Highlighting through the Particle swe? in Sgaw Karen narrative Discourse

Somsonge 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 Karen³, 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 texts² 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.³

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.⁴ Its first occurrence within the story is tied to the plot structure⁵ 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 timeline 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

lētōkhō nē nē nō vēnō
first day that let sister
vēkō lē ?ō
eldest take-care him

swe? mēchēthō ?ā pe
pt. in-the-morning he younger sister
xē va lē klōnō
six cl. go pull grass

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

In the morning, the six younger sisters went to pull grass.
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 mëchëthò 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? ve ve ne tà khi
pt. pt. finally completely dark
'Finally, [it was] completely dark. He cried "kwa kwa"
and went underground.

ve? kó? kwa? kwa?
he emp.mk. cry sound of toad

mi? ló hòkhò bé?la?
enter in ground under

nôtàhò ké ci? ci? zò
deer return run run step on

ba? lùsa khòme
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 swa? in example 2 highlights the time juncture encoded by the temporal phrase và và nè tà khi 'Finally, it was completely dark'. This time juncture is crucial for the development of the story because it was nighttime and thus the deer could not see the gourd and stepped on it. With this temporal phrase swa? 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 swa? is twofold. On the one hand swa? 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 swa? 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
phósahó va ne lò? mì ?asá? 'That child pretended to child cl. that pretend sleep himself sleep.

lò? mì ?asá? swa? pa vænò pretend sleep himself pt. she sister [After the child] had pretended to sleep, the eldest vækó chômôwé àtà mì dài? sister thought he [the eldest think her child sleep then mì mino ?à khotihí? sleep lie down to sleep him beside nè mì that sleep