MEANING BASE FOR STRUCTURE: A RE-EXAMINATION OF VERBS IN BURMESE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Okell (1969:43-44) divides verbs in Burmese into two types: functive and stative. He explains the difference between the two types on the basis of meaning; that is, those in the former denote actions or functions (e.g. သွား /θwà/[1] 'go', လာ /la/ 'come', နေ /ne/ 'live', ထိုင် /thain/ 'sit', စား /sà/ 'eat', သောက် /θau'/ 'drink'), whilst those in the latter denote qualities or states (e.g. လေး /lè/ 'be heavy', ပေါ့ /pó/ 'be light', မြန် /myan/ 'be fast', နှေး /hnè/ 'be slow'). Although, however, the criterion for the initial classification is made on the basis of meaning, the differences between the two types, which he does not specify either as structural differences or meaning differences, are explained in a somewhat circular approach, a mixture of meaning explained in terms of structure and function, and structure and function explained in terms of meaning. This is illustrated in points (1) to (5) below.

(1) According to Okell one of the most important differences between the two types of verbs is the way they are attributed to nouns. Functive verbs simply precede the noun. For example:

Functive	V		N		
သောက်	+		ရေ	⇒	သောက်ရေ
/θau'/			/ye/		/θau'-ye/
drink			water		drinking water

Stative verbs usually follow the noun. For example:

N		Stative	V		
ရေ	+		အေး	⇒	ရေအေး
/ye/			/è/ =		/ye-è/
water			be cold		cold water	(p.43)

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[1] For describing Burmese words, the broad transcription outlined in the introduction has been used in this paper, and is applied to the paraphrased or quoted material from Okell (1969) in (1) to (5) below.

The way verbs are used attributively with nouns is explained in terms of structure, the word order they conform to – that is, the difference in function is explained on the basis of structure.

(2) Okell sees other differences between the two types of verb as following naturally from their meaning. "For example, functive verbs do not *normally*[2] occur with the formative prefix အခ /kha'/ 'rather, fairly, -ish'; and stative verbs do not *normally* occur with imperative markers, or with such auxiliary verbs as ရဲ /yé/ 'dare to', အား /à/ 'free to', ဖြစ် /phyi'/ 'manage to' etc." (pp.43-44). Thus a structural difference is explained in terms of meaning.

(3) "...with other verbs – particularly those which are not found as attributes in compound nouns – the classification is necessarily subjective and there are therefore many *borderline cases and exceptions*. Examples of difficult cases are:

ရှိ	/ʃí/	be, exist, there is
ဖြစ်	/phyi'/	happen, come about, be
ဟုတ်	/hou'/	be true, be so
သိ	/θí/	know"

(p.44)

The "difficult borderline cases" are explained on the basis that they are not attributes in compound nouns – an explanation which is half meaning-based and half function/structure-based.

(4) "*Some* verbs are used with both functive and stative meaning; e.g.

ရပ်	/ya'/	stop, bring to a halt; stop, cease, come to an end, be still
ရစ်	/yi'/	turn, cause to revolve; revolve
ကပ်	/ka'/	place close to, put near; be close, near
ရှင်း	/ʃìn/	clear up, make clear, explain; be clear, obvious
ဝိုင်း	/wàin/	form a circle, surround; be surrounded
ဆိုင်း	/shàin/	postpone, delay; be postponed, delayed
ဆက်	/she'/	join together; be joined together" (p.44)

These, Okell says, are the verbs which can belong to two types, having two types of meaning – which is a meaning-based explanation.

(5) "In other cases, verbs that are *usually* stative are sometimes used transitively, like functive verbs; e.g.

တင်း	/tìn/	be tight, tense – make tight, tense
တိုး	/tòu/	be quiet – make quiet, turn down volume

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[2]   The italics in points (2) to (5) are mine.

ကျယ်	/cɛ/	be loud – make loud, turn up volume
ကျဉ်း	/cìn/	be narrow – make narrow
တို	/tou/	be short – make short"	(p.44)

"These are examples of verbs which are basically stative verbs and can sometimes function as functive verbs " – here, exceptions of shift from one type to the other are explained on the basis of transitivity, a grammatical term of meaning and structure.

Okell's grammar is universally acclaimed among Tibeto-Burmese linguists as a superb grammar. For the task of analysing Burmese grammar, especially for the use of non-native speakers, it seems impossible to take any approach other than his. The purpose of this paper is neither to contradict Okell's remarks on verbs nor to criticise his methodological approach, but rather to examine the meaning components in Burmese verb types, which are determinants of the classification of verbs as well as their morphological (structural) make-up when they are attributed to nouns. In this paper, I will attempt first to present the view that meaning is the only criterion for explaining both the initial classification of verb types and their morphological make-up. Such an approach, I believe, will help the grammarian abstain from using exceptions such as those indicated by italic type in the paragraphs above, so that more universal grammatical statements can be made. Secondly, I will attempt to establish the view that classifying all 'verbals' in Burmese simply as verbs is merely a subjective treatment.[3] As mentioned previously, Okell's grammar is a *reference* grammar, and cannot be expected to contain a detailed analysis of the meanings of verbs. The ultimate objective of this paper is merely to complement Okell's remarks on verbs.

2. MONOSYLLABIC VERBS

Although verbs in Burmese can be either monosyllabic, disyllabic or polysyllabic, monosyllabic verbs are the cores of all other verbs, because disyllabic and polysyllabic verbs (with the exception of 'tied noun + verb' compound verbs such as နှုတ်ဆက် /hnou' shɛ'/ 'greet') are merely combinations of monosyllabic verbs. Verbs at the monosyllabic level will therefore be dealt with first.

2.1 ANALYSIS OF MEANING

Okell (1969:43) explains that it is useful for some purposes to divide verbs into two types: those which denote *voluntary*[4] actions or functions, and those which denote qualities or

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[3] The term 'verbal' here refers to a word class including verbs and adjectives in the tradition of transformational generative grammar.

[4] This term is my own.

states. The second difference in meaning between the two types (which is not explicit in Okell) is the agentive nature of the former and non-agentive nature of the latter. Functive verbs are highly agentive in the sense that they strongly assume an actual agent, a performer, whereas stative verbs are non-agentive in the sense that they do not assume an actual agent or performer, although both types need the formal subject in the sentence construction. The subjects associated with functive verbs play an active (agentive) role, whereas the subjects associated with stative verbs play an inactive (non-agentive) role.

This agentive versus non-agentive component of meaning is not the same as the presence or absence of action. And it is important to establish this component of meaning as one independent characteristic distinguishing the two types because there are verbs which are stative – they still denote actions and the actions denoted by them can be seen. The action takes place by itself and hence the associated (nominal) subject has no role in it. For example:

ပြတ်	/pya'/	break off (on one's own accord)	The actions
ကျ	/cá/	fall down	can be
ချိ	/chí/	limp	seen, but
နွဲ့	/nwέ/	be tender and gracious (as a feminine feature)	these are intransitive
ခြော	/có/	be gracefully pleasant	stative verbs.

(The first two verbs are more action-orientated than the remaining three, although they are all stative verbs.) The action denoted by these verbs is understood to happen or take place with no effort on the part of the subject associated with them. The subjects associated with stative verbs are more akin to a topic in a topic-comment construction with a verb 'to be' (e.g. 'we are carpenters') and hence they can be regarded as nominal or topical non-agentive subjects. For functive verbs, however, voluntary action is the most prominent. For example:

သွား	/θwà/	go	These are functive
လာ	/la/	come	intransitive verbs and
နေ	/ne/	stay	their actions
ထိုင်	/thain/	sit	can be seen.

Since these verbs in the two sets of examples above are all intransitive, the transitive/intransitive criterion cannot distinguish these two sets and the agentive element is therefore required as a separate component of meaning to distinguish the two types.

The third componential difference in meaning between the two types is that there is transitivity and/or intransitivity and/or causativity in the functive verbs whereas there is only intransitivity in the stative verbs. For example: