/ and /tó/ in commands separately from their use in statements, but in fact the 'quantitative relationship' characterization outlined above seems to hold without strain in both

| | | | |
|---------|-------------|-----|-------------------------------------|
| pa'tälà | tì-oùn | ++ | 'Go on playing the xylophone' |
| pa'tälà | mätì-né-oùn | -- | 'Don't play the xylophone yet' |
| pa'tälà | tì-tó | :+ | 'Play the xylophone now' |
| pa'tälà | mätì-né-tó | +:- | 'Don't play the xylophone any more' |

5.2 Other than the present

Here again there is no difficulty in applying the 'quantitative relationship' idea.

| | | | |
|---------|-----------------------|-----|---|
| pa'tälà | tì- <u>thei-te</u> | ++ | '(I) also played the xylophone' (sc. e.g. last week, as well as yesterday) |
| pa'tälà | mätì- <u>thei-hpù</u> | -- | '(I) hadn't yet played the x.' (sc. e.g. at that point in my career) |
| pa'tälà | tì- <u>tó-te</u> | :+ | 'In the end (I) played the x.' (sc. e.g. after being held up) |
| pa'tälà | mätì- <u>tó-hpù</u> | +:- | '(I) didn't play the x. any more' (sc. e.g. after I married) |

5.3 Other than the same action

/Thei-oùn/ and /tó/ do not only imply that the (in)action indicated by the verb is a continuation, repetition, resumption (or the opposite) of the same preceding (in)action. In some cases they also relate the

stated (in)action to implied action of a different nature, or with a different goal, or even to an implied intention to act. Some possible implications are suggested for the examples below, on the basis of likely contexts, and contrasted with 'same action' implications.

pa'tälà tì-theì-te +:+ '(I) also played the x.'
 implied +: I had already played the flute
 or : I had made a speech
 contrast : I had already been playing the x.

eìn-ji lè-oùn-me +:+ '(I) will also change my shirt'
 implied +: I have been getting ready to go out in other ways
 contrast : I have already changed my shirt once

wi-säki thau'theì-te +:+ '(He) drank whiskey as well'
 implied +: He had already been drinking beer
 contrast : He had already been drinking whiskey

hnäná htain-pa-oùn +:+ 'Please stay a while'
 implied +: You have already come as far as my house
 contrast : You have already been here some time

mälai'tó-hpù +:- '(I) won't come with you'
 implied +: I was all set to come with you
 contrast : I am already travelling with you

dí meìn-hkäleì mäyu-né-tó +:- 'Don't marry this girl'
 implied +: You were all set to marry her
 contrast : You have already married her once

5.4 Other than action

'Action' is an undefined term used so far to make the point easier to write about. In fact /theì-oùn/ and /tó/ occur with verbs of all sorts.

mähni'ká-hte wá-theì-te '(I) am fatter than (I) was last year'
 implied +: I was fat last year
 stated : I am fat (now), more than last year

täkya' can'theì-te '(I) still have one kyat'
 implied +: I had (at least) a kyat before
 stated : I have a kyat (now)

ngà-hni'hpè shí-theì-te '(He)'s only five year old'
 ? implied +: He was only five years old before
 stated : He is only five years old (now)

thu-lau' mäta'theì-hpù '(I) don't yet know as much as he does'
 implied -: I didn't know as much as he does
 stated -: I don't (now) know as much as he does

yähtà mähmi-tó-hpù '(I) missed the train'
 implied +: I was in time for the train
 stated -: I'm not in time (now)

täkyahpè can-tó-te '(I) have only one kyat left'
 implied -: Previously I didn't have only one kyat
 stated +: I do have only one kyat (now)

5.5 Other than preceding

There are some instances, in +:+ cases, of the implied situation not being chronologically previous to the stated situation. Some likely implications are suggested with the examples.

mähneí-ká pa'tälà tì-thèi-te '(I) also played the xylophone yesterday'
 implied +: I am playing today
 stated +: I played yesterday

si' mähpyi'hkin-ká dí-hte' zeì cì-theì-te 'They were more expensive than
 this before the war'
 implied +: They are expensive (now)
 stated +: They were expensive before the war

6. Revised formulation

It is clear from the examples of parts of section 5 that the formulation of section 4 - 'implied preceding (in)action' etc. - must be revised to cover not only 'action' verbs, but others too; perhaps 'action-state' would do as a cover-term; and not only chronologically preceding action-state, but also action-state of which the hearer has already been informed, or of which he is deemed to be aware: perhaps 'informationally preceding'.

The revised formulation will have to be something like: /theì-oùn/ and /tó/ represent direct and inverse forms, respectively, of the quantitative relationship between a stated (non)action-state and an implied informationally-preceding and not-necessarily-the same (non)action-state.

It is a moot point whether, for clarity of statement, this is any advance over either the ad hoc labellings or Allott's cumulative-culminative characterization. However, awkward though it is to express, I believe it amounts to more than a vague catch-all formula devised to cover as many of the usual glosses as possible. The contrast between /theì-oùn/ and /tó/ is clear, and the explanation of their meaning, in some contexts at least, does seem to lie somewhere along the lines suggested here.

7. Loose ends

There are two uses of /theì-oùn/ and /tó/ that cannot be forced into the interpretation suggested above. Neither is very common, but they both violate the claimed mutual exclusiveness of /oùn/ and /tó/ by having the two

occur together, thus apparently making nonsense of the opposition. Disturbing though this is at first sight, these two uses can in fact be fairly convincingly isolated and shown to be separate issues from the contrasting /*thei-òun*/ and /*tó*/.

The first use is mentioned by Allott (loc. cit.), who suggests as a possible explanation a historical merger between /*tó*/ and an obsolete-cum-literary imperative suffix /*ló*/ . One can however stay synchronic and distinguish this /*òun+tó*/ from the contrasting /*òun*/ and /*tó*/ on the grounds that it does not occur with the full set of vsmkrs.

ʔhkú məlou'(né-)òun-tó nau' lou'hcín-yín lou'me
'Even though (he) doesn't do it now, (he) may well do it later'

hsáya-hsi la-mətweí-(né-)òun-tó əsin thədí yá-te
'(I) always remember you, even though (I) don't come and see you'

ta'hnain-òun-tó thwà-kou məthwà-hcín-hpù
'Even if (I) could afford to, (I) simply don't want to go'

A zealous opponent of the mutual exclusiveness view might be tempted to analyse such examples as consisting of two sentences in each case: in the last example above, /*ta'hnain-òun-tó*/ would be an imperative, with vsmkr /*(zero)*/ . This interpretation could seek support from the optional /*né*/ that occurs with the negated verbs in the first two examples, which could be identified with the vsmkr for negative imperatives.

However, as such imperatives have first or third person subjects in a way unparalleled elsewhere in the language, such a view would be hard to defend. Perhaps this /*òun+tó*/ contrast had become established, but if so it has evidently developed other uses since, and is better served by a separate analysis.

The second use of /*òun+tó*/ that is found is again fairly easily isolated. It occurs in such phrases as -

thwà-pa-òun-tó-me
'I am going now' - 'Goodbye'

It seems to be limited to very polite and rather rare greeting phrases of this type, and so can perhaps be regarded as falling outside the scope of explanations of the less restricted uses of /*thei*/, /*òun*/, and /*tó*/.

Post script:

Two rather more substantial loose ends were uncovered at the conference:

Kris Lehman pointed out that there seems to be another use of /*òun*/, that is perhaps more frequent among female speakers. In this use, /*tì-òun-me*/, for example, states '(I) will play' and appears to imply 'before doing something else'. This tentative characterization is lent force by something similar in Lahu, mentioned by Jim Matisoff:

/gay-šē/ '(I) intend to go - let me go first'

/vî-šē/ '(It)'s still far - but we'll be there soon'

There seems to be an implication here that is not easily accounted for by the set of + and - contrasts suggested above.

The second point arose from another pair of Lahu examples offered by Matisoff:

/gay-ò/ '(he) has gone already'

/mâ-gay-ò/ '(He) is not going any more'

This contrast is reminiscent of Burmese -

| | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| | /thwà-pi/ | '(He) has gone (now)' |
| (literary style) | /máthwà-pi/ | '(He) isn't going any more' |
| (=colloquial style) | /máthwà-tó-hpù/ | |

- which brings up again the 'perfective' question mentioned in Section 4 above: i.e. the relationship between the aux vbs /tó/ and /théi/ versus vsmkr /pi/.

While these two points do not, I think, totally invalidate the set of contrasts put forward in the preceding sections, they do suggest that these contrasts are not the only ones, and it is clear that further examination is called for.

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