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Grammaticalized Verbs in Lolo-Burmese

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Summary Below I will present an analysis of a set of verbs in Burmese which concatenate with each other and with full verbs to form complex predicates which themselves function as unitary predicates in simple sentences. These complex predicates I will call V*'s and the process which forms them 'verb incorporation.' Okell has called these verbs auxiliary verbs[1] and has characterized them as those elements which "precede clause-markers in verb clauses" and "occur in compounds following a wide variety of other verbs." I will attempt to demonstrate that this set of over fifty verbs can be further subcategorized into five groups, which form a sloppy hierarchy of increasing grammaticalization, a trait whose definition will take into account boundness, the presence or absence of complements and complementizers in underlying structure, the possibility of direct negation, flexibility of scope, and surface ordering. I will show that there is a degree of semantic coherence to these predicates and their subcategorizations, and suggest several ways in which their semantic properties might be linked to their grammaticalized syntactic behavior. I will also claim that there is a degree of arbitrariness in the subcategorizations--that the behavior of the system cannot be predicted from semantic facts alone. Where appropriate, I will compare analogous verbs and processes in Lahu and Lisu.

A linguistic problem of long standing has been that of determining the category membership of morphemes in a given language. This aspect of grammar writing has always been complicated by the dynamic processes of language change, through which elements become relexicalized and regrouping takes place among the form-classes of the lexicon. Often category labels such as noun, verb, auxiliary, particle, and so on have been bandied about with little concern for careful definitions, or transferred in a Procrustean way from one language to another with insufficient attention to language particular formal and functional criteria.

There has been a resurgence of interest of late in questions of category membership and categorial change, particularly among verbs. Arguments have been presented for the segregation or coalescence of modals and auxiliaries and main verbs.[2] Work on serial verbs and co-verbs in some African languages and Chinese has led to proposals that verbs have undergone categorial change into prepositions or particles.[3]

The Lolo-Burmese languages, as well as other languages of the Tibeto-Burman group, evince verb categories of a particular sort.

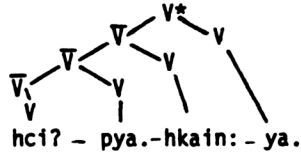
Certain subsets of the complement-taking verbs of these languages (many but not all of these can occur alone as main verbs--a point to which I will return below) suffer reduction of their complement structures and concatenate into tightly bound strings of verbs into which neither NP arguments nor any other morphemes can intrude (for behavior of the negative and complementizers see below). As Matisoff puts it in his grammar of Lahu(henceforth LG), "the Tibeto-Burman languages in general, and Lahu in particular, are remarkable for the apparent ease with which two or more verbs may be strung together or concatenated to form complex verbal nuclei."[4]

I will call these verbs 'incorporable verbs' to emphasize the tightness of the bonds which link them, and the process which creates these strings 'incorporation'. 'Compound verbs' seems incompatible with the complexity and non-coordinateness of their internal structure. The strings themselves I will refer to as V*'s, partly for brevity's sake and partly because the strings themselves seem to function as unitary predicates--complex words--in simple sentences.

Loosely speaking, then, incorporation is a process by which the predicates P, Q, R, S, say, of a set of embedded propositions with additional arguments x, y, z (I attempt to mirror OV syntax in these logical forms):(((((x)S,y)R,x)Q,w)P) are extracted and fused into a single complex predicate S-R-Q-P with arguments x, y, z: ((z,y,x)S-R-Q-P). For example,[5]

(1) ahpwa:ci:-kou hci?-pya.-hkain:-ya.-te
old lady-OBJ scrape-show-ask-must- PRT.
"(I) had to ask the old lady to show (me) how to scrape (it)."

contains the V* hci?-pya.-hkain:-ya. consisting of the full verb hci? 'scrape', and the three incorporable verbs pya. 'show (how)', hkain: 'ask', and ya. 'must'. The pronominal arguments are optionally expressed in most sentences, but if they were there, they could not intrude into any part of V*, but would rather be found strung out along with ahpwa:ci:-kou 'old lady' in initial position in a relatively free order. In other words, the relatively simple structure of the sentence, roughly (NP)(NP) NP V*-PRT, belies its complex logical form, which is reflected only in the internal structure of V*, which is not coordinate, but rather has the constituent structure



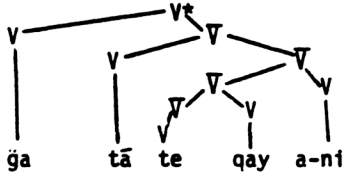
correctly reflecting the scopes of the various predicates which have

been incorporated.

An example from Lahu of even greater complexity is[6]

(2) ŋà ɡ̈a-tā-te-qay-ani-ve-yɔ̀
I must-begin-do-continue-try-PRT.-PRT.
"I will have to begin trying to continue doing this."

which contains a V* ɡ̈a-tā-te-qay-ani consisting of a full verb te 'do', two left-incorporating verbs(a category not found in Burmese to which I will return later) ɡ̈a 'must' and tā 'begin', and two right-incorporating verbs qay 'continue' and a-ni 'try', along with an additional argument ŋa 'I', 'this' being unexpressed. The basic sentence structure NP V*-PRT-PRT is quite similar to (1), and again the complex logical form is reflected only in the internal structure of V* which, due to the presence of the left-incorporated predicates, displays ambidextrous branching:



Not all elements of V* behave identically. Previous grammatical treatments of these verbs have differed with respect to both the number of subcategorizations proferred and the differentiating criteria employed. Okell, in his Reference Grammar of Colloquial Burmese (henceforth BG), has taken a broad approach, making no formal divisions amongst the V* elements (bound morphemes occurring between the head, or 'lowest', verb and the clause marking particle (e.g.te in (1) above)), but rather simply noting peculiarities of behavior as they occur. He calls the V* elements 'auxiliary verbs' and characterizes them as follows:

> Among other compound verbs there are some which contain verbs(relatively few in number) that occur in compounds following a wide variety of other verbs--in fact virtually any other....When these very productive verbs occur in compounds they are called 'auxiliary members' or simply 'auxiliary verbs', and the compounds containing them are called 'auxiliary compounds'. (BG p. 25)

Cornyn and Roop[7] propose two categories where Okell has one: 'auxiliary verbs', which "function both as full verbs and as modifiers immediately following full verbs," and 'secondary part-

icles', which are "bound forms which follow the verb and precede final particles." Aside from the use of 'immediately', which presupposes incorrectly that there can be only one 'auxiliary verb' in any given V*, the significant aspects of this categorization are first, the decision to deny verbhood to some V* elements, and second, the use of boundness, or inability to occur alone as a full verb, as a differentiating criterion. In fact, roughly fourty percent of V* elements do not have full verb homophones, but the application of this diagnostic is quite problematic from a methodological point of view, owing to the fact that the mere presence of a full verb homophone does not guarantee 'non-boundness' in the absence of a consideration of the semantic relatedness between the homophones.

Matisoff, in LG, distinguishes five subcategories among the V* elements of Lahu, basing himself on both "distributional and semantic criteria." He distinguishes'pre-head versatiles', which I have referred to above as 'left-incorporated verbs'; 'juxtacapitals', which occur directly after the head verb; 'medials', a semantically heterogeneous open class which are mutually exclusive; 'caudals', which are very abstract in meaning and occur in final position in V*'s; and 'variables', which are aspectual in nature and have great 'concatenative freedom'.

Before presenting my classification of the V* elements for Burmese, two caveats are in order. First, the hierarchy below does not constitute a claim about diachronic development, i.e. that given incorporable verbs are changing categorially through time in any direction along the hierarchy. More comparative-historical work is required before claims of this kind can be substantiated. The hierarchy is simply an indication, synchronically speaking, of'verbiness', an arrangement of groups of V* elements in such a way as to place the most verb-like elements at one end (Group I) and the most particle-like elements at the other (Group V). Second, these subcategories are not neat, and the idiosyncratic behavior of a number of verbs remains unresolved. Some order has been imposed upon the chaos, but reclassifications and further subcategorizations may very well be necessary, if not major revisions. The system is not perfectly static, and the amount of dialectal and idiolectal variation in the location of particular elements along the hierarchy is unclear. The classification scheme is presented in diagrammatic form below:

	I	II	III	IV	V
V* element	X	X	X	X	X
Free scope	X	X	X	X	
± Complement	X	X	X		
± Complementizer	X	X			
Nominalized complement	X				