A Linguistic Image of Nature?
The Burmese Numerative Classifier System Reviewed

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1. Introduction

A quarter of a century ago, Alton L. Becker published an article on the Burmese numerative classifier system, based on "a small paper-bound copy book, carefully written in his [Becker's teacher's] fine hand". (Becker 1975: 109) This book, "in which all classes of things are listed, abstract as well as concrete, in this world and out of it" (ibid.) was, as far as I know, never published or made available to the public in any form.

For more than twenty years Becker's paper has been considered a classical example of description of a classifier system which is closely related to the cosmos as perceived by the language community. During the past twenty years, Becker has often been quoted, most recently by Foley (1997:232 ff), but hardly ever challenged. On the following pages I want to take a closer look at Becker's argumentation and the Burmese data he uses.¹ The question to be answered is: Is there sufficient evidence to postulate a system of concentric circles for the Burmese classifiers, as Becker suggests, rather than a vertical stratification for humans and shape- or function-based choice for inanimate objects as is usually accepted for other Southeast Asian languages, such as Thai and Vietnamese?

2. Becker's analysis and discussion

Becker himself mentions that "numerative classifiers ... do distinguish shape and relative size ..." (p.110) but these distinctions are taken as secondary to a social dimension, derived from the folkloristic Buddhist cosmology of the Burmese. According to this Burmese cosmology, the centre is occupied by the Buddha and objects related to Him, such as Buddha images, pagodas, relics, but strangely also fishing nets, mosquito nets and staircases. The classifier associated with the centre is

¹ I use basically the same transcription system as Okell (1969).
The second circle is occupied by "people of status," teachers and scholars which are counted as 'kha'. The third circle belongs to ordinary humans, counted as 'yak' (spelled 'yok'). The innermost circle are, animals, ghosts, dead bodies, deprived people and children, classified as 'kha', 'body', corporeal form, corpse.

As Becker correctly states, the choice of classifier used for a specific person or object is not fixed, but depends on the speakers' feelings about the person/object as well. The extra-linguistic context, apart from the person/object itself, may also influence the choice of classifier. For example, a person might be classified as 'father' in some contexts, but as 'brother' in others.

In the outermost circle are animals, ghosts, dead bodies, deprived people and children. The classifiers used for these categories are 'kha', 'body', corporeal form, corpse.

Having established the system of animate beings with four circles around the centre of 'kha', Becker goes on to the system of inanimate objects, for which not Buddha is used. Becker probably meant to use the term 'Buddha' in each of the four circles, but the term is not used in this context. The term 'Buddha' is used in the context of referring to a supreme being, not a term for inanimate objects.

1. There are no "seris" in the Burmese language of the word Theravada Buddhism. The term is used by Burmese people to refer to a supreme being, not a term for inanimate objects.

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the centre anymore, but rather the "Self". The four orbits are occupied by inalienable "parts of Self", alienable objects "on Self", "nearby Self" and "far from Self" respectively (p.117). Each orbit is divided in an upper and a lower part, corresponding to the head and the body of the Self. The head is associated with "round" and the body with "straight". In the lower division of all four orbits, subclasses can be distinguished.

Becker's main argument for a centro-orbit arrangement rather than the usual vertical hierarchy for animate beings is the fact that ahsu is used not only for sacred objects, but metaphorically also for (conical) nets, gardens and staircases, which, seen from above, exhibit some similarity with the "concentric network" (cf. Foley 1997:238). Becker argues that "it is important to note that this term hsu can apply to the whole system itself (the field of human existence or the Law, the Dharma) ..." (p.116). I can personally hardly think of any context in which the "whole system itself" would be used with a numerative classifier, which in Burmese are used exclusively in combination with numerals. The counting of the whole system would require the existence of more than one system of this kind, which as far as I know is not the case in the traditional Burmese cosmology, all levels of existence already being accounted for in the hierarchy from lesser beings (animals, ghosts) to the highest levels of Arahats and Buddhas. An illustration of the Burmese cosmos can be seen in Temple 1906 (facing p.8). It is interesting to note in this illustration, to which Becker refers, that although it is supposed to be a "traditional Burmese cosmology", the equator and the tropic of Capricorn are indicated. Temple describes the form of the map as "an attempt to copy a coloured European map of the 17th century" (ibid.).

If, as suggested above, we can not prove that ahsu can be applied to the whole system (network), the connection to other kinds of nets seems rather difficult to establish. Even more difficult is the connection to 'staircases'. I can not remember having met any winding stairs in Burma which could explain the metaphorical use of ahsu. Stairs of an ordinary Burmese house, as well as palaces and temples are straight.

Except perhaps that most speakers would "feel" that the feminine form is less correct, showing more German influence.
Is there another possibility to account for the seemingly illogical use of *ahsaw*? First accepted by all speakers of Burmese. As my informant told me, mosquito-nets ("hpyahtawad") are counted either as *ahsaw* 'unit', non-specific default classifier for (small) objects or, better, *khataw* 'round thing', which is also used for houses and other small buildings. The word *hpyahtawad* literally means ‘mosquito-net frame/prison’, so the use of the classifier for buildings seems to be the obvious choice. My informant did not accept an expression like *hpyahtawad* 'ahsaw', never as *khataw*.

Judson states in his Burmese-English dictionary that *ahsaw* (of uncertain meaning) is used for "gardens, etc." pagodas, and some other articles (1883:679). According to Okell, this classifier is used for being objects and persons deserving respect, e.g., Buddhas, pagodas, and Treasures, also for folded paper manuscripts and fishing nets. (1969:218), The Myanmar-English Dictionary defines *ahsaw* as 'part numerical classifier used when counting sacred objects and manuscripts'. According to Okell, this classifier is used for being objects and persons deserving respect, e.g., Buddhas, pagodas, and Treasures. The Myanmar-Thai Dictionary lists *ahsaw* as 'part numerical classifier used when counting sacred objects and manuscripts'.

Paya (khataw) and Buddha (myaw-saw-thpyaw) (1994:159) The Burmese school grammar explains *ahsaw* as 'being used with persons and objects worthy of being respected and revered' and gives as examples *hpyahtawad* 'ahsaw', 'a Buddha, pagoda', etc.