

A semantic study of deictic auxiliaries in Burmese

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1. Introduction

The grammaticalization of motion verbs into deictic auxiliaries is a common phenomenon in Tibeto-Burman languages. DeLancey (1985) notes that this is a cyclic process, the directive category being regularly reinvented in the Tibeto-Burman languages, and almost as regularly lost again. This paper will explicate the semantics of two sets of deictic auxiliaries in Burmese. The first set comprises *swà*¹ which is related to the verb 'go', and *la*, which is related to the verb 'come'. The second set comprises *lok*, related to the verb 'follow, accompany', and *khái*, which is of uncertain origin. Burmese allows verbs to be freely concatenated and this has led to an extensive system of versatile verbs (cf. Matisoff 1969; Smeall 1975) that can be classified according to varying degrees of grammaticalization. The degree of grammaticalization is largely determined by the semantics of the interaction between the auxiliary and the main verb. In the case of deictic auxiliaries like *la* and *swà*, which are synchronically attested as main verbs, the degree to which they are metaphorically extended depends on the semantics of their interaction with various categories of verbs. This synchronic continuum in the degree of grammaticalization is due to the semantic stability of their meanings as main verbs.

As auxiliaries, *swà* and *la* have developed beyond marking direction into the domain of aspect. *Swà* has developed a perfective aspectual sense from its meaning of *departure from a deictic center*. *La*, on the other hand, has developed an aspect of 'progression towards completion' from its meaning of *motion towards a deictic center*. In many, but not all examples, I have glossed *la* as 'becoming', indicating a progression towards (the completion of) a state. Similarly, from its basic meaning of 'follow, accompany', *lok* has developed an aspectual sense beyond that of displacement from a deictic center into the metaphorical notion of 'going ahead and doing something', which, in most uses, functions to give permission or ask for confirmation. Although the origin of *khái* is uncertain and not dealt with in this paper, it falls neatly into the paradigm, in opposition to *lok* and as the counterpart of *la* 'come'. As with *la*, *khái* indicates motion towards a deictic center. Unlike *la*, *khái* conveys a greater

¹ The system of transliteration used in this paper represents standard Burmese orthography. The clear level tone (<PLB Tone *1) is left unmarked (e.g. *la*); the heavy breathy tone (<PLB Tone *2) is marked by a grave accent (e.g. *swà*); and the creaky tone (<PLB Tone *3) is indicated by an acute accent (e.g. *khái*).

sense of displacement, forcing the further displacement of an argument in some uses (e.g. in combination with *rawk* 'reach').

2. *la* and *swà*

Since *la* and *swà* are deictically specified, the parameters of deixis (see DeLancey 1980) are relevant in investigating their metaphorical extensions. The deictic orientation of motion that *la* and *swà* specify comprises a two term system as in English: *la* 'come' indicating motion either towards the speaker or the hearer (SAL, Speech Act Location) and *swà* 'go' indicating motion away (from the speaker or the hearer) in some other direction.

As in English, *la* 'come' treats both Speech Act Participants (SAP) as equals, where the speaker as well as the hearer may equally be treated as the deictic center towards which motion is directed (cf. DeLancey 1980).

1. *dí-né ma la náí*
today NEG come IMP
'Don't come today.' (speaker=deictic center)
2. *kyá-naw la khái may*
I come AUX IRR
'I will come.' (hearer=deictic center)

Motion towards either SAP by a third person is expressed with *la* whereas motion by either SAP towards a third person is expressed with *swà*.

3. *màng chí kə su la pè may*
you AT TO he/she come give IRR
'He/she will come and give (it) to you.'
4. *ngá chí kə su má la bù*
I AT TO he NEG come NEG
'He didn't come to me.'
5. *sú chí kə swà*
he AT TO² go
'(You) go to him.'

² *kə*, glossed as 'to', indicates destination and is the same as the morpheme used to mark objects, as opposed to *ká*, glossed as 'from', which indicates origin and is the same as the morpheme used to mark subjects.

6. *sí chí kə swà mǎy*
 he AT OBJ go IRR
 '(I) will go to him.'

When *la* or *swà* precede another verb, they retain their full lexical meaning. Verbs that follow the head either retain their lexical meaning or undergo varying degrees of grammaticalization, which is determined by their semantics. Thus, in *la cà tay* '(He) came and ate' ("come eat RLS") and *swà prǎw mǎy* '(I) will go talk (to him)' ("go talk IRR"), the initial position ensures that *la* and *swà* will invariably retain their full lexical meanings. It is when either *la* or *swà* follows another verb that they undergo metaphoric extension or semantic bleaching. The semantics of these verbs in their grammaticalized uses are dependent on their interaction with the meaning of the main verb. For the purpose of explicating the differences in the degree of grammaticalization, main verbs have been categorized as either 'action', 'motion' or 'stative'. For the purpose of making clearer the difference between *la* and *swà*, stative verbs in Burmese have been further categorized into those that 'undergo progress' as opposed to those that do not.

2.1 Action verbs with *la* and *swà*. When following verbs that refer to concrete actions, *la* and *swà* retain their full lexical meaning. This is a case of what has been called by Matisoff (1969, 1973) simple "nonce concatenation", i.e. 'an unmarked sequence of verbs in which neither has a grammaticalized function' (cf. DeLancey 1991).

7. *su thámàng cà la tay*
 he rice eat come RLS
 'He ate rice (and came).'
8. *mert thámàng khyak swà tay*
 Mary rice cook go RLS
 'Mary cooked rice (and left).'

However, with 'utterance verbs', that do not refer purely to concrete actions, the meaning of *la* has been metaphorically extended to express a gradual approach towards the completion of a state of affairs where there is a perception of some (usually social) difficulty in bringing up a matter:

9. *su mè la tay*
 she ask come RLS
 'She has brought herself to ask the question' (in the context of some difficulty or problem).

10. *su mè la pr*
 he ask come PUNC
 'He is beginning to ask' (about a matter which is embarrassing to bring up, e.g. a long-forgotten debt).

When *swà* combines with utterance verbs, it retains its lexical meaning of *departing from the SAL*:

11. *su pràw swà tay*
 she say go RLS
 'She said (something)' (and is now no longer at the SAL).

2.2 Motion verbs with *la* and *swà*. Following motion verbs, *la* and *swà* add a deictic specification. They specify motion either towards or away from a deictic center (cf. DeLancey 1991a):

12. *nggak tac kawng sac-pang paw ká praM swà tay*
 bird one CLF tree on FROM fly go RLS
 'A bird flew away from the tree.'
13. *nggak tac kawng sac-pang paw ko praM la tay*
 bird one CLF tree on TO fly come RLS
 'A bird flew towards the tree.'

With motion involving SAP's, *la* orients motion towards the deictic center, which is either the speaker or hearer or a terminal point where both the speaker and the hearer will be located. The deictic center is the hearer in (14):

14. *nga prè la da nái mǎng lup ne da rap*
 I run come NMLZ AND you do PROG NMLZ stop
 'Stop what you're doing when I run towards you!'

In (15), the deictic center is displaced from the SAL to a terminal point where both SAP's will meet:

15. *mǎng kyàwng ko kà mǎwng la*
 you school TO car drive come
 'You drive and come to school (where I'll be).'

On the other hand, *swà* orients the motion away from the SAL. That is, the terminal point is not the other SAP, but rather some other point outside of the SAL: