Pronouns in Burmese-Lolo[1]

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Abstract

Various interesting processes of grammaticalisation can be observed in the pronominal systems of the Burmese-Lolo languages. There are many innovative denominal or de-demonstrative pronoun stems. On the whole, third person pronouns are the least stable; this is also true of Tibeto-Burman in general. Diachronically they tend to be derived from demonstratives. Replacement first and second person pronouns are mostly denominal; the first person pronouns tend to belittle the self, while the replacement second person pronouns tend conversely to aggrandise or honour their referent. Reflexive pronouns derive mainly from nouns meaning 'body', with or without other associated pronouns.

A variety of denominal and deverbal suffixes for functions such as plural and case marking have developed, followed by a number of suffix fusion processes leading to the development of paradigmatic oppositions in these languages. Thus, though these languages are usually described as isolating, many of them are becoming less so.

Data is presented on Burmese and its dialects from the earliest attested texts of A.D. 1112, from closely related Burmish languages, from several languages in the three main subgroups of Loloish languages, and from other languages which scholars have claimed to be more or less closely connected to this nucleus within Tibteo-Burman. A new reconstruction of the Burmese-Lolo pronoun system is developed and this is used as a criterion for subgrouping within Burmish, Loloish, Burmese-Lolo and Tibeto-Burman. The resulting subgrouping supports the hypothesis presented in Bradley (1979b) based mainly on lexical and phonological correspondences.

I. BURMESE PRONOUNS

Burmese is the national language of Burma with some 30 million first language speakers, over ten million second language speakers, and a written history of nearly 900 years. It is one of the many South and Southeast Asian languages with diglossia, having a literary High (also used in some formal spoken contexts) which is distinct from the spoken Low. In Burmese, the differences are mainly in the forms of most noun and verb markers and suffixes, as well as some frequent function words such as the demonstratives; there are also other lexical differences. For details and some examples, see Bradley (1977) and Allott (1985). The literary High is in many cases more conservative, reflecting the earlier language, Old Burmese, as preserved in inscriptions from A.D. 1112. However, apart from the reflexive, these differences are not reflected in pronominal forms.

Old Burmese forms are cited here in a transliteration which probably reflects their early pronunciation; modern Burmese is cited in the transcription described in Bradley (1992). Table 1 shows the earliest and most recent forms.

The current first person pronouns are derived from the word for 'slave' ကျွန် /cun/ plus the royal or respectful suffix တော် /tɔ/ for the male speaker form, and the female suffix မ /má/ for female speakers. These forms first appear in 12th century inscriptions in their literal meaning, 'royal slave', and through a gradual process of bleaching have reached their current meanings. The current second person pronouns, the latest in a long succession of replacements for the originals, are from religious titles: the male form is probably a contracted version of သခင်ဘုရား /θəkhin phəyà/ 'Bodhisattva';[2] and the female form from the homophonous word /shin/ 'master.' The forms of the disyllabic pronouns vary as shown in Table 2.

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[2] The sporadic loss of the first syllable is paralleled elsewhere; see below. The contraction of the final two syllables into one is more unusual; but compare the corresponding monosyllabic form of this Buddhist loanword in Thai /phrá?/.

Table 1: Pronominal Forms in Old and Modern Burmese

12th century

ငါ	ŋa	I
နင်	naŋ	you
အယင်	ʔəyaŋ	he/she/it
+ တို့	túiʋ	plural marker
အတို့	ʔətúiʋ	we
+ သူ	su	person who (nominaliser)

late 20th century

ကျွန်တော်	/cənɔ/	I (male speaker);
ကျွန်မ	/cəmá/	I (female speaker)
ခင်ဗျား	/khəmyà/	you (male speaker);
ရှင်	/shin/	you (female speaker)
သူ	/θu/	he/she (animate referent)
+ တို့	/dó/ (from OB tó)	plural marker
ဒို့	/dó/	we

Table 2: Modern Spoken Burmese Pronoun Forms

	slow, literary	normal	rapid
1st M sp.	/cundɔ/	/cəndɔ/	/cənɔ/
1st F sp.	/cunmá/	/cəmá/	/cəmá/
2nd M sp.	/khinbyà/	/khəmbyà/	/khəmyà/

An earlier first person form also derived from the noun 'slave' plus a different second syllable is now restricted to rural use and is regarded as slightly impolite. This is ကျို်ု /cou?/, contracted from ကျွန်ုပ် /cunnou?/ which is also occasionally heard. While the original forms ငါ /ŋa/ and နှင့် /nin/ still do occur, they have become appeggiorated, and are used only to very close intimates, to inferiors or as an insult.

The current third person form descends from the nominalising suffix 'one who', also used as an indefinite third person ('whoever') derived from the question word 'who?'. It is still used in these senses in modern literary Burmese. The form for 'who?' in Old Burmese was အသု ?əsu, which comprises the most widespread Tibeto-Burman noun-formative prefix and the widespread agentive formative suffix *su. The beginning of the process of development from 'who(ever)' to third person pronoun can be seen from the very first dated inscription, the so-called 'Myazedi'.[3] The original third person form အဝင်: ?əyàŋ of inscriptions from the twelfth to the

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[3] The 'Myazedi' Inscription is so called because one version of it is next to the Myazedi Temple in Pagan. It is in four languages: Burmese, Mon, Pali and Pyu (the language of an earlier Tibeto-Burman kingdom in central Burma). It is also known as the Rajakumar Inscription from the name of the donor who caused it to be written. He was one of the sons of King Kyanzittha (1084-1112), but not the successor to the throne. This is the earliest dated Burmese inscription. Up to the end of Kyanzittha's reign the court literary language used in all inscriptions was Mon; but from 1112 to 1287 (when Pagan was sacked by the Mongols) there were a very large number of stone and ink inscriptions in Old Burmese. Many of these have survived; most relate to religious dedications and contain a great deal of information about life and language in twelfth and thirteenth century Burma.