The benefactive construction in Moulmein Sgaw Karen

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

It is generally recognized that the Karen languages are tonal S-V-O languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family (Benedict 1976; Shafer 1974; Weldert 1987). Sgaw Karen, the language investigated in this analysis, represents the largest subgroup within Karenic (Jones 1961:v) with sizeable populations living in both Burma and Thailand.

This paper examines the syntactic and semantic features of the benefactive construction in Sgaw Karen with exponent ne\(^2\) ('get') which contains three core participants: the agent, undergoer and beneficiary (or recipient), e.g.:

\[ \text{AGENT - VERB - NE}^2 - \text{BENEFICIARY - UNDERGOER} \]

\[(1) \ \theta o^1 k h a^1 \ s o^3 \ n e^2 \ n a^6 \ n a^3 \ t o - p h l e^5 \]
monk carry BEN 2sg basket one-CLF
'\text{The monk carried the basket for you.}'

This is compared with the construction having identical function in Mandarin formed with exponent gei\(^3\) ('give') and where appropriate, with internal and external datives in English.

Dative and benefactive constructions have been the focus of several recent papers such as Hermann (1979) which contrasts Thai and Mandarin; Zhu (1979, 1983) on Mandarin; and Green (1974), Thompson (1989) and Wierzbicka (1986) on English. With reference to this ongoing debate concerning the semantic and pragmatic features coded by these constructions, the verb classes and predicates permitted in the case of Sgaw Karen are defined in broad semantic terms, and constraints on the animacy of the participants are examined. Data are taken from texts and elicited work with a speaker of Sgaw Karen from Hpa-an, whose dialect can be classified as Moulmein Sgaw.

\[1\] This paper was first presented at the 24th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics held in Thailand from 7 - 11 October, 1991 at both Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok and Chiangmai University in Chiangmai.
1.2 *Language classification within Sino-Tibetan*

Karen is a minority language spoken in large areas of Burma and Thailand. It is generally held that the Karen group of languages belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan, although its exact genetic position has been a topic of debate. One of the reasons for its problematical status is the fact that Karen has basic S-V-O word order, unlike other Tibeto-Burman languages which are S-O-V.

Benedict’s 1972 taxonomy, for example, originally gave Karen a more independent status, placing it on the same level as Tibeto-Burman under the superordinate grouping of ‘Tibeto-Karen’. See Figure 1:

![Figure 1](image)

Hale (1982) follows Shafer (1974) in subdividing Tibeto-Burman into the four main groups of Bodic, Baric, Karenic and Burmic; while Benedict, in a reanalysis of Sino-Tibetan language affiliation (1976), groups Karen within Tibeto-Burman. In Weidert (1987) and Matisoff (1991a), Karen is similarly classified as a subgroup of Tibeto-Burman.

We use Shafer’s classification (1974) of Karen as representative of this second approach, with the caveat that details of the subgroupings differ considerably among the analyses listed above:

![Figure 2](image)

1.3 *Classification of Karenic languages*

Official records number speakers of Karen at 2,122,825 in Burma (1983) and 265,611 in Thailand (1986). These figures are from Bradley (1990) who suggests that the combined population for both countries is
closer to four million, with the smaller official tallies being due both to underenumeration—many Karen live in areas not under direct government control—and the exclusion of some smaller groups of Karen speakers.

Within Karenic, three major subgroupings have been identified. These are called Sgaw, Pho, and Bwe by Jones (1961); coastal, mountain, and delta by Shafer (1974); and northern, central, and southern by Bradley (1990). Within Sgaw Karen, which represents the largest subgrouping within Karenic (1.6 million speakers), there are further subdivisions into Moulmein and Basselin dialects (Jones 1961). This study is based on the Moulmein dialect of Sgaw, with data from Alfred Saw Keh, a speaker from the town of Hpa-an (Pa’an) in eastern Burma, not far from the border with Thailand.²

1.4 Typological features of Sgaw Karen

Sgaw Karen is an S-V-O tonal language of the isolating or analytic type characterized by features such as classifiers, modifiers generally following the modified element, and a large set of modal and aspectual particles. As is typical for most of Sino-Tibetan, Sgaw Karen possesses few, if any, inflectional morphemes. This should not be taken to mean that Sgaw Karen is lacking in complex morphology (see the description of the pronominal system below). Moreover, there are a number of morphemes which are undergoing grammaticalisation, and taking on case- and aspect-like functions, such as the benefactive marker ne² (related to and homophonous with the verb 'to get'), which is the subject of the present study.

This dialect of Sgaw Karen has a phonemic inventory of 27 consonants (including semi-vowels) and 9 vowels. The consonants are displayed in Table 1:

² I am very grateful to Mr Alfred Saw Keh for his many hours of assistance in preparing this study.

Alfred Saw Keh is a native speaker of Moulmein Sgaw Karen and is bilingual in Burmese and English. In Burma, he is Head of the English Department at Hpa-an College, Kayin State, but is presently undertaking graduate studies in the School of Education, La Trobe University. Note that his hometown of Hpa-an lies in a predominantly Pho Karen area to the north of Moulmein. His family is thus typically multilingual, particularly the female members who also speak Pho Karen.

I worked with Mr Keh from May to June, and from July to November in 1989 and again in October - December 1991.

From this point on, wherever I use the term "Sgaw Karen", the Moulmein dialect is intended, which (1) respects the consultant's classification of his dialect and (2) is confirmed by my analysis of the consonantal, vocalic, and tonal systems, which tally closely with those described for Moulmein Sgaw Karen by Jones (1961:63), with minor differences attributable to subdialectal variation.
### TABLE 1: Consonants of Moulmein Sgaw Karen (HPA-AN dialect)

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For the 12 stop consonants, there is not just a simple voiceless aspirated-unaspirated contrast but a three-way distinction with the voiced member for stops found in bilabial, alveolar and palatal positions, a feature which is not uncommon in Tibeto-Burman (see Matisoff 1989 on Lahu). There is no voiced velar stop. Note, however, that words with palatal stops are infrequent: e.g., the voiced palatal stop is often found in loans of Burmese origin such as /ʃa¹/ 'tiger'.

The 7 fricatives include an aspirated-unaspirated contrast for the alveolar position, as well as a voiced-voiceless opposition for the uvular position (with velar allophones for both). The palatal glide /j/ is strongly fricativized in several Sgaw words such as jo³ 'deep', which is why it is tentatively placed in parentheses among the fricatives.⁴

The 8 sonorants include 4 nasals, 2 glides, a lateral, and a trilled /r/ which typically occurs as C2 in consonant clusters but also acts as an allophone of /d/ in syllable-initial position, e.g. do⁴ ~ ro⁴ 'and'.

Vowels form a symmetrical system, distinguished for height, with three front, three mid and three back phonemes. See Table 2.

### TABLE 2: Vowels of Moulmein Sgaw Karen (Hpa-an dialect)

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³ For typographical convenience, the symbol [R] is employed to represent the voiced uvular fricative.

⁴ Lahu /γ/ is similarly to be considered the voiced homologue of /ʃ/, and is also fricativized before certain vowels. [Ed.]