A Linguistic Image of Nature?
The Burmese Numerative Classifier System Reviewed

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1. Introduction

A quarter of a century ago, Alton L. Becker published an article on the Burmese numerative classifier system, based on "a small paper-bound copy book, carefully written in his [Becker's teacher's] fine hand". (Becker 1975: 109) This book, "in which all classes of things are listed, abstract as well as concrete, in this world and out of it" (ibid.) was, as far as I know, never published or made available to the public in any form.

For more than twenty years Becker's paper has been considered a classical example of description of a classifier system which is closely related to the cosmos as perceived by the language community. During the past twenty years, Becker has often been quoted, most recently by Foley (1997:232 ff), but hardly ever challenged. On the following pages I want to take a closer look at Becker's argumentation and the Burmese data he uses.[1] The question to be answered is: Is there sufficient evidence to postulate a system of concentric circles for the Burmese classifiers, as Becker suggests, rather than a vertical stratification for humans and shape- or function-based choice for inanimate objects as is usually accepted for other Southeast Asian languages, such as Thai and Vietnamese?

2. Becker's analysis and discussion

Becker himself mentions that "numerative classifiers ... do distinguish shape and relative size ..." (p.110) but these distinctions are taken as secondary to a social dimension, derived from the folkloristic Buddhist cosmology of the Burmese. According to this Burmese cosmology, the centre is occupied by the Buddha and objects related to Him, such as Buddha images, pagodas, relics, but strangely also fishing nets, mosquito nets and staircases. The classifier associated with the centre is

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[1] I use basically the same transcription system as Okell (1969).

ahsuê a word for which no meaning or etymology has been established (but see below).

In the first circle (or "orbit") around the centre, there are found, according to Becker, Nats (Burmese deities, cf. Temple 1906), saints[2], monks and royalty, which are counted as *apà*[3], a word which in modern Burmese means 'closeness' or 'cheek'[4].

The second circle is occupied by "people of status", teachers and scholars which are assigned the classifier *ù*, which is also used as a noun meaning 'head, be ahead, fore, front part, first', also 'uncle' (younger brother of father or mother).

The third circle belongs to ordinary humans, counted as *yauk* (spelt <*yok*>), which is probably related to Tibetan *yog/yog* 'servant' (Jäschke 1977:519).

In the outermost circle are animals, ghosts, dead bodies, deprived people and children, classified as *akauñ*, 'body, corporeal form, corpse'.

As Becker correctly states, the choice of classifier used for a specific person or object is not fixed, but depends on the speakers feelings about the person/object as well the extra-linguistic context. Apart probably from the very centre, occupants of a specific circle can be transferred to one further away from the centre, expressing disrespect or contempt, or closer to the centre to show more respect. Classifiers in Burmese therefore are a very different concept from gender marking in languages like German and French as classifiers are not simply syntactical or morphological markers, but do have a semantic content of their own. For Swiss people, for example, there is no difference in feeling whether referring to 'the butter' as *de Putter* (with the masculine article as in French) or *d'Putter* (with the feminine article as in German)[5], whereas a Burmese expresses different things when speaking of 'a child' as *hkalèi ta-kauñ* instead of *hkalèi ta-yauk*, the first expression showing some degree of contempt about the child while the second one is unmarked.

Having established the system of animate beings with four orbits around the centre of *ahsu*, Becker goes on to the system of inanimate objects, for which not Buddha is

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[2] There are no "saints" in the European sense of the word in Theravada Buddhism. The term as used by Becker probably refers to Arahat, a monk who has achieved a high level of meditational concentration. (cf. Nyanatiloka 1989: 33 f)

[3] Becker writes '*pa*, whereas the fuller form is *apà*, the initial *a* regularly being deleted in compound forms both in the spoken and written language.

[4] But cf. also the Pyu term *bà:* 'Honorific Prefix or Suffix' (Luce 1985:chart M no. 109) and Burmese *pa* 'honorific particle' with different tone. A parallel tone difference is also seen in *hkamyà* 'you (honorific, male speaker)' and *hkamya* 'honorific sentence particle, male speaker'.

the centre anymore, but rather the "Self". The four orbits are occupied by inalienable "parts of Self", alienable objects "on Self", "nearby Self" and "far from Self" respectively (p.117). Each orbit is divided in an upper and a lower part, corresponding to the head and the body of the Self. The head is associated with "round" and the body with "straight". In the lower division of all four orbits, subclasses can be distinguished.

Becker's main argument for a centre-orbit arrangement rather than the usual vertical hierarchy for animate beings is the fact that *ahsu* is used not only for sacred objects, but metaphorically also for (conical) nets, gardens and staircases, which, seen from above, exhibit some similarity with the "concentric network" (cf. Foley 1997:238). Becker argues that "it is important to note that this term *hsu* can apply to the whole system itself (the field of human existence or the Law, the Dharma) ..." (p.116). I can personally hardly think of any context in which the "whole system itself" would be used with a numerative classifier, which in Burmese are used exclusively in combination with numerals. The counting of the whole system would require the existence of more than one system of this kind, which as far as I know is not the case in the traditional Burmese cosmology, all levels of existence already being accounted for in the hierarchy from lesser beings (animals, ghosts) to the highest levels of Arahats and Buddhas. An illustration of the Burmese cosmos can be seen in Temple 1906 (facing p.8). It is interesting to note in this illustration, to which Becker refers, that although it is supposed to be a "traditional Burmese cosmology", the equator and the tropic of Capricorn are indicated. Temple describes the form of the map as "an attempt to copy a coloured European map of the 17th century" (ibid.).

If, as suggested above, we can not prove that *ahsu* can be applied to the whole system (network), the connection to other kinds of nets seems rather difficult to establish. Even more difficult is the connection to 'staircases'. I can not remember having met any winding stairs in Burma which could explain the metaphorical use of *ahsu*. Stairs of an ordinary Burmese house, as well as palaces and temples are straight

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[5] Except perhaps that most speakers would "feel" that the feminine form is less correct, showing more German influence.

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[6]. Examples of staircases of ordinary houses, monasteries. and palaces can be seen in Fraser-Lu 1994 (chpts. 2, 3).

Is there another possibility to account for the seemingly illogical uses of *ahsu*? First of all, the use of this classifier with things other than sacred objects is not universally accepted by all speakers of Burmese. As my informant[7] told me, mosquito-nets (*hkyiñ-htauñ*) are counted either as *ahkú* 'unit, non-specific default classifier for (small) objects' or, better, *alòuñ* 'round thing', which is also used for houses and other small buildings. The word *hkyiñ-htauñ* literally means 'mosquito-trap/frame/prison', so the use of the classifier for buildings seems to be the obvious choice. My informant did not accept an expression like *hkyiñ-htauñ ta-hsu* 'mosquito-net one *hsu*' and found my question rather absurd, stating that these were not objects of worship. The same goes for all kinds of fishing nets and traps (*paik, kuñ, hmyòuñ, palàiñ*, etc.), which are counted as *akhú, alòuñ, siñ* etc., but never as *ahsu*[8].

Judson states in his Burmese-English dictionary that *ahsu* (of uncertain meaning) is used for "Deities, also [gardens, st[9].] pagodas, and some other articles" (1883:679). According to Okell, this classifier is used "for beings and objects deserving respect, e.g. Buddhas, pagodas, treatises; also for folded paper manuscripts ... and fishing nets." (1969:218). The Myanmar-English Dictionary defines *hsu* as "*part* numerical classifier used when counting sacred objects and *parabaik* [manuscripts]." (1993:132). The Myanmar-Thai Dictionary lists under *hsu* the following examples: Pagoda (*seiti*), ceremonial umbrella (*hti-to*), relic (*dak-to*), pagoda (*hpayà*), Arahat (*yahànta*)[10] and Buddha (*myak-swa-hpayà*). (1994:159) The Burmese school grammar (1994) explains *hsu* as "being used with persons and objects worthy of being respected and revered" and gives as examples *hpayà ta-hsu* 'a Buddha, pagoda', *seiti*

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[6] The only obvious exception is the staircase of the watch tower of the Mandalay palace, which was built in 1857 after the second Anglo-Burmese war.
[7] A young Burmese from Irrawady Division, who went to school in Pegu, later lived at Kya-ln Hseik-kyl in Southern Burma and was ordained as a novice at Phayathouhsu near the Thai border. He is monolingual native speaker of Burmese.
[8] Another informant told me fishing nets might be used with this classifier, but not mosquito-nets and staircases. He was less than sure about the fishing nets, too.
[9] st. indicates additions by Stevens in the second edition.
[10] This term according to Becker belongs to the first orbit, not to the centre.

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ta-hsu 'a pagoda', *kyàñ ta-hsu* 'a (religious) treatise[11], *parabaik ta-hsu* 'a palmleaf manuscript' (Myanma Thadda 1994:57).

The use of *ahsu* for 'manuscripts' is not surprising, taking into account that old manuscripts contain mainly religious texts, therefore being considered sacred objects. But what about the nets, which for some authors at least (and consequently for some speakers) belong to the same category? Probably a investigation of the etymology of the word could help to clarify the sutuation. Becker's proposal relating *ahsu* "to the Kachin term *tsu*, meaning ghost or spirit" (p.116) is not very convincing. The Kachin term seems rather to belong to the widespread Southeast Asian word for 'god, master, lord etc', cf. Thai *câu* 'god, lord, king, prince', Ancient Chinese *tsiu*[12] 'master, lord, govern etc.' (Karlgren 1957:54), Burmese *sôu* (spelt <*cui:*>) 'rule, dominate'.

A possible starting point might be the verb *su* 'bulge, swell', of which a causative **hsu* could be formed (though it is not found in modern Burmese[13]). This causative could in turn be nominalised by prefixation to *ahsu*. The meaning would then be something like 'thing made swell, increase ⇒ exalted', a term which can be applied to 'objects of worship' and which can easily be extended to fishing nets and staircases (if its application to these items can be verified). Causative formation by means of aspiration (from an older *s-* prefix as found in other Tibeto-Burman languages) is very common in Burmese, though not productive anymore (cf. Okell 1969:205). A garden could then be seen as 'a place where plants are made to grow', but I am not quite sure about the correctness of the application of *ahsu* to gardens.

If we do not need a network of concentric orbits for the animate system, do we need it for the inanimate objects? I first want to look at Becker's examples. Becker explains that "Head is to Body as cup is to saucer, letter is to page, chair is to mat ..." (p.118). All these items are listed in the third orbit ("nearby Self") and classified as *alôuñ* and *ahkyak* respectively. Obviously the cup rests on the saucer just as the head rests on the body. But saucers are hardly part of traditional Burmese culture. Becker states that he tested the correctness of his system by making "a list of objects which are not

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[11] Note the phonetic closeness of *kyàñ* 'treatise' to *hkyañ* 'garden'. Is it possible, that here some western sources spread a misunderstanding?

[12] Spelling simplified.

[13] The verb *hsu-te* in modern Burmese means 'boil (it.), bubble; be noisy, be in a state of unrest; plump, well filled' and has to be kept apart.

part of Burmese culture and asked Burmese what classifiers they would use. Without exception, stereo-headphones, contraceptives, aerosol throatsprays and the like were classified as *hku*. They knew what these things were, but they did not know where to put them in the Burmese system."(p.120) This is for Becker "a further indication that things are not classified according to superficial attributes." (ibid.). The normal Burmese table lay-out is cups (or glasses), which are both counted as *alòuñ*, next to rather than on top of plates (counted as *ahkyak, alòuñ* or *apyà*). The term *alòuñ* means 'round thing, ball' (cf. *bò-lòuñ* 'football'), *hkyak* is 'flat'. The appearance of the objects is enough to account for the choice of the classifier. This is supported by the use of *alòuñ* also for spittoons, which are never placed on the table (or tray serving as table) but under it or behind the people sitting around the table. Spittoons are used not only to get rid of excess betel juice but also for other small businesses (especially by children) which are hardly associated with the head or anything 'upper'. The same goes for chairs (*kalà-htaiñ* 'Indian seat', also not part of Burmese culture) and mats. You don't place a chair, if you happen to have one, on a mat.

If a Burmese wants to write (*sa yèi* 'writing write') something, he takes a sheet (*sa-ywek* 'writing leaf', Becker's first orbit, upper part!) of paper and a ball pen (*bò-piñ*[14] *ta-hkyàuñ*, first orbit, lower part!), which, by the way, is no more part of traditional Burmese culture than stereo headphones, but has enough similarities in shape and use to traditional Burmese writing tools to be assigned a classifier within the system. Now he can start writing letters (*sa-lòuñ* 'writing round-thing', counted as *alòuñ* which is not surprising, given the round shape of Burmese letters). As soon as something is written on the paper, it is not *aywek* anymore, but rather *asauñ* 'something kept in reserve, for reference'. If the written pages are glued or bound together, they become a book (*sa-'ouk ta-'ouk* 'writing cover one cover'). This example not only gives evidence for the assigning of classifiers by "superficial attributes" without reference to any orbits of closeness to "Self", but it clearly shows that Becker's system can not be correct. How else could we account for the use of *aywek* for a sheet of paper, which is certainly neither an inalienable part of "Self" nor associated in any way with "Head" or *ahkyàuñ* for ball pen? 'Hair of the head' are, by the way, not usually counted as *aywek*, as Becker states (p.116) but as *ahkyàuñ* or as *apiñ*, both belonging to Becker's first orbit, lower part.

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In the fourth orbit, Becker lists *siñ* for "upper things which have circular orbit: sun [hardly counted in traditional Burmese culture], rivers, sea, arrows, needles"(p.117). The same classifier is also used for boats and aeroplanes[15]. The meaning of *siñ* is 'straight', so it can be used for objects with a straight appearance, which is surely true for arrows and most kinds of boats and aeroplanes, but hardly the sun, rivers and sea (of which I am less than sure that they really are assigned this classifier). In the lower part we find *si* which is used for "lower things which move in straight lines: vehicles, hunted animals, horses, dupes(?)" (p.117). Apart from not being part of Burmese culture either[16], cars in Burma hardly ever "move in straight lines", but *kà ta-si* is the correct expression for 'one car'. Given the meaning of the verb *si* 'ride' we do not have to look any further for a common concept of the terms assigned this classifier, except for "hunted animals", which might actually not belong to this group, but rather be counted as *akauñ* like other animals (including horses when not thought of as means of transportation).

3. Conclusion

From the data given above, we can conclude that the Burmese classifier system fits very neatly into the Southeast Asian context: Animate beings are arranged on a vertical hierarchy, with Buddhas and Arahats on the highest level, followed by deities, persons of high social status and ordinary human beings. The lowest level is occupied by animals, people spoken of in contempt and ghosts.

Inanimate objects are classified either according to their shape (as in the case of *ahkyak* 'flat-thing' or *alóuñ* 'round-thing') or function (e.g. *asi* 'thing-to-ride'). Another type of classifiers consists of repetition of the whole noun or a part of it ('echo-classifier'), such as *myik ta-myik* 'river one river' and *bò-lóuñ ta-lóuñ* 'ball-round thing one round- thing'. In the latter case, the noun itself is composed of an English loan ('ball') and a Burmese term which also functions as classifier.

New nouns in Burmese are assigned a regular classifier if they correspond in shape or function to concepts already known, as *kà ta-si* 'car one thing-to-ride', *kek-hsek ta-lóuñ* 'cassette-player one round-thing' and *bò-piñ ta-hkyàuñ* 'ball pen one

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[14] From English 'ball pen

[15] The use of *siñ* was not accepted by my informant for rivers (*myik ta-myik*), seas (*piñle ta-piñle*), arrows (*hmyà ta-hkyàuñ*) and needles (*ak ta-hkyàuñ*).

[16] The more traditional Burmese equivalent, *hlè* 'bullock cart' is counted either as *si*, *siñ* or *hlè*.

straight- thing' (from English 'car', 'cassette' and 'ball pen' respectively). If no clear shape or function can be distinguished, or if the proper classifier is not known to the speaker, both for Burmese and foreign terms, the unmarked classifier *ahkú* 'unit' is used. Its use seems, however, to be restricted to small objects and abstract concepts. While *hkyiñ-htauñ ta-hkú* 'mosquito-net one unit' is fine with most speakers, *eiñ ta-hkú* 'house one unit' is not usually accepted. Better sounds in this case *eiñ ta-eiñ* 'house one house' with repeating (or 'echo') classifier, while the correct form is *eiñ ta-lóuñ*.

Both classification systems (social vertical hierarchy for animate beings and shape/function for inanimate objects) closely resemble the Thai and Vietnamese systems and do not need any explanation in terms of cosmology. As in other languages, some details of classifier assignment are unclear or irregular in the modern language. Further sudy, especially comparison with related laguages and etymological connections may very well shed more light on these cases.

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