

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/ '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:

Functionive 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)

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 ခံ /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	/í/	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	/lín/	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
တိတ်	/tòu/	be quiet – make quiet, turn down volume

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

ကျယ်	/ce/	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 ရှုတိဆင် /hnou’ she’/ ‘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

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. Funtive 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 funtive 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	/nwé/	be tender and gracious (as a feminine feature)	these are intransitive
ကြေ့	/cś/	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 funtive verbs, however, voluntary action is the most prominent. For example:

သွား	/θwà/	go	These are funtive
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 funtive verbs whereas there is only intransitivity in the stative verbs. For example:

သွား	/θwà/	go	Intransitive and
လာ	/la/	come	funcative
နေ	/ne/	live, stay	verbs
ရိုက်	/yai'/	hit	Transitive and
သတ်	/θa'/	kill	funcative
ကန်	/kan/	kick	verbs
ဖြတ်	/phya'/	cut	Causative ('h')
ခွဲ	/khwé/	break	and funcative
ချေ	/che/	crush	verbs
ဟောင်း	/hàun/	be old	All intransitive.
သစ်	/θi'/	be new	Only
ကွဲ	/kwé/	broken (by one's own accord)	intransitive
ကျေ	/ce/	crumble (by one's own accord)	in stative
နပ်	/na'/	be tender from cooking	verbs

This aspect is not explicit in Okell although he mentions that all 'h' verbs (causative and transitive verbs) belong to the funcative type. (Since action-orientated non-agentive intransitive verbs can be changed to (transitive) causative verbs by placing an 'h' (aspiration) after their initial consonant, causative verbs can be mentioned as 'h' verbs.)

The fourth difference in meaning (which is fairly explicit in Okell) is the tendency for application of imperative mood. The tendency to imperative mood is so strong in funcative verbs and so weak in stative verbs that the former can function as imperatives when they occur on their own whereas the latter cannot. For example:

သွား	/θwà/	can mean 'go' in imperative mood on its own
နာ	/na/	does not mean 'be painful' in imperative mood on its own.

The fourth difference is in fact a spin-off from the second componential difference in meaning (in the sense that there will be no imperative mood if there is no agent), but it deserves an independent status since it will become relevant to some of the aspects to be explained later. The components of meaning which serve as bases for classifying the two verb types discussed above can be summarised in the following manner in the order of their importance:

	Type one (active verbs)	Type two (inactive verbs)
Plane of meaning	1 funcative	1 stative
	2 agentive	2 non-agentive
	3 combined or separate transitivity intransitivity causativity	3 intransitivity
	4 strong imperative mood	4 weak imperative mood

The terms under type one and type two can be regarded as end points (not necessarily opposite extremes) on the same plane of meaning. For instance ‘active verb’ is not necessarily the opposite of ‘inactive verb’. The difference between the two is relative. Intransitivity is not necessarily the opposite of the combined status of ‘transitivity’, ‘intransitivity’ and ‘causativity’. The same principle of contrast applies to the ‘agentive’/‘non-agentive’ pair and the ‘strong imperative’/‘weak imperative’ pair as well.

2.2 MEANING AS A BASIC CRITERION

In this section, I will argue that meaning is the only reliable criterion on the basis of which verbs in Burmese should be classified and their structural forms and functions explained. In my attempt to achieve the objective of this section, I will relate my arguments as far as possible to the discussion of Okell’s classification as outlined in §1 (1)-(5) above.

2.2.1 DIFFICULT BORDERLINE CASES

The verbs in §1 (3) above which Okell describes as “difficult cases” can be resolved on the basis of their meaning. Of the four verbs given, နှိ /*ŋi*/ and ဖြစ် /*phyi*/ are truly stative verbs. Their stative meaning can be specified in terms of the four components: they are inactive, non-agentive, intransitive and the force of imperative mood in them is nil; that is, they cannot function as imperative verbs on their own. The term ‘imperative’ can share both the meaning aspect and the structural aspect, but, as explained earlier, it is used here as a spin-off from the non-agentive component of meaning in which the action takes place virtually of its own accord. This kind of initial classification on the basis of meaning also agrees with the structural formula stated by Okell that stative verbs are attributed in the form of nouns derived with the prefix particle /ə/ and follow the noun. For example:

N		N (V)		
အရာ	+	အရှိ	~ ရှိ	⇒ အရာရှိ
/əya/		/əʃi/	/ʃi/	/əya ʃi/
status			be, there is, exist	the status which exists there, official, person with a status
လက်	+	အရှိ	~ ရှိ	⇒ လက်ရှိ
/lə/		/əʃi/	/ʃi/	/lə ʃi/
hand			be, there is, exist	the hand which exists there, incumbent, what is left in the hand
ရွှေ	+	အဖြစ်	~ ဖြစ်	⇒ ရွှေဖြစ်
/ʃwe/		/əphyi'/	/phyi'/	/ʃwe phyi'/
gold			happen, come about	the gold which comes about, gold made by alchemy, the art of turning things into gold

In these cases verb is subordinated or attributed to the noun. These constructions should not be confused with nominalised verbs formed by nominalisers such as ပုံ /poun/, ရိုး /yòu/, လေ့ /lé/, ထာ /thá/, စဉ် /sin/, ထုံး /thòun/ as in

ဖြစ်ပုံ	/phyi' poun/	the manner of happening, event
ဖြစ်ရိုး	/phyi' yòu/	the custom of happening
ဖြစ်လေ့	/phyi' lé/	the custom of happening

and so on where the second syllables are not ordinary nouns as are ရွှေ /ʃwe/ 'gold' and လက် /lə/ 'hand', but special nominalisers.

The meaning of the verb သိ /θi/ is pervasive in the sense that it shares both the end points on each of the four planes of meaning (the same as Okell's verbs mentioned in §1 (4), such as ရှိ /yi'/ and ကပ် /ka'/). It can therefore be structured as both a functive and a stative verb when attributed to a noun. For example:

V		N		
သိ	+	စိတ်	⇒	သိစိတ်
/θi/		/sei'/		/θi sei'/
know		mind		knowing mind, conscious mind

N		N (V)			
လူ	+	အသိ	~	သိ	⇒ လူသိ
/lu/		/əθi/		/θi/	/lu θi/
person				know	person who is known

/lu θi/ in the above example has the same meaning function as လူစိမ်း /lu sèin/ 'fresh person, green person, unknown person, stranger' and လူကျက် /lu cɛ'/ 'known person'. This kind of N + V construction should not be fully equated with similar structures where the verbal noun is not attributed to the noun and the meaning is derivative. For example:

N		V	
ခါတ်	+	သိ	
/da'/		/θi/	
true nature		know	
(but not *ခါတ်အသိ /da' əθi/ 'well acquainted person')			

The verb ဟုတ် /hou'/ is the most interesting of all the four because it is a perfect example of meaning as the determinant of structure. Being restricted by its own meaning, it belongs neither to the functive type nor to the stative type. It rests exactly halfway between the two end points on each of the four planes of meaning. It cannot function either as a functive verb or a stative verb to attribute nouns and it is thus a dead verb. Its meaning is more akin to the affirmative and negative interjection like 'yes' and 'no' in English (ဟုတ်တယ် /hou' tɛ/ and မဟုတ်ဖူး /məhou' phù/ with very little or no grammatical connection. The morphological or structural make-up used with the verb /hou'/ is only for affirmative and negative expressions. For example:

ဟုတ်တယ်	/hou' tɛ/	yes
မဟုတ်ဖူး	/məhou' phù/	no
ဟုတ်ပြီ	/hou' pi/	(emphatic) yes, very good, fine
ဟုတ်မယ်	/hou' mɛ/	probably yes, may be true (not 'will be true')

This view is reinforced when ဟုတ် /hou'/ is compared with other verbs whose meaning is similar but not identical to /hou'/, that is, မှန် /hman/ 'be correct, true' and စင် /si'/ 'be genuine, be pure'. Unlike ဟုတ် /hou'/, the meaning of မှန် /hman/ and စင် /si'/ are on the type-2 ends of the four planes of meaning and thus they function freely and naturally as stative verbs. For example:

N		N (V)		
ရွှေ	+	အစစ်	~ စစ်	⇒ ရွှေစစ်
/ʃwe/		/əsi'/	/si'/	/ʃwe si'/
gold			be pure, be genuine	pure gold
လမ်း	+	မှန်	⇒	လမ်းမှန်
/làn/		/hman/		/làn hman/
road, way, street		true, correct		right way
တရား	+	မှန်	⇒	တရားမှန်
/təyà/		/hman/		/təyà hman/
doctrine		true, correct		correct doctrine, truth

Moreover, all the verb endings that can go with all stative verbs can go with မှန် /hman/ and စစ် /si'/. In short, as the meaning of ဟုတ် /hou'/ is so limited and static, resting exactly at the very centre of the four planes, it is neither a functive nor a stative verb and is structurally dead or non-productive – incapable of forming the N + N(V) construction type.

2.2.2 PERVASIVE VERBS - BOTH FUNCTIVE AND STATIVE VERBS

As with ဝိ /θi/ there are verbs whose meaning is pervasive along the four planes and hence their structural make-up attributing nouns can assume both functive and stative forms. Of these pervasive verbs some possess more functive and less stative meaning and vice versa, and some are truly pervasive verbs. In order to demonstrate this sub-classification, I will analyse the verbs in §1 (4), which Okell describes as verbs with both functive and stative meaning.

(a) ဆိုင်း /shàin/, ဆက် /shɛ'/ and ရပ် /yi'/.

These verbs are more functive and less stative. They can naturally assume the V + N functive attributive structure – they are more active, more agentive, and have stronger transitivity, intransitivity and causativity force, and more imperative force. For example:

V		N		
ဆိုင်း	+	ခ	⇒	ဆိုင်းခ
/shàin/		/khá/		/shàin khá/
postpone		fee		postponement fee

ဆိုင်း	+	ကြေး	⇒	ဆိုင်းကြေး
/shàin/		/cè/		/shàin cè/
postpone		fee		postponement fee

ဆက်	+	ခ	⇒	ဆက်ခ
/she'/		/khá/		/she' khá/
join up, connect		fee		connection fee

ဆက်	+	ကြေး	⇒	ဆက်ကြေး
/she'/		/cè/		/she' cè/
join up, connect		fee		connection fee

ရစ်	+	စက်	⇒	ရစ်စက်
/yi'/		/se'/		/yi' se'/
rotate		machine		rotating machine

Nonetheless, these verbs cannot assume the N + N (V) stative attributive structure. If it is however possible under certain circumstances to construct N + N (V) structures with them, it is not the verb being attributed to the noun; it is the noun attributed to the verb functioning as a noun. For example:

N		N (V)		
ရက်	+	ဆိုင်း	⇒	ရက်ဆိုင်း
/ye'/		/shàin/		/ye' shàin/
day		postpone		postponement by day

နှစ်	+	ဆိုင်း	⇒	နှစ်ဆိုင်း
/hni'/		/shàin/		/hni' shàin/
year		postpone		postponement by year

မျိုး	+	ဆက်	⇒	မျိုးဆက်
/myò/		/she'/		/myò she'/
relation, ancestry		connect		connection by ancestry

ဆွေ	+	ဆက်	⇒	ဆွေဆက်
/shwe/		/she'/		/shwe she'/
friend, friendship		connect		connection by friendship

စက်	ရစ်	⇒	စက်ရစ်
/sɛ'/	/yi'/		/sɛ' yi'/
machine	rotate		rotation by machine

(b) ရပ် /ya'/, ကပ် /ka'/, ရှင်း /ʃin/ and ဝိုင်း /wàin/.

These are truly pervasive verbs and hence they can assume two kinds of construction when attributed to nouns. For example:

Funcative			Stative		
V		N		N	N (V)
ရပ်	+	ခ	⇒	ရပ်ခ	တော + ရပ် ⇒ တောရပ်
/ya'/'		/khá/'		/ya' khá/'	/tə/ + /ya'/' ⇒ /tə ya'/'
stop		fee		fee for stopping	jungle be settled, stop jungle which is a stop, jungle which is a settlement

ရပ်	+	မိန့်	⇒	ရပ်မိန့်
/ya'/		/mèin/		/ya' mèin/
stop		order		stopping order, order to stop

ကပ်	+	ပေါက်	⇒	ကပ်ပေါက်	အိတ်	+	ကပ်	⇒	အိတ်ကပ်
/ka'/		/pau'/		/ka' pau'/	/ei'/		/ka'/		/ei' ka'/
place near, opening, stick, outlet to be recalcitrant				chance to be recalcitrant, reason for being recalcitrant	pocket		be near, be recalcitrant		stuck pocket, pocket stuck on a garment

ကပ်	+	ခ	⇒	ကပ်ခ
/ka'/		/khá/		/ka' khá/
place near		fee		fee for placing near

ရှင်း	+	ခ	⇒	ရှင်းခ
/ʃin/		/khá/		/ʃin-khá/
clear up		fee, payment		payment for clearing (something)

ဝိုင်း	+	ခ	⇒	ဝိုင်းခ	စည်း	+	ဝိုင်း	⇒	စည်းဝိုင်း
/wàin/		/khá/		/wàin khá/	/sì/		/wàin/		/sì wàin/
surround		payment		payment for surrounding (something)	scratch -mark, line		be surrounded, form a circle		scratch-mark in a circle, line in circle

ကြိုး	+	ဝိုင်း	⇒	ကြိုးဝိုင်း
/cò/		/wàin/		/cò wàin/
rope		be surrounded		ring rope, rope in a circle

The same method of initial meaning analysis followed by structural types can be applied to those verbs which Okell treats as basically stative (and intransitive) verbs mentioned in example five. Of these verbs, တင်း /tìn/ is the only functive verb and the remaining verbs are pervasive. တင်း /tìn/ therefore is the only verb in the example which cannot assume the N + N (V)⁵ attributive construction. They also classically represent that there is a combined meaning component of ‘transitivity, intransitivity and causativity’ in functive verbs whilst there is only the element of intransitivity in stative verbs. For example:

Functive			Stative		
V	N		N	N (V)	
တင်း	+	အား	⇒	တင်းအား	
/tìn/		/à/		/tìn à/	
tighten		strength		strength to tighten	

တိုး	+	သံ	⇒	တိုးသံ	သံ	+	တိုး	⇒	သံတိုး
/tò/		/θan/		/tò θan/	/θan/		/tò/		/θan tò/
make quiet		sound		sound that is made quiet	sound		be quiet		quiet sound

ကျယ်	+	သံ	⇒	ကျယ်သံ	သံ	+	ကျယ်	⇒	သံကျယ်
/cɛ/		/θan/		/cɛ θan/	/θan/		/cɛ/		/θan cɛ/
make loud		sound		sound that is made loud	sound		be loud		loud sound

⁵ In words such as မူးတင်း /mù-tìn/ and မတ်တင်း /ma' tìn/, the element /tìn/ ‘less’ has the meaning opposite to ‘tightening’.

Funcative			Stative		
V	N		N		N (V)
			အာ + ကျယ်	⇒	အာကျယ်
			/a/	/ce/	/a ce/
			mouth	be loud	loud mouth
ကျဉ်း + အာ :	⇒	ကျဉ်းအာ :	မြစ် ကျဉ်း	⇒	မြစ်ကျဉ်း
/cìn/	/à/	/cìn à/	/myi'/	/cìn/	/myi' cìn/
make	strength	ability to	river	be narrow	narrow river
narrow		decrease/narrow			
တို + ဆေး	⇒	တိုဆေး	ဗုံ + တို	⇒	ဗုံတို
/to/	/shè/	/to shè/	/boun/	/to/	/boun to/
make	medicine	medicine for making	drum	be short	short drum
short		something short ⁶			
			တုံး + တို	⇒	တုံးတို
			/tòun/	/to/	/tòun-to/
			log	be short	short log
			လမ်း + တို	⇒	လမ်းတို
			/làn/	/to/	/làn-to/
			road	be short	short road

2.2.3 SUMMARY OF THE MEANING-BASED ARGUMENT FOR MONOSYLLABIC NOUNS

In the examples described above, I have argued for the approach of first classifying monosyllabic nouns in Burmese on the criterion of meaning, and then explaining the differences of their structural functions or structural forms on the basis of meaning. Such an approach can enable the grammarian always to resort to the lexical meaning of the verb and explain the exceptions which s/he may encounter when analysing its structural forms. Although this approach does need a crosscheck from differences in structural forms, the central theme of the approach is that meaning is the final arbiter. This meaning-based approach is applicable to disyllabic and polysyllabic (compound) verbs as well, as can be seen in the following sections.

⁶ As in /əye' θau' ta əθe' to shè bè/
alcohol drink nominaliser life short medicine emphatic particle
Drinking alcohol is medicine for making life short indeed.

3. THE ROLE OF MEANING IN DISYLLABIC AND POLYSYLLABIC COMPOUND VERBS

Since the V + N and N + N(V) constructions are in fact compound nouns where monosyllabic verbs are attributed to nouns, the role of verbs in these construction types is no longer relevant to disyllabic and polysyllabic compound verbs (because for compound verbs, verb structure is the target but not noun structure). Nevertheless, the concept of four planes of meaning is applicable to the classification of syntactic forms of disyllabic and polysyllabic verbs as well. In §2, the issue at point is how to explain the role of monosyllabic verb types in the construction V + N and N + N(V) noun types. But the formation of compound nouns with disyllabic and polysyllabic verbs (e.g. တည်းခိုရိပ်သာ /tè kho yei' tha/ 'rest house' and စားသောက်ဆိုင် /sà θau' shain/ 'restaurant') is very rare. The construction type that remains to be discussed for disyllabic and polysyllabic compound verbs on a meaning-based criterion therefore falls within the domain of verb construction alone.

3.1 COLLECTIVE MEANING AND SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES

The formation of compound verbs and a meaning-based explanation of the way in which they assume their structural forms (i.e. the way in which they take different verb endings) is fairly straightforward. Okell (1969:25-39) has analysed the formation of compound verbs under eight main categories:⁷ ordinary compound, doubled verb, artificial compound, pre-verb compound, compound with bound member, frequentative compound, tied noun compound and multiple compound. On the basis of the collective meaning given, all these eight types of compound verbs mentioned in Okell can be classified under the 'factive versus stative' criterion. Once the verbs are compounded, their meaning becomes specific and hence it seems that there are no pervasive compound verbs.

Factive compound verbs can take the three auxiliary verbs ရဲ /yè/ 'dare to', အား /à/ 'be free to', and ဖြစ် /phyi/ 'manage to' as Okell (1969:43-44) remarks; whereas stative compound verbs cannot take any of these. In the sections that follow I will attempt to demonstrate that all the eight major compound verbs described in Okell can be classified either as factive or stative on the basis of their collective meaning. In these sections it will be clarified that compound verbs with factive collective meaning can take the three auxiliary verbs whereas those with stative collective meaning cannot. In other words, those compound verbs which can take the three auxiliary verbs (ရဲ ဖြစ် အား) are factive verbs and those which cannot are stative.

⁷ Okell also mentions a number of relevant constructions such as pre-verb members, auxiliary members, ambivalent compounds and so on, but these are not discussed here because they cannot be treated as compound verbs in a strict sense.

3.1.1 ORDINARY COMPOUND VERBS

The only stative verbs in this group are:

ကျေနပ်	/ce na'/'	be satisfied
ပေါက်ကွဲ	/pau' kwè/	explode
တိုးတက်	/tò te'/'	make progress
ကြီးကျယ်	/cì cè/	be grand

The rest of the group are functive verbs. For example:

ဆက်သွယ်	/shé' θwé/	clean up, be clean
သန့်ရှင်း	/θán jìn/	clean up, be clean
ရောင်းဝယ်	/yàun wé/	trade
သွားလာ	/θwà la/	travel about

3.1.2 DOUBLED COMPOUND VERBS

The only stative verbs in this group are:

ကောင်းမွန်	/kàun mun/	be good
ကင်းရှင်း	/kìn jìn/	be free from
ဆီဆိုင်	/shi shain/	be relevant

The rest of the group are functive verbs. For example:

ပြောဆို	/pyò sho/	speak
ကြည့်ရှု	/cí j'ú/	look
ဝယ်ယူ	/wé yu/	buy
ချက်ပြုတ်	/ché' pyou'/'	cook
ရေးသား	/yè θà/	write

3.1.3 ARTIFICIAL COMPOUND VERBS

Functive verbs in this group are:

ခေါ်ဝေါ်	/khə wə/	call, name
ညှာတာ	/hña ta/	be considerate
ကပ်သတ်	/ka' θa'/'	be recalcitrant
စာနာ	/sa na/	be compassionate (by comparing oneself with others)
တွေးတာ	/twè tə/	think
လိုလား	/lo là/	favour, be favourably disposed to

ရိုင်းစိုင်း	/yàin sàin/	be uncouth
ညီညာ	/ñi ña/	be even, be united

The rest of the group are stative verbs. For example:

သွက်လက်	/θwε' lε'/	be fluent, alert, active
မြိုင်ဆိုင်	/myain shain/	be harmonious (as a crowd)
မြန်ဆန်	/myan shan/	be quick

3.1.4 PRE-VERB COMPOUNDS

All the pre-verb compounds given in Okell are functive verbs. For example:

ပြောင့်ပြော	/pyaun pyò/	say in jest
လိမ်ပြော	/lein pyò/	lie
ခုစား	/khù sà/	pluck and eat

3.1.5 COMPOUNDS WITH BOUND MEMBERS

The only stative verbs in this group are:

ပျက်စီး	/pyε' sè/	be destroyed
ဆိုးဝါး	/shò wà/	be bad
လွယ်ကူ	/lwe ku/	be easy

The rest of the group are functive verbs. For example:

တိုင်ပင်	/tain pin/	consult
စိုးရိမ်	/sò yein/	worry
ရိုသေ	/yo θe/	be respectful
ခံစား	/khan sà/	enjoy, suffer

3.1.6 FREQUENTATIVE COMPOUND VERBS

The only stative verb in this group is:

ရော့ရော့သွား	/yó yó θwà/	become slacker and slacker
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The rest of the group are functive verbs. For example:

ထပ်ထပ်တီး	/tha' tha' tì/	play again and again
ကြိုကြိုပို့	/co co pò/	keep sending in advance
ဝင်ဝင်ပြော	/win win pyò/	keep coming in and speaking
လာလာမေး	/la la mè/	keep coming and asking

3.1.7 COMPOUND VERBS WITH TIED NOUNS

The only stative verbs in this group are:

စိတ်တို	/sei' to/	to be short tempered
အုရောင်	/u ʃwin/	be joyful
အားနာ	/à na/	be embarrassed
သဘောကောင်း	/θəbò kàun/	be good-natured

The rest of the group are functive verbs. For example:

နှုတ်ဆက်	/hnou' she'/	greet
နားထောင်	/nà thaun/	listen
လေပစ်	/le pyi'/	chat

3.1.8 MULTIPLE COMPOUND VERBS

The only stative verbs in this group are:

လှပတင့်တယ်	/hlá pá tìn tē/	look lovely
စွတ်စိုထိုင်းမှိုင်း	/su' so thàin hmàin/	be damp and dull

The rest of the group are functive verbs. For example:

ရှိသေးစား	/yo θe lè sà/	respect and revere
ဆင်ခြင်စဉ်းစား	/shin chin sìn sà/	think seriously
သယ်ယူပို့ဆောင်	/θe yu pó shaun/	transport

4. ARE STATIVE VERBS SOMETIMES ADJECTIVES?

Mainly because all stative verbs in Burmese can take all verb endings except ဝါ /pa/, the politeness marker, Burmese has been treated as a language with no adjectives (Okell 1969, Cornyn and Roop 1968). I have argued in the previous sections that structure (syntactic features) alone is not a sound basis for classifying words. Even if one can accept stative verbs under the general classification of 'verb', the fact that stative verbs can function as adjectives has to be recognised. In highly inflectional languages, such as Sanskrit and Pali, and partially inflectional languages such as English, the way in which a word undergoes changes in structural or grammatical function and meaning is very obvious because these changes usually take place with the help of suffixes or internal changes. For example:

grind (verb),
grinder (-er noun),
grinding (present participle which can function as an adjective)
ground (past participle).

In most tonal languages which are not inflectional, such as Burmese where the inflectional suffixes serving as grammatical mechanisms (especially for participles) are almost non-existent, similar grammatical functions are accomplished firstly by the original lexical meaning and secondly by the position in the morphological make-up. The adjectival nature and functions of stative verbs in Burmese are therefore subtle, but their existence is fairly obvious. In the sections that follow, I will attempt to establish the following views:

- (1) Although one type of words can be assigned to one major class in Burmese, their grammatical function can shift depending on the original lexical meaning and the position in the morphological make-up;
- (2) The words which are basically classified as ‘verbs (stative)’ in Burmese are endowed with a number of features which are regarded as adjectival features in other languages.

4.1 CHANGE OF GRAMMATICAL FUNCTION DUE TO MEANING AND POSITION IN THE MORPHOLOGICAL MAKE-UP

It has been proposed that functive verbs can be attributed to a noun in the V + N compound noun structure as in /θau’ ye/ ‘drinking water’ (in §1). It may be within reason to treat these as functive verbs and the label for them in this environment may simply be a matter of terminology. In the formation of nouns in the N + V (functive) structure, however (which (Okell 1969: 90-92) places under “fixed headless NV attributes”), they do not appear to function as verbs. It is more plausible to treat the functive verb in this construction as a head noun, though they are verbs in their original classification. In these N + V constructions such as set out below, it is not the verb which is attributed to the noun, but the noun which is attributed to the verb functioning as a head noun:

ပဲ့ကိုင်	/pé kain/	helmsman
မြို့စား	/myó sà/	town administrator
ရှေ့နေ	/lé ne/	lawyer
ထမင်းချက်	/thəmìn che’/	cook
ပတ်မတီး	/pa’ mətì/	drummer
စာပို့	/sa pó/	letter sender, postman

For instance in ရှေ့နေ /lé ne/ ‘lawyer’, it is not နေ /ne/ ‘stay’ qualifying or attributing ရှေ့ /lé/ ‘in front’, but the reverse (‘stayer in front, legal representative, advocate, lawyer’), and the same applies to the other examples. The functive verbs in this construction are the counterparts of English *-er* nouns such as *grinder* from *grind*, *taker* from *take* and so on. These examples demonstrate the fact that words in Burmese can change their classification

and grammatical function depending on their original lexical meaning and the environment in which they occur.

4.2 ADJECTIVAL QUALITIES IN STATIVE VERBS

There are a number of qualities in stative verbs, which cannot be treated as those of any other word class, but only as those of adjectives. Firstly, in the same way as adverbs can be formed from adjectives in English with the use of the suffix *-ly*, adverbs in Burmese can be formed from stative verbs (not from functive verbs) by reduplication. For example:

မြန်မြန်လာ	/myan myan la/	come quickly
နှေးနှေးသွား	/hnè hnè θwà/	go slowly
ရှိရှိလုပ်	/yò yò lou'/	behave honestly
ကုပ်ကုပ်နေ	/kou' kou' ne/	live humbly

Secondly, in the same way as English adjectives can inflect in degrees such as positive, comparative and superlative, these reduplicated stative verbs in Burmese can be ranked as adjectives in degree by more than the three levels that exist in English. For example:

Word	Degree	Structure		
ပူ /pu/	1	ရေပူ	/ye pu/	hot water
	2	ရေပူပူ	/ye pu pu/	somewhat hot water
	3	ရေခပ်ပူပူ	/ye kha' pu pu/	considerably hot water
	4	ရေသိပ်ပူပူ	/ye thei' pu pu/	very hot water

The construction type with stative verb, which Okell (1969: 79) describes as “derived āV noun attributes” such as မြို့ဟောင်း /myó hàun/ ‘old city’, နွားဖြူ /nwà phyu/ ‘white bull’, and ဘုရားပျက် /phəyà pye/ ‘ruined pagoda’, can be arranged in this order of adjectives in degree. For example:

Word	Degree	Structure		
ဟောင်း /hàun/	1	မြို့ဟောင်း	/myó hàun/	old city
	2	မြို့ဟောင်းဟောင်း	/myó hàun hàun/	somewhat old city
	3	မြို့ခပ်ဟောင်းဟောင်း	/myó kha' hàun hàun/	considerably old city
	4	မြို့သိပ်ဟောင်းဟောင်း	/myó θei' hàun hàun/	very old city

And finally, it is obvious that the greater the number of syllables in multiple compound nouns with stative verbs, the stronger the attributive/adjectival element of the stative verbs.

For example:

ဘုရားပျက်နှိမ်ဆူ

/phəyà pye' hnəshu/

two ruined pagodas (the meaning of /pye'/ 'ruined' becomes more adjectival.)

ဆေးပြင်းလိပ်တစ်ထုပ်

/hsè pyìn lei' təthou'/

a packet of strong cigars (the meaning of /pyìn/ 'strong' becomes more adjectival.)

စာတော်ဘတ်ကြီး

/sa to pha' cì/

big royal reader (the meaning of /cì/ 'big' becomes more adjectival.)

စာအုပ်ထူကြီး

/sa ou' thu cì/

big thick book (the meaning of /thu/ 'thick' and /cì/ 'big' become more adjectival and so on.)

5. CONCLUSION

In order to analyse the structure of verbs in Burmese for practical purposes of teaching the language to non-native speakers, there seems to be no better approach than that followed in Okell (1969). This approach should not however be stretched to the extent of treating Burmese as a language with no adjectives and adjectival structures.

Dixon (1991) has demonstrated that the grammar of English can be explained satisfactorily and systematically on the basis of meaning alone, without the need to resort to the model of generative grammar. An analysis of the verb types in Burmese has shown that such a meaning-based approach is the only satisfactory method one can rely upon for explaining finer details of verbs in Burmese.

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