

# Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area

Still and anymore in Burmese:\*  
another look at /theɪ/, /oʊn/ and /tɔ/

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## 1. Introduction

Writing about the English perfective in relation to still and anymore, Michael Morrissey (1973) made use of a helpful way of isolating certain semantic features associated with them. He pointed out, among other things, that sentences containing still and anymore have to do with a primary time of reference, often 'now', and a secondary time, which is previous to the first. If these two times are symbolized by x, for the primary time, and y, for the secondary time, then his example 'Mr. Jones is still tampering with the lock' can be represented as +y+x; i.e., by virtue of containing still, the sentence includes both 'Mr. Jones is (now) tampering', hence +x, and 'Mr. Jones was (previously) tampering', hence +y.

Similarly, 'Mr. Jones isn't tampering with the lock anymore' can be represented as +y-x: -x because he is not tampering (now)', and +y because 'he was tampering (previously)'.

Morrissey also noted that the information relating to time x is 'new', while that for time y is not.

A similar treatment had occurred to me as a promising way of understanding Burmese /tɔ/, an auxiliary verb which, used with a positive verb, has given some trouble to analysts. This paper suggests that it helps to clarify the meaning of /tɔ/ if one recognizes, both for sentences containing /tɔ/ and for sentences containing two other auxiliary verbs, /theɪ/ and /oʊn/, two times of reference. The information relating to one of the times is new ('stated'), while that relating to the other is not ('implied'), and there may be a positive or negative 'truth value' for either time.

Looked at in this way, the system formed by /theɪ/, /oʊn/ and /tɔ/ in combination with positive and negated verbs is strikingly close to that formed by still and anymore, but it is more complete since /tɔ/

with a positive verb fills a slot that is not comfortably filled in English.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Auxiliary verbs

As a rule, verb sentences in Burmese end with, or consist of, a verb followed by one of a set of suffixes which may be called 'verb-sentence markers' - 'vsmkr' for short; e.g.

ein-au'hma	hpya hkin-te
house-under-at	mat spread - vsmkr
'(I) spread a mat under the house'	

or:

pì-yò
finish-vsmkr
'(That)'s the end (of the matter)'

(The transcription used here is that called 'standard phonetic' in Okell 1972, with voicing marked and with accented tones)

Between the verb and the vsmkr there occurs a large set of items, some free, some bound, and some in between, which, on the strength of their productive occurrence in this position, may be grouped together and labelled 'auxiliary verbs'; e.g.

/peì/ in:	hkin-peì-te
	spread-give-vsmkr
	'(I) spread (it) for (them)'

/thwà/ in:	pì-thwà-yò
	finish-go-vsmkr
	'(That)'s the end (of the matter)'

/theì/, /òun/ and /tò/, the subject of this paper, can be placed in the class of 'auxiliary verbs' thus defined, though two of them (/òun/ and /tò/) are exceptional in one respect: see 2.4.

### 2.2 /theì/ = /òun/

It should be mentioned at this stage that, as several writers have pointed out, /theì/ and /òun/ occur in complementary distribution. /òun/ occurs where the vsmkr is /me/, /né/ or /(zero)/; and /theì/ is used with the other vsmkrs and before suffixes of classes other than vsmkr. (/(Zero)/, meaning 'no overt vsmkr' is used here for simplicity of statement despite the theoretical objections.)

So, instead of three items, we have in effect only two: /thei-oùn/ and /tó/.

2.3 The Literature. Most published accounts of what /thei/, /oùn/, and /tó/ mean - references are given in section 8 - treat them as more or less unconnected members of the large class of auxiliary verbs - or of partly identical classes under other names. /Thei/ and /oùn/ are given such labels as 'continuance', 'repetition', 'further action', 'still', 'yet', 'more', 'again', and so on; while /tó/ is said to indicate 'inevitability', 'imminence', 'permission', 'necessity', 'now', 'no longer', 'emphasis', and the like.

Glosses such as these are usually appropriate for the examples given, but such a piecemeal, ad hoc approach fails to reveal some important points of contrast between the two, and even obscures an important aspect of the meaning of /tó/.

My colleague Anna Allott, one of whose articles (1965) deals more fully with /thei/, /oùn/, and /tó/ than any other source, has taken a long step towards a more satisfactory description by pointing out that (with certain rare exceptions: section 7) /thei-oùn/ and /tó/ are mutually exclusive. She treats them together as contrasting exponents of a 'category of aspect', to which she allots two terms, 'cumulative' (/thei-oùn/ and 'culminative' (/tó/). She gives some examples to illustrate their use, and summarizes the meanings of her two terms as -

'(cumulative:) a continuation, a repetition, an adding of one state or action to another, an unfinished accumulation, as it were...

(culminative:) one thing inevitably or imminently leading on to, finishing, in fact culminating in a certain action or state'.

The postulation of a semantic link between /thei-oùn/ and /tó/, marching their mutual exclusion, seems well justified. It receives striking support from certain distributional peculiarities noted in the following section. The explanation of their meaning, however, can, I believe, be made more explicit by drawing attention to their double time reference.

## 2.4 Distributional peculiarities

While /thei-oùn/ and /tó/ behave in many respects like other auxiliary verbs, they have two distributional characteristics that set them apart from the rest. Both are matters of relative order.

First there is their order-relationship with the auxiliary verb /pa/ '(polite)': they follow /pa/ after a positive verb, but reverse the order after a negated verb - i.e. a verb with the prefix /mā/ 'not':

positive:	V-pa-thei-te	V-pa-tó-te
negative:	māV-thei-pa-hpù	māV-tó-pa-hpù

Secondly there is their order-relationship with vsmkr /né/: unlike other auxiliary verbs, /thei-òun/ and /tó/ follow /né/ instead of preceding it:

māV-né-òun	māV-né-tó
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Contrast other auxiliary verbs -

māV-peì-né	māV-thwà-né
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It does not of course necessarily follow from mutual exclusiveness or from unparalleled distributional characteristics that there will be a semantic contrast or complementarity. Such features are, however, suggestive, and in this case, it seems, it is rewarding to follow up the suggestion.

### 3. Implied preceding (in)action

#### 3 1 /Thei-òun/

One common characteristic of sentences containing /thei-òun/ and /tó/ is that they not only inform the hearer of some action (or, with a negated verb, inaction), but also imply a relationship with some preceding action (or inaction) - if we limit ourselves for the time being to statements containing verbs of 'action'.

For example, a sentence without either -

pa'tǎlà	tì-me
xylophone	play-vsmkr
'(I) will play the xylophone'	

- informs the hearer of some action to take place. The same sentence with /òun/, however -

pa'tǎlà	tì-òun-me
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- not only informs as before, but also implies some preceding action of which the hearer knows, e.g. (according to context) that I have been playing the xylophone already. A possible translation for such a context is '(I) will go on playing the xylophone', or '(I) will play the xylophone again'.

/Thei/, in complementary distribution with /òun/, works in the same way: the sentence -