

Highlighting through the Particle *swe?*  
in Sgaw Karen narrative Discourse

Somsong Burusphat

Mahidol University, Bangkok

Many languages have particles and affixes that are problematic to the grammatical analysis. The functions and meanings of these particles and affixes are not easy to identify on a clause or sentence level because they are determined by the structure of connected discourse (Longacre 1976). This claim is supported by the evidence from Sgaw Karen<sup>1</sup>, a language of Tibeto-Burman family.

In this language, there are several particles that have discourse functions. Among these particles, the particle *swe?* is dominant. This particle occurs in all texts<sup>2</sup> even though narrated by different native speakers. In some texts it may occur with great frequency, whereas in other texts it is only occasionally present. This is not a matter of idiolects because its frequency of occurrence also varies in texts narrated by the same individuals. At first glance it seems to be randomly distributed. It may be preferred at any point where the narrator's emotions are involved. However, a closer look on discourse level reveals its function and meaning.<sup>3</sup>

The particle *swe?* is usually attached to thematic material, i.e. the significant information of narrative discourse called backbone or storyline which is opposed to supportive material called background or non-storyline.<sup>4</sup> Its first occurrence within the story is tied to the plot structure<sup>5</sup> of the story. The particle *swe?* first appears

at the inciting incident in texts 1, 2, 4 and 6; at the developing conflict in text 3; and at the climax in text 5. Its common function is to provide chronological theme line cohesion to a discourse. That is, it indicates progression to a new backbone event or activity. However, not all backbone events or actions are marked by this particle. The purpose of this study is to discuss the situations in which *swe?* is used to mark temporal progression in discourse. It is found that the narrators used this particle when they aimed to highlight an important chronological juncture, a backreferent to the previous crucial event or activity, a connectivity of crucial successive events or activities, a new cycle of a cyclical episode, a thematicity switch, a thematic participant within an identification sequence and a role reversal.

#### 1. Highlighting an important chronological juncture

Temporal phrases or words that are preceded or tagged by the particle *swe?* encode major time settings of the following crucial events or activities. While *swe?* indicates important chronological juncture, it also indicates progression along the backbone. The following examples, 1 and 2, from text 2 and text 4 respectively, illustrate the function of *swe?* with temporal expressions to highlight important time settings.

##### Example 1

létókhò nì nè mé vèndò  
 first day that let sister  
 vèkó lè ?ò  
 eldest take-care him

'On the first day, [we, all  
 sisters] let the eldest  
 sister take care of him  
 [the baby].

*swe?* mùchèthò ?à pù  
 pt. in-the-morning he younger sister  
 xú va lé klòndò  
 six cl. go pull grass

In the morning, the six  
 younger sisters went to  
 pull grass.

ʔà? vèno vèkó ò? lèkhí  
 she sister eldest be behind  
 lè phòsàhó va nè  
 take-care child cl. that

The eldest sister was  
 [left] behind to take  
 care of that baby.'

The context of this example is that six sisters who owned seven pigs wanted to have a little baby sister or brother and talked about what they wanted. A giant overheard them and disguised himself as a baby boy. The six sisters found him and took him home. They decided to take turns taking care of the baby. The eldest sister was the first to start while the rest went to work in the field. Example 1 has the temporal word *nùchethò* preceded by the particle *swe?*. The function of *swe?* is to highlight the temporal setting of the following crucial events in which the story develops its conflict. That is, while the eldest sister was taking care of the baby brother and fell asleep, the baby became a giant and ate a big pig.

Example 2

swe? swe? vè vè ne tà khí  
 pt. pt. finally completely dark  
 ʔà wé kó? kwà? kwà?  
 he emp.mk. cry sound of toad  
 nù? lé hòkhò bè?là?  
 enter in ground under

'Finally, [it was] completely  
 dark. He cried "kwa kwa"  
 [and] went underground.

nòtáhó ké cì? cì? zò  
 deer return run run step on  
 bà? lùsà khómé  
 touch, hit gourd stem

The deer returned [and] ran.  
 [He] stepped on the stem  
 of a gourd.'

The context of example 2 is that a toad and a deer exchanged labor. The toad went to help the deer work first. The deer provided lunch for the toad and took him home. When it was the turn of the deer, the toad neither gave him lunch nor took him home. After work, the toad

went into a hole under the ground. The deer had to return alone. While running, he stepped on the stem of a gourd.

The particle *swe?* in example 2 highlights the time juncture encoded by the temporal phrase *vè vè nè tà khi* 'Finally, [it was] completely dark'. This time juncture is crucial for the development of the story because it was the nighttime and thus the deer could not see the gourd and stepped on it. With this temporal phrase *swe?* occurs twice. Its double occurrence confirms the importance of the following events which form the climax of the story.

## 2. Highlighting a backreference

The effect of tagging a backreferential clause with *swe?* is twofold. On the one hand *swe?* highlights the completion of the previous crucial event restated by the backreferential clause which serves as a point of reference for the following crucial event. On the other hand the backreferential clause tagged by *swe?* indicates that the crucial backbone event expressed by the independent clause represents progression from the preceding backbone event. The backreferential clause usually occurs without an overt subject as in the following example from text 2.

### Example 3

phósàhó va ne lò? mí ?asá? 'That child pretended to  
child cl. that pretend sleep himself sleep.

lò? mí ?asá? swe? pa vènò [After the child] had pre-  
pretend sleep himself pt. she sister tended to sleep, the eldest  
wèkó chómowé à?tà mí dè? sister thought he [the  
eldest think her child sleep then child] was asleep.'  
mí míno ?à khòthí?  
sleep lie down to sleep him beside  
nè mí  
that sleep