Highlighting through the Particle swc? in Sgaw Karen narrative Discourse

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Many languages have particles and affixes that are problematic to the grammatical analysis. The functions and meanings of these particles and affixes are not easy to identify on a clause or sentence level because they are determined by the structure of connected discourse (Longacre 1976). This claim is supported by the evidence from Sgaw Karen, a language of Tibeto-Burman family.

In this language, there are several particles that have discourse functions. Among these particles, the particle swc? is dominant. This particle occurs in all texts even though narrated by different native speakers. In some texts it may occur with great frequency, whereas in other texts it is only occasionally present. This is not a matter of idiolects because its frequency of occurrence also varies in texts narrated by the same individuals. At first glance it seems to be randomly distributed. It may be preferred at any point where the narrator's emotions are involved. However, a closer look on discourse level reveals its function and meaning.

The particle swc? is usually attached to thematic material, i.e. the significant information of narrative discourse called backbone or storyline which is opposed to supportive material called background or non-storyline. Its first occurrence within the story is tied to the plot structure of the story. The particle swc? first appears
at the inciting incident in texts 1, 2, 4 and 6; at the developing conflict in text 3; and at the climax in text 5. Its common function is to provide chronological theme line cohesion to a discourse. That is, it indicates progression to a new backbone event or activity. However, not all backbone events or actions are marked by this particle. The purpose of this study is to discuss the situations in which swé? is used to mark temporal progression in discourse. It is found that the narrators used this particle when they aimed to highlight an important chronological juncture, a backreferent to the previous crucial event or activity, a connectivity of crucial successive events or activities, a new cycle of a cyclical episode, a thematicity switch, a thematic participant within an identification sequence and a role reversal.

1. Highlighting an important chronological juncture

Temporal phrases or words that are preceded or tagged by the particle swé? encode major time settings of the following crucial events or activities. While swé? indicates important chronological juncture, it also indicates progression along the backbone. The following examples, 1 and 2, from text 2 and text 4 respectively, illustrate the function of swé? with temporal expressions to highlight important time settings.

Example 1

lētōkhō nē nē mō vēnō
first day that let sister

vēkō lə ?ɔ
elest take-care him

swé? mēchēthɔ ʔə pə
pt. in-the-morning he younger sister

xé va lē klonɔ
six cl. go pull grass

'On the first day, [we, all sisters] let the eldest sister take care of him [the baby].

In the morning, the six younger sisters went to pull grass.
The context of this example is that six sisters who owned seven pigs wanted to have a little baby sister or brother and talked about what they wanted. A giant overheard them and disguised himself as a baby boy. The six sisters found him and took him home. They decided to take turns taking care of the baby. The eldest sister was the first to start while the rest went to work in the field. Example 1 has the temporal word màchëthò preceded by the particle swè?. The function of swè? is to highlight the temporal setting of the following crucial events in which the story develops its conflict. That is, while the eldest sister was taking care of the baby brother and fell asleep, the baby became a giant and ate a big pig.

Example 2

swè? swè? vè vè ne tà kbi
pt. pt. finally completely dark
và wè kò? kwà? kwà?
he emp.mk. cry sound of toad
nì? lò hòkhò bè?lìa?
enter in ground under

nòtbò kè cì? cì? zò
deer return run run step on
bà? lùsà khòmè
touch, hit gourd stem

'Finally, [it was] completely dark. He cried "kwa kwa" and went underground.

The context of example 2 is that a toad and a deer exchanged labor. The toad went to help the deer work first. The deer provided lunch for the toad and took him home. When it was the turn of the deer, the toad neither gave him lunch nor took him home. After work, the toad
went into a hole under the ground. The deer had to return alone. While running, he stepped on the stem of a gourd.

The particle swé? in example 2 highlights the time juncture encoded by the temporal phrase và và nè tà kéhí 'Finally, it was completely dark'. This time juncture is crucial for the development of the story because it was the nighttime and thus the deer could not see the gourd and stepped on it. With this temporal phrase swé? occurs twice. Its double occurrence confirms the importance of the following events which form the climax of the story.

2. Highlighting a backreference

The effect of tagging a backreferential clause with swé? is twofold. On the one hand swé? highlights the completion of the previous crucial event restated by the backreferential clause which serves as a point of reference for the following crucial event. On the other hand the backreferential clause tagged by swé? indicates that the crucial backbone event expressed by the independent clause represents progression from the preceding backbone event. The backreferential clause usually occurs without an overt subject as in the following example from text 2.

Example 3
phósahó va ne lò? mí ?asá? 'That child pretended to
c1. that pretend sleep himself
child

lò? mí ?asá? swé? pa vàbò
pretend sleep himself pt. she sister
wèkó chómòwè àtà mí dè?
eldest think her child sleep then
mí mìno ?à khothí?
sleep lie down to sleep him beside
nè mí
that sleep

[After the child] had pretended to sleep, the eldest sister thought he [the child] was asleep.'
The context continues from example 1. After the eldest sister fed the baby and put him in the crib, the baby pretended he was asleep. In this example the repetitive adverbial clause lò? mí ?asá? 'pretend one was asleep' was tagged by swè? to highlight the completion of the previous crucial event and to indicate that the following crucial event builds on the previous one.

3. Highlighting a connectivity of successive events

A serial clause construction is often used to encode successive events or activities which are closely connected. It consists of a series of clauses with one overt subject present in the initial clause. The following clauses have zero anaphora as their subjects (Burushpah 1986). The events or activities encoded by this construction are chronologically related and have the same overall setting or point of reference. The particle swè? precedes the second clause. It marks progression of a new event or activity which builds on the preceding event or activity and highlights a connectivity of these two successive events or activities as in the following example from Text 5. The clauses are numbered for convenience of reference.

Example 4

Cl.1 swè? ké tò sí ?à 'He returned to hit a male pig [until it] died.
he emp.mh. return hit die he
thò?phá pig male

Cl.2 swè? kò nó pa hé ?ò? Then [he] called [other] people to come to eat people come eat
pt. call eat people come eat

The context of this example is that a king had seven daughters. He wanted the youngest daughter to get married. So he announced that if any man could sleep in the khló?, i.e. a kind
of big bell used for special occasions, the king would let him marry his daughter. Because of the cold, everybody who volunteered died within the khló?. However, one young man survived because of his wit. The king refused to let him marry his daughter. Then he went to consult an owl. The owl told him to kill a male pig. The following events are in example 4 and they are chronologically connected by the particle swe?.

In some instances of serial clause construction, the particle swe? is also used to connect a set of events or activities with another. In doing this, it further indicates a change of direction from a set of events or activities to another as in example 5 from Text 2.

Example 5

Cl.1 phósābó kwá pva mí lí 'The child saw the person child see person sleep already [the eldest sister] sleep.

Cl.2 swe? vsthè ró? lòthbósá? dò?sàká? then [he] got up, sneaked pt. get up sneak disguise giant
pva sí té dú giant,
old very one cl.

Cl.3 lò ?ò? thó? phá phàdò? ló? [he] went down to eat a go down eat pig male big at khlòlàdè whole big male pig under ne lò? the-space-under-a-house that whole té dí one cl.

Cl.4 swe? kè thò ?ò? dò? lòchà? then [he] returned to get pt. return go up be a.aux. at crib pu ne back into that crib, in that
Cl. 5 lòthòsá phòsáhó
    [he] disguised as a child, disguise child

cry again continually
Cl. 6 hò dò rára
    [he] cried continually.

The context of this example is example 3. In this example clauses 2 and 3 carry a set of activities and clauses 4, 5, 6 encode another set. These two sets are connected chronologically by the particle swé?.

4. Highlighting a new cycle of a cyclical episode

A cyclical construction is also found in the data. This construction involves going around and around in multiple cycles. The first cycle conveys new information while the following cycles consist of new situations with semantically similar activities.

In Sgaw Karen texts swé? is frequently used to introduce a new cycle other than the first one. However, the attachment of swé? to a new cycle is not obligatory. The preference of this particle at any point has to do with the speaker's emotions (cf. Leenhouts 1978). Example 6 illustrates series of eight cycles. The second, third, fourth, and sixth cycles are introduced by swé?. The whole episode is very lengthy, therefore only three cycles are given. In this example swé? introduces the second and the third cycles.

Example 6
nàthí sa?pvítà
    water spirit angry

' The water spirit was angry.

First cycle
sá  lè ?ò?ló? nà?
    [he] would go to ask the will go repay wild banana

nà?
    [his son's death].

wild banana say I know you go

The wild banana said, "How do I know? Go and ask the
ca thò? pè ò? dà? wè tè va
ask pig I be a.aux. a.aux. one cl.
pòtaklè pòtènò he cì?
My self was not strong come run
cà? bà? pva pè rìźwx?
Hit touch/hit person I roll down
pè bà? nà tèvàtèva pè tè
I touch, hit you whatever I not
siñà
know

Second cycle
swè? nàthí lè cá? dò? thò?
pt. water spirit go ask again pig
thò? té pè siñà né pè ò? dà?
pig say I know q.pt. I be a.aux.
wè pè swí pè tè siñà tà?è?
a.aux. my pigsty I not know what

wèsó hé blò? pè swí pè cì
cobra come crawl my pigsty I run
nà?cì?nà?co
without direction

Then the water spirit went
to ask the pig.
The pig said, "How do I know?
I was alone in my pigsty.
I did not know anything.
A cobra crawled into my
pigsty. I ran without
direction"

Third cycle
swè? lè cá? dò? wèsó bó
pt. go ask again cobra cl.
wèsó tèwè pè siñà pè ò? dà?
cobra say that I know I be a.aux.
wè dìlùdìlì
a.a. not interfere with anybody
wè pva lo chè? bà?
bamboo old down pierce touch, hit

Then [the water spirit] went to ask the cobra.
The cobra said, "How do I know? I was alone, not
interfering with anybody.
The old bamboo fell down
[and] pierced my backbone.
I crawled without
pà plökò pà blò? direction."

my backbone I crawl
nà ci nà co lò
without direction f.pt.

The context of this example continues from that of example 5. After the deer stepped on the stem of a gourd, the gourd rolled and hit the sesame. The sesame then hit a chicken’s eyes. The chicken went up a bamboo tree. The bamboo tree then pierced a cobra. The cobra moved into a pigsty. A pig ran and hit a wild banana. The wild banana hit a son of water spirit. The waterspirit was angry. Example 6 is the following part of the story.

5. Highlighting a thematicity switch

A thematic agent is the major participant who is the focal or central character on a given part of narrative (Jones and Nellis 1979). Thematicity switch occurs when there is a switch of interest from one thematic agent to another as the discourse progresses. It is highlighted by the particle sw? only when a new thematic participant is involved in crucial events or activities such as an inciting incident, a developing conflict, and a climax. The following example from text 1 illustrates a thematicity switch highlighted by the particle sw?.

Example 7

sw? pa ?ò sí? klà? nè pt. person drink liquor cl. that drinking said that he té ?à tà tònà?co tà say he emp. ak. talk nonsense f.pt. (the orphan) talked nonsense. [They] beat the to sèkò? có phxòvé orphan beat help together man orphan

The context is that a husband told his wife not to let pigs out of the pigsty while he was out. But the wife let the pigs go and a snake rolled itself around a pig's leg. The wife used a stick to move the snake away from the pig. The more she did this the bigger the snake was. The big snake then rolled itself around the wife's waist and dragged her into its hole. The villagers told a pigeon to get the husband. The husband was drinking with other men and did not listen to the pigeon. An orphan man did not drink and heard what the pigeon said. He told those men what he heard. The example begins with a thematicity switch from the orphan man to a group of men. Another thematicity switch is from the group of men to an old man. The next interest switch is from the old man to the group of men. This part of the story is crucial in that the husband knew what happened to his wife and returned home to rescue her.

6. Highlighting a thematic participant within an identification sequence

After a thematic agent is identified, he is usually encoded by zero anaphora. But this thematic agent can be re-identified for emphatic prominence within the same identification sequence by
attaching the particle swé? to an overt subject referring to him. The purpose of swé? is to signal that the following event or activity involved by this thematic agent is pivotal and unexpected as in example 8 from text 2.

Example 8

Identification

pt. one day giant big one

dá hò hó ló xá? xà
cl. come come at field beside

Re-identification

# nàbù nèkhlà? wè ?a
[he] hear hide a.aux. them

tà tè lò?sà?
in progress talk each other

in progress talk each other

He overheard them [seven sisters] talking to each other.

Re-identification for emphatic prominence

swé? dò?sèká? dá nè
pt. giant cl. that

ke lòthòsà? phòsàhò phòkhwavòphó
return disguise child baby boy

That giant disguised [himself] as a very lovely good baby boy.

[He] came [and] was crying beside the field.'

one cl. lovely good very come cry

ló xá xà nè
at field beside that

The context is the same as example 1. (In this example the particle swé? occurs twice. The effect of the first swé? is to highlight a temporal setting. In the meantime it also indicates progression along the backbone). The second swé? provides emphatic prominence for the thematic agent of an unexpected pivotal event, that
is, the giant disguised as a baby boy. This thematic agent is given even more emphasis by attaching dò mè 'classifier that' to the noun dò sàkà 'giant'.

7. Highlighting a role reversal

When the particle sàwè attaches to a thematic agent, it sometimes signals a role reversal event, i.e. there will be a radical change of some one's fortunes in a story where the aggressor will become the victim and vice versa (Longacre 1976). The example of a role reversal from text 4 is illustrated below.

Example 9

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Ìòò mè nòtàhó le
toad barking deer go
mòdòlvè sà?
exchange labour pull grass
Ìòò mè nòtàhó va le mòdò
toad person go work for
barking deer it's time return eat
me nòtàhó ke ?ò? kò
rice barking deer return eat take
à me mòbà nòtàhó ke
him rice evening barking deer return
take him
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's A toad and a barking deer went to exchange their labor by pulling grass. The toad went to work for the barking deer [first]. When it was time to return [home] to eat rice, the barking deer took the toad home [and gave] him rice. In the evening the barking deer took the toad [home].
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swè nòtàhó le mòkà ke ?ò
pt. barking deer go return the labour
mùbà? ?ò? me to ke ?ò?
it's time eat rice not return eat
take him nighttime not return take
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The barking deer went to work for the toad. When it was time to return [home] to eat rice, [the toad] did not take [the barking deer home] to eat [rice].
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At nighttime [the toad] did not take him [home].'

The context is the same as example 2. The particle swe? indicates that a role reversal is coming. That is, the barking deer will become a victim and the toad will become an aggressor. This role reversal event is an inciting incident which is crucial for the development of the story.

8. Summary

This paper discusses the functions of the particle swe? in connected discourse. The basic function of this particle is to mark progression of the thematic events or activities. In marking progression, the particle swe? is specifically used to highlight an important chronological juncture, a backreference, a connectivity of successive events, a new cycle of a cyclical episode, a thematic switch, a thematic participant within an identification sequence and a role reversal.

Even though the particle swe? corroborates thematic material, it is also found within embedded material encoded by a different discourse type, i.e. procedural discourse. In text 3 there were a grandmother, a granddaughter and a grandson. One day the granddaughter went to work and told the grandson how to take care of the grandmother step by step. The quote is an embedded procedural discourse in which the particle swe? is used to move progression an additional step along the backbone of procedural discourse.

The occurrence of swe? within procedural discourse shows that swe? not only marks progression of events or activities taken place within a completed time as in narrative discourse but also indicates progression of activities which are anticipated within a projected time as in procedural discourse."

In Sgaw Karen narratives, there is another discourse particle, i.e. mló or bló which behaves similarly to the particle swe?.
It is used interchangeably with swc? and found within only one lengthy text narrated by another elderly native speaker. As this article focuses on the particle swc?, this text is not used for the analysis. However, further study of this particle will discover its real meaning and function."
Notes

1. According to Ratanakul (1986), Sgaw Karen is accepted by most anthropologists to belong to the Tibeto-Burman family, a branch of Sino-Tibetan Stock. In Thailand, Sgaw Karen is spoken by a hill tribal group called Kariang Khaw or Yang Khaw emigrating from Burma more than two hundred years ago. This hill tribal group reside in the western half of the northern Thailand (Dhananjayananda 1983).

2. This article is based on six texts narrated by two female native speakers aged 13 and 21 years who speak a dialect of Sgaw Karen at Hua Pon village, Amphoe Khunyua, Maehongsorn province, Thailand. The texts are as follows:
   Text 1 nò më ë
   Mrs. Mue-E
   Text 2 pà dò pù wè ñï va
   Seven sisters
   Text 3 pà dò phó phi sé va
   The grandmother, the granddaughter, and the grandson
   Text 4 nòdè?kùò? nòtañō
   The barking deer and the toad
   Text 5 cópà phó më ñï va
   The king and seven daughters
   Text 6 pà dò pù wè këi va
   Two brothers

I would like to thank Assistant Professor Amon Tawesak for checking the transcription of these texts.

3. Cf. other studies of 'mysterious' particles and suffixes in Jones and Longacre, eds. (1979)

4. The backbone or storyline is referred to as any happenings which are punctiliar, sequential, and (most often) voluntary (Longacre 1990). These happenings contribute to the movement of the narratives. The background or non-storyline includes all supportive materials other than the main line of development in a
discourse (Longacre 1983).

5. See a discussion of the notional features of climactic narrative discourse (the plot) in Longacre (1983).

6. Jones (1961) classifies aspectual auxiliaries as a word class occurring after other members of the verb class. This word class has the following members:

- da’ ‘emphasized action’
- da ‘minimized action’
- ko ‘general or uncertain event’
- di ‘incomplete event (still,yet)”
- wé ‘reported event’
- dò ‘continuing action’

The aspectual auxiliaries found in this study and have a similar function to the above aspectual auxiliaries include:

- da ‘minimized event or action’
- wé ‘reported event’
- dò ‘continuing action’

7. The cyclical construction is similar to the overlay construction as found in Grimes (1975), therefore it is often mistaken as the overlay construction. In overlays, there is no temporal progression. The same facts are repeated about the same situation. But in cycles, it is different situations with similar actions by different participants. See a detailed discussion of cycling and overlaying in Thomas (1978).


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References


