REFLEXIVES IN BURMESE[1]

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1. ABSTRACT

The Burmese reflexive has three alternative forms. One, attested from the earliest inscriptions, uses ၎ /mí mí/ as the reflexive pronoun; for direct objects this is usually followed by the noun ကိုယ် /ko/ 'body', thus literally meaning 'self's body'. This reflexive has numerous cognates in Loloish languages and is ultimately derived from the Tibeto-Burman etymon *mi 'person'. Another has reanalysed the noun ကိုယ် /ko/ 'body' as the reflexive pronoun, and adds something else following it; for direct objects, the most frequent type, the form is /kó ko ko/; this comprises two occurrences of 'body', the first in possessive form, and the object marker which is also ultimately derived from 'body'; as discussed below the order of these constituents is a point of disagreement among Burmese grammarians. A third, derived by reanalysis of the second, uses any pronoun twice, separated by the noun ကိုယ် /ko/ 'body' or less frequently another body-part noun.

In a reflexive context, the use of one of these reflexives is not obligatory; but if a reflexive is not used then the sentence is ambiguous and would normally be interpreted as non-reflexive. Burmese uses reflexives quite frequently with abstract verbs for mental attitudes and states, and considerably less frequently with concrete action verbs.

In general where a cognate for the literary Burmese ၎ /mí mí/ is absent elsewhere in Burmese-Lolo, the reflexive is instead innovatively derived from etyma for 'body' (such as Sino-Tibetan *guŋ, Burmese-Lolo *goŋ¹) or from Burmese-Lolo *daw³. In this it is unlike the Burmese spoken form, which derives from another Sino-Tibetan 'body' etymon *s-ku, Burmese-Lolo *s-ko¹. In some languages both a cognate for /mímí/ and a 'body' form occur. Grammaticalisation from words for 'body' is very widespread in languages of the area and of course semantically quite reasonable for reflexives.

2. INTRODUCTION

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 various South and Southeast Asian languages with diglossia, 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 1112 AD. One of the structural differences between the High and the Low is in reflexivisation, for which there is one form in the High and two others in the Low, with interesting structural differences.

The transliteration of Old Burmese and the transcription of Modern Burmese used here have been outlined in the introduction to this volume.

The following abbreviations are used in this paper.

ACC	accusative	O	object
CLF	classifier	PF	final particle
DO	direct object	PL	plural
EXC	exclusive	PRO	pronoun
GEN	genitive	PUR	purposive
INT	intensifier	REL	relative
M	male	S	subject
NEG	negative	SG	singular
NP	noun phrase		

3. PRONOMINALISATION IN BURMESE

For full details of the pronoun system in Burmese and its development from Old Burmese to Modern Burmese, see Bradley (1993). There have been very substantial changes including the appeggioration or replacement of virtually every pronoun, in some cases more than once, during the nine centuries of records of written Burmese. Unlike most other function words, these pronouns do not differ between the modern literary High and the spoken Low.

The usual modern forms are cited in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: PRONOMINAL FORMS IN MODERN BURMESE

ကျွန်တော်	/cənɔ́/	I (male speaker)
ကျွန်မ	/cəmá/	I (female speaker)
ငါ	/ŋa/	I (speaking to intimate or inferior)
ကျုပ်	/cou'/	I (used in rural areas, mainly by male speakers)
ခင်ဗျား	/khəmyà/	you (male speaker)
ရှင်	/ʃin/	you (female speaker)
နင်	/nin/	you (speaking to intimate or inferior)
မင်း	/mìn/	you (speaking to intimate or inferior)
သူ	/θu/	he/she (usually human, always animate)

In Burmese, pronoun forms are fairly infrequent in running discourse; the unmarked assumption is that a statement has a first person subject and that a question has a second person subject, unless the context shows or implies otherwise.

Pronouns also have an attributive/possessive form which replaces a final heavy or level tone with a creaky tone, e.g. ကျွန်တော့ /cənɔ̀/ 'my (male speaker)'; those which already end in creaky tone, such as ကျွန်မ /cəmá/ 'I/my (female speaker)', have the same form. The pronoun plural marker is တိုဝ် *tuiw.* from the earliest inscriptions, regularly giving modern တို့ pronounced /dó/. This was originally voiceless /tó/ and can be related to the fairly widespread Loloish etymon **daw³* 'body'; cognates are also used as a reflexive in some of those languages. In Burmese, the plural marker may be productively added to any of the above pronouns, but pronouns without the plural marker do also occur in plural contexts. All these pronouns, with or without plural marker, may occur in the Pró (possessive form) + /ko/ + Pro reflexive construction discussed below. The same marker with the formative prefix /ə/ as seen in the inscriptional form အတိုဝ် *atuiw.* was most likely a first plural exclusive; when the prefix was later lost, it retained medial voicing[2] and this is the source of the modern first person plural (inclusive or exclusive) /dó/. There are various restrictions on the plural marker in reflexives, as discussed below.

While the earliest Burmese inscription, the Rajakumar (dated 1112 AD), provides evidence for juncture voicing in noun compounds such as မင်ကြီ *maŋgrī* 'king' + 'big' > 'great king' (lines 15-16), in almost all such cases later spellings show the unvoiced forms instead. Here, the modern form is မင်းကြီး now written /mìn cì/, showing the base form of the second element but pronounced /mìn jì/, still with medial voicing. Other dialects of Burmese show much less medial voicing: some do not voice medial aspirates, others do not voice medials at

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[2]   For details and various parallel examples which have similarly reinforced the category of voiced stops in modern Burmese, see Bradley (forthcoming).

all, except where a Burmese doublet form has been borrowed. In standard Burmese this juncture voicing is one of the main markers of unity between the noun or verb stem and following associated components in a compound as well as following suffixes, modals and other markers. Juncture voicing is regular for reduplicated verbs but not reduplicated nouns.[3]

Many of the modern Burmese pronoun forms, including the reflexes, are denominal. The literary reflexive appears to be derived from a reduplication of Sino-Tibetan etymon *mi* 'person', while the spoken reflexive is derived from the Sino-Tibetan etymon *s-ku* 'body'. Parallels for this semantic development can be found in a number of languages of the region, as well as elsewhere. The likely process of these developments is traced below.

It is often difficult to disentangle the literal 'body' and the extended object marker or pronominal uses of /ko/ in early inscriptions. The reanalysis of ကိုယ် /ko/ as a reflexive appears to have been fairly early; more recently, as in many other languages, this reflexive is itself shifted to a non-reflexive pronominal use. Thus, in early modern Burmese, /ko/ alone could also be used as a second person pronoun, to which the pronoun plural marker /tó/ > /dó/ could also be added. Judson (1853:203) provides some examples of /ko/ used as a second person pronoun by male or female intimates to women; Tun Nyein (1906), which is often somewhat archaic for its period, includes /ko/ in the list of second person pronouns. However, in current spoken Burmese, /ko/ alone is an informal first person pronoun mainly but not only used by male speakers, not a second person pronoun; this further illustrates the instability and openness of the pronoun system in Burmese. The form /ko dɔ/ could formerly be used as a second person pronoun to address superiors – monks and others; this is clearly another extension of the 'body' meaning with the addition of the royal or respectful suffix တော် /tɔ/. Its replacement by the current အရှင်ဘုရား /ə ʃinphəyà/ is another example of the relatively rapid changes in the Burmese pronoun system.

Yet another independent development, discussed further below and in Bradley (1993), is the modern spoken object/goal/allative noun marker ကို /ko/ from the same nominal source; this has been differentiated from the nominal/reflexive spelling as noted below.

4. CASE MARKING IN BURMESE

Burmese is a typical SOV language; all marking of cases is done with suffixed cliticised markers. These are phonologically joined to the preceding nominal by various juncture phenomena which likewise link the verb and associated modals and other markers. Many of these markers are historically derived from grammaticalised nominal, verbal or other forms.

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[3]   For example /kàun/ 'good', reduplicated /kàungàun/ 'well', but အစ်ကို /əko/ 'older brother', reduplicated ကိုကို /ko ko/.