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 suwà1 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 suwà, 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, suwà and la have developed beyond marking direction into the domain of aspect. Suwà 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

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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. suwà); 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 *suwà*

Since *la* and *suwà* 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 *suwà* 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 *suwà* '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 nài*
today NEG come IMP
'Don't come today.'
(speaker=deictic center)

2. *kyá-naw la kháí 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 *suwà*.

3. *màng chì ko su la pè may*
you AT TO he/she come give IRR
'He/she will come and give (it) to you.'

4. *ngá chì ko su mà la bà*
I AT TO he NEG come NEG
'He didn't come to me.'

5. *sú chì ko suwà*
he AT TO2 go
'(You) go to him.'

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2 *ko*, 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. **sù chi kò suwà may**
   he AT OBJ go IRR
   '(I) will go to him.'

When *la* or *suwà* 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 *suwà prìw may* '(I) will go talk (to him)' ("go talk IRR"), the initial position ensures that *la* and *suwà* will invariably retain their full lexical meanings. It is when either *la* or *suwà* 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 *suwà*, 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 *suwà***. When following verbs that refer to concrete actions, *la* and *suwà* 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 thàmàng cà la tay**
   he rice eat come RLS
   'He ate rice (and came).'

8. **mert thàmàng khyak suwà 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 prl*
   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 suwà 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. *nghak 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. *nghak 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 mànng 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. *mànng kyàwng ko kà màwng 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:
16. *ngā gu thài *wāng swà may
   I cave inside enter go IRR
   'I will enter the cave' (away from SAL).

17. *màng kyàwng ko kā *màng swà
    you school TO car drive go
    'You drive and go to school.' (away from SAL and in contrast to 15,
    where the speaker will not be)

2.3 Stative verbs with *la and swà.* A metaphorical extension takes place
    when *la* and *swà* are used with stative verbs. With a stative verb like *ne*
    'stay/live', *swà* adds a sense of finality. This sense of finality is derived from its
    meaning of departure, of motion away from a deictic center. The deictic center
    in this case, would be a location or a state:

18. *su di mha ne swà tay*
    he this LOC live go RLS
    'He lived here' (and no longer does)

In contrast, the counterpart of (18), *su di mha ne *la tay* is ungrammatical. However, the *'ne la'* combination occurs in a nominalized clause which is an
argument of a matrix verb:

19. *su di mha ne *la da kra pri*
    he this LOC live come NMLZ be-of-some-length-of-time PUNC
    'He has lived/has been living here for some time.'

In contrast to *su di mha ne da kra pri* (which simply means 'He has lived here
for some time'), (19) conveys an extremely subtle difference in meaning. It is as
if the person in question were in the process of living, attributing to him a
tentativeness, a non-finality as to his choice of residence.

Another stative verb, that shows similar syntactic behavior in
combination with *swà* and *la*, is *thong* 'sit'. Paralleling *ne* in (18), *su di mha
thong swà tay* "he this LOC sit go RLS" means that 'He sat here (and no longer
does) / He used to sit here.' The sense of finality that *swà* contributes is
obviously derived from the absence of the subject from the scene. In contrast,
the *thong la* 'sit come' combination is ungrammatical in a simple declarative
sentence. However, as with *ne*, the *thong la* combination occurs in a
nominalized clause which is the argument of a matrix verb:

20. *su di mha thong la da ko mà krok phù*
    he this LOC sit come NMLZ OBJ NEG like NEG
    '(I) don't like him coming to sit here.'
In (20), *la* does not literally mean ‘to come’. The semantics of *thong* ‘sit’ has forced *la* to take on a metaphorical meaning, implying that the person in question has ‘maneuvered’ himself quite inappropriately into a location where he has no right to be. Without *la*, the sentence *su di mha thong da ko mā krok phù* would simply mean ‘(I) don’t like him to sit here.’

Furthermore, the directional meaning *towards a deictic center* indicated by *la*, and *away from a deictic center* indicated by *swà* easily allow extension to non-spatial, i.e. psychological states. Cognitive states allow themselves to be conceptualized as locations (cf. DeLancey 1991b) and there are examples of many such metaphors in English, as in the examples ‘going to sleep’, ‘going into a depression’, ‘falling in love’. In metaphorical extensions such as these, states are the deictic centers.

Stative verbs fall into two semantic categories: (i) those indicating states that undergo a progression towards completion or perfection, that is, processes such as ‘becoming big’, ‘becoming unhappy’, ‘becoming cold’; and (ii) those indicating states that do not undergo a similar process but are conceptualized instead as either existing or not existing, e.g. ‘to be asleep (or not to be asleep)’ or ‘to faint and be in that state (or not to faint and for that state not to exist)’.

(i) With states that are conceptualized as a gradual process, *la* indicates progress towards completion whereas *swà*, from its meaning of departure from a state, indicates completion with a sense of finality:

21. *bok kri la pri*
   belly big come PUNC
   '(Her) belly is becoming big/(She) is (apparently) becoming more pregnant.'

22. *bok kri swà pri*
   belly big go PUNC
   '(Her) belly has become big/(She) got pregnant.'

23. *wăm nāñ la tay*
   stomach less come RLS
   'becoming unhappy'

24. *wăm nāñ swà tay*
   stomach less go RLS
   'became unhappy'

25. *ra-sī Ḗ la tay*
   weather cold come RLS
   'The weather is becoming cold.'
26. ra-sî ʔè suwà tay
weather cold go RLS
'The weather turned cold.'

27. thang-rhà la tay
distinct come RLS
'is becoming distinct'

28. thang-rhà suwà tay
distinct go RLS
'became distinct'

The sense of completion that suwà indicates, adds emphasis to the sense of perfection expressed by punctual sentences:

29. uwa suwà pri
full go PUNC
'I'm full' (after eating, meaning 'I've had enough').

In contrast, without the suwà, the sentence uwà pri 'I'm full' is not as emphatic.

(iii) States that are not conceptualized as undergoing a progression towards completion, i.e. states conceptualized as either existing or not existing, are compatible with suwà only:

30. mé suwà tay
faint go RLS
'(I/he) fainted/became unconscious.'

In (30), mé 'to be unconscious' is a cognitive state which either exists or does not exist. In fact, mé 'to be unconscious' cannot occur on its own in a sentence. It must either take suwà or ne. As an auxiliary, ne indicates the progressive aspect but mé ne tay translates into '(He) is unconscious' indicating the existence of the state in contrast to 30, which shows its occurrence. Furthermore, the auxiliary la is not possible with mé meaning 'to faint/be unconscious'. However, la is compatible with mé meaning 'to forget', which is a volitional verb. Thus, mé la tay is grammatical when it means 'I/He forgot something (and came).'</li>
The verb ṣp 'sleep' is also conceptualized as existing or not existing. Suwa indicates entry into that state:

31. ṣp suwa pri
    sleep go PUNC
    '(The baby) has fallen asleep.'

When ṣp combines with la, la retains its lexical sense since ṣp 'sleep' is not conceptualized as undergoing gradual progress:

32. su ṣp la tay
    she sleep come RLS
    'She slept (and came)'\(^4\)

The following sentence is used to express the sense of progression towards the state of sleeping:

33. ṣp ca pru la tay
    sleep begin do come RLS
    '(She) is beginning to sleep.'

Verbs that express compact instantaneous events also fall into the second category since they do not undergo progression towards completion or perfection. Events like pawk 'to explode' either take place instantaneously or do not take place at all. With these verbs also suwa is possible, but not la:

34. bun pawk suwa tay
    bomb explode go RLS
    'The bomb exploded (unexpectedly).'</n
In contrast, bun pawk tay simply means that 'a bomb exploded'. In (34), la is not grammatical with pawk meaning 'to explode'. A parallel example is with pawk meaning 'to be punctured':

35. bin pawk suwa tay
    tire puncture go RLS
    'The tire's punctured.'

It is not grammatical to say *bin pawk la tay to mean 'The tire's becoming punctured.' However, the sentence is grammatical when it is interpreted as 'came with a flat tire', where la retains its lexical meaning. This is a case of

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\(^4\) This shows the difference between the auxiliary la and the auxiliary ne, which is a true progressive auxiliary. With the auxiliary ne, the sentence ṣp ne tay means '(She) is sleeping.'
simple verb concatenation, literally translating into 'The tire punctured and (he) came (drove here).'

On the other hand, when pawk indicates a state that is conceptualized as undergoing progression, as in pawk meaning ‘to be crazy’, it combines with both la and swà:

36. pawk swà pri
crazy go PUNC
‘(He) has gone crazy’ (with a sense of finality and completion).

37. pawk la pri
crazy come PUNC
‘(He) is becoming crazy’ (still in the process).

3. Lok and khái

Another pair of auxiliaries that parallel swà and la are lok and khái. Lok is related to a main verb meaning ‘to follow, accompany’, whereas khái, of uncertain origin, is totally grammaticalized and not attested synchronically as a main verb. Lok is referred to as ‘distal’ by DeLancey (1980) and as ‘non-junctive’ by Allott (1965). Khái is referred to as ‘proximal’ by DeLancey and ‘junctive’ by Allott.

Lok, as a main verb, variously means ‘follow’, ‘pursue,’ or ‘accompany’:

38. su-khò ko pú-líp tue lok krá tay
thief OBJ police PLU follow PLU RLS
‘The police chased the thief.’

39. phe-phe nát lok swà
father WITH follow go
‘Go along with father.’

As an auxiliary, lok contributes the meaning of motion away from a delictic center:

40. su kyâwng swà may, sú ko ʌp pè lok pa
she school go IRR. she OBJ bag give lok POLITE
‘She’s going to school. Please give her the bag (to take with her).’

41. kyâ-náw ko pè lok pa
I OBJ give lok POLITE
‘Please give (it) to me’ (and I will take it away).
(40) and (41) are usually used in contexts where the subject will be leaving the SAL. In other words, the direct object will 'accompany' the subject away from the SAL. Without lok, the sense of motion away from a deictic center is absent:

42. kyá-náw ko pè pa
   I OBJ give POLITE
   'Please give (it) to me.'

It is in the sense above as an exponent of deictic specification that lok has been described as expressing action 'away from the situation' (Cornyn 1944) and as 'action involving change of place' (Stewart 1955). Allott (1965) defines lok as 'carrying through with an action in a location that is not associated with the speaker's location.' She gives the example suvà yu lok 'Go take/get something', in the context of a master sending off a servant to fetch something. However, it can be argued that the sense of displacement in her example is caused by suvà 'go' and not so much by lok. Without suvà, yu lok does not have any sense of displacement. In yu lok as well as in Allott's example of suvà yu lok the presence of lok may, at the most, add a subtle difference of permission. In other words, lok does not express any sense of displacement. This is noted by Allott in her example thá-màng cà lok 'rice eat lok' in the context of a parent telling a child to eat up (eat away). With this example, she states that 'no connection is established between the location of the action and the speaker's location'.

There are some metaphorical uses that indicate the path that lok followed in developing metaphoric extensions from its deictic sense ‘to follow’:

43. kálè ko pà-lo má lok ná
   child OBJ desire NEG lok NEG
   'Don't spoil the child'
   (from the more literal "Don't follow the desires of the child").

44. cít pà-lo lok tay
   mind desire lok RLS
   '(He) indulges himself'
   (from the more literal "to follow the mind's desires").

This explains the difference between Cà 'Eat!' and Cà lok which has a subtle additional sense of 'giving permission', translating into 'Go ahead and eat.' This can be used in a context where the speaker indicates to the addressee that he need not wait for him to eat. The same subtle difference can be seen in the examples below:
45. *kyá-naw swá rá má-là*
   I go GET QUES
   'Must I go?'

(45) is a straightforward question, where there is no uncertainty in the speaker's mind as to the appropriateness of the action. However, with *lok*, it becomes more than simply a question. *Kyá-naw swá lok rá má-là* is used when there is some uncertainty in the mind of the speaker as to whether he should go. Depending on the context, the sentence could variously mean 'Would you like me to go?' or 'Do you think (it's a good idea that) I should go?'. In the metaphorical extensions of *lok*, the common theme is that of giving permission or agreeing, or of requesting confirmation when there is some uncertainty in the mind of the speaker. It can be argued that these metaphorical extensions have resulted from the use of *lok* in sentences meaning 'to follow one's mind, one's desires or inclinations'. It is when one is uncertain about the appropriateness of following a course of action that one asks for confirmation. In Burmese, *lok* subtly expresses this sense of uncertainty when a speaker asks for confirmation about a course of action to be undertaken.

To recapitulate, *lok* in the Imperative indicates permission or agreement, generally translating into 'Go ahead and do something.' The imperative *lok* is also appropriate in contexts where the event in question takes place in a location different from the SAL, as in *thá-màng câ lok pa* 'Go ahead and eat (Don't wait for me)'. When the speaker is present at the location of the event, there is a further metaphorical extension since the sense of spatial displacement is blocked; thus we have Allott's example of *thá-màng câ lok* in the context of a parent telling a child 'to eat up (eat away)'. Here, the delictic sense of *lok* meaning 'to go ahead and eat' is interpreted metaphorically to function as an exhortation. When there is no spatial displacement, the difference that *lok* makes is quite subtle. Without *lok*, the sentence below is a straightforward invitation:

46. *câ pa ?ùM*
   eat POL AUX
   'Please eat.'

With *lok*, as in *câ lok pa ?ùM*, there are two uses: (i) when the speaker feels that the addressee is hesitant, which is similar to Allott's interpretation; and (ii) when the speaker wishes to indicate that the act of eating should be completed first, usually before turning to other matters. The English translation 'to go ahead and eat' would serve quite well for both uses, being the primitive from which metaphorical extensions are made.
Lok does not occur with stative verbs in declarative sentences, since verbs like uxa 'fat', lhá 'pretty' and pu 'hot' do not involve the notion of spatial dislocation. However, there is an exclamatory construction with lok which is compatible with 'action' as well as 'stative' verbs:

47. thámàng cá lok tha.
    rice eat lok NMLZ
    '(You) eat so much!'

In (47), it can be argued that the sense of 'eating a lot' is derived from the primitive sense of 'going ahead' from a deictic center, a metaphoric extension in the sense of 'following one's mind or inclination'. The same construction is used with a stative verb below:

48. ne wang da lhá lok tha
    sun enter NMLZ pretty lok NMLZ
    'The sunset is so pretty!'

Khái, the counterpart of la, specifies motion towards a deictic center, which could be either the speaker or hearer. This deictic specification can be seen with motion verbs. In the sentence below, the deictic center is the speaker:

49. nga chi ko lhrawk khái
    I at TO walk khái
    'Walk towards me.'

With action verbs, the event occurs in a location different from that of the deictic center. In the sentence below, the deictic center is the hearer:

50. nga thámàng khyak khái tay
    I rice cook khái RLS
    'I cooked rice (and came).'

With a third person agent, the deictic center is the speaker, as in the example below:

51. su píza cá khái tay
    she pizza eat khái RLS
    'She ate pizza (before she came).'

In the examples above, the subject is displaced from the scene of the main verbal event towards a deictic center. In other words, khái indicates that
someone did something somewhere prior to beginning the trajectory towards where the speaker and/or hearer would be. However, when khái is used with the verb ne ‘stay’, the meaning of ne does not allow its subject to be displaced:

52. *meri yu-gyàng mha ne khái tay*
    Mary Eugene LOC stay khái RLS
    ‘Mary remained in Eugene (while I moved on).’

Although I have referred to khái as the counterpart of la ‘come’, the examples below indicate their differences:

53. *su làm lhrawk la tay*
    she road walk come RLS
    ‘She came walking.’

54. *su làm lhrawk khái tay*
    she road walk khái RLS
    ‘She walked here.’

The difference is that only (53) can be used for the historical present. In contrast, (54) cannot be used for the historical present, since the sense of displacement that khái contributes has been metaphorically extended even further, to indicate the perfective aspect.

The perfective aspect is further illustrated in the example below:

55. *su báma prü ko rawk khái tay*
    she Burma country TO reach khái RLS
    ‘She has been to Burma.’

In (55) above, the subject is no longer in Burma. The use of khái has displaced her from the scene of the main verbal event indicated by rawk ‘reach’. In contrast, la does not cause the subject to be displaced from the scene of the main verbal event:

56. *su báma prü ko rawk la tay*
    she Burma country TO reach come RLS
    ‘She arrived in/came to Burma’ (to the speaker’s surprise).\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Without la, the sentence *su báma prü ko rawk tay* means ‘She reached/visited Burma.’ The presence of la in (56) indicates that the speaker was not expecting her to come. *Su di-né rawk tay* simply means ‘She arrived today.’ and *su di-né la tay* simply means ‘She came today.’ But *su di-né rawk la tay* subtly indicates surprise on the part of the speaker, as if the person in question were to have come and ‘arrived’ against the expectations of the speaker.
4. Conclusion.

When the motion verbs la ‘come’ and swà ‘go’ grammaticalized into deictic auxiliaries, they developed beyond marking direction. However, the extent to which these semantic extensions have developed depends on the semantics of their interaction with various categories of verbs. The semantics of ‘purely physical and perceptible’ action verbs force la and swà to retain their full lexical meanings. With motion verbs that leave a trajectory, la and swà add a deictic specification. It is the category of stative verbs that allow la and swà to develop fully into the aspectual domain. Conceptualizing states, either physical or psychological, as locations has allowed la, whose trajectory is directed towards a location, to take on an aspect of ‘progression towards completion’, distinct from that of the ‘progressive’ ne. In the case of Burmese, I have categorized states into (i) those that undergo progression towards completion and (ii) those that lack this sense of progression, that is, they either exist or do not exist. This distinction is useful to show the difference between la and swà.

Swà, in contrast to la, indicates departure from a location. I have shown that in combination with action verbs, departure is subsequent to completion of the action. As with la, the meanings of stative verbs allow swà to develop beyond the specification of direction. Swà adds a perfective aspect when used with stative verbs, because departure from a state usually implies an end to that state. Since swà has this sense of completion, it is compatible with verbs that express compact, instantaneous events. On the other hand, compact, instantaneous events are incompatible with la, which has developed an aspect of progress towards completion.

Lok and khái are semantically similar to swà and la. The verb lok, meaning ‘follow, accompany’, indicates motion away from a deictic center. Although the auxiliary lok is the counterpart of swà, the semantics of lok have allowed it to metaphorically develop further than swà. With motion as well as action verbs, lok expresses the notion of ‘going ahead and doing something’, unlike swà, which largely retains its lexical meaning. With a ditransitive verb like pè ‘give’, lok displaces the direct object whereas swà displaces the subject.

The origin of khái is obscure and is not within the scope of this paper. However, its semantics have enabled it to fit into a paradigm, standing in opposition to lok and forming with it a pair that is the counterpart of la and swà. When the speaker is the subject, the auxiliary khái displaces the speaker towards the hearer, subsequent to the main verbal event. When the hearer is the verbal subject, the auxiliary khái displaces the hearer towards the speaker subsequent to the main verbal event. With the verb rawk ‘reach’, khái further displaces the subject subsequent to its ‘reaching’ a certain place, translating into ‘has been to a certain place’. 
REFERENCES


