

## **Between South and Southeast Asia - adverbial clauses in Burmese**

Mathias Jenny, University of Zurich

Converb is a morphological-functional category that is, among others areas, found in Turkic, Ethiopian, and South Asian languages. Various definitions are given by different authors, e.g. Haspelmath (1995:3) “a non-finite verb form whose main function is to mark adverbial subordination” and which “is part of the inflectional paradigm of verbs”(Haspelmath 1995:4) (see van der Auwera 1998, Ebert 2008 for discussions). According to Masica (2002:108ff), the presence of “conjunctive participles” (“converbs” in more recent linguistic terminology) is one of the characteristic features of the South Asian linguistic area. South Asian languages, including members of the Dravidian, Indo-Aryan, Munda and Tibeto-Burman language families, exhibit a certain degree of verbal morphology with special forms for adverbial subordinate clauses. Interestingly, Masica includes Burmese as peripheral member of the South Asian linguistic area, listing as “conjunctive participles” what Okell and Allott (2001:300) call “subordinate clause markers”, Bernot (1980:192ff) “marques de syntagmes subordonnés”. Masica admits that the Tibeto-Burman (Tibetan, Gurung, Burmese) “forms seem in their multiplicity [...] and certain lack of fixed character to be a late development” (2002:124), and “the forms of Burmese [...] give the impression of being patched together in answer to the areal pull of “Indian” syntax” (2002:139). One of the conclusions of Masica’s study of various features believed to be characteristic of South Asian languages is that there is a “profound hiatus between India and Southeast Asia beyond Burma” (2002:183).

The inclusion of Burmese in the South Asian linguistic area, and especially the description of Burmese subordinate forms as converbs, raises a number of questions. Given the traditional definitions of converbs, the following points must be addressed: First, are the Burmese subordinate forms “verb forms” according to Haspelmath’s definition, implying morphologically marked forms, a question that inevitably leads to a definition of morphology and therefore wordhood in Burmese (cf. Dixon and Aikhenvald 2002, Matthews 2002). Second, is there an overt category of finiteness in Burmese so that the subordinate forms can justifiably be called nonfinite (cf. Bisang 2007, Cristofaro 2007)? Third, in what sense are the forms under discussion subordinate (cf. Cristofaro 2003)? In what respect are they different from other types of subordinate clauses (adnominal, complement)?

Burmese shares many features with other Southeast Asian languages, such as serial verb constructions (cf. Bisang 1995) and others. Being a verb final language, it naturally has many affinities with South Asian languages as well. The morphological status of Burmese is not clear (cf. WALS online), though it seems obvious that the formatives (Bickel and Nichols 2007) are clitics rather than affixes by most definitions. It is argued that finiteness in Burmese is a property of a clause (cf. Langacker 2008:124ff), or perhaps a verb phrase, rather than a verb form. In this sense, subordinate clauses are in fact nonfinite, and the adverbial subordinate clauses, though not containing morphologically marked verb forms, are functionally similar to converb constructions, being clearly distinct from adnominal and complement clauses.

The questions addressed in the present study will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the position of Burmese between two well known linguistic areas, namely South Asia and Southeast Asia.

### References

Bernot, D. 1980. *Le prédicat en birman parlé*. Paris: SELAF.

Bickel, B. and J. Nichols. 2007. Inflectional morphology. In T. Shopen (ed.) *Language typology and syntactic description, 2nd edition*, vol. III. Cambridge: CUP, 169-240.

Bisang, W. 1995. Verb serialization and converbs - differences and similarities. In Haspelmath and König (eds.) 137-188.

- Bisang, W. 2007. Categories that make finiteness: discreteness from a functional perspective and some of its repercussions. In Nikolaeva (ed.), 115-137.
- Cristofaro, S. 2003. *Subordination*. Oxford: OUP.
- Cristofaro, S. 2007. Deconstructing categories: finiteness in a functional-typological perspective. In Nikolaeva (ed.) 91-114.
- Dixon, R. M. W. and A. Y. Aikhenvald. 2002. Word: A typological framework. In Dixon and Aikhenvald (eds.) 1-41.
- Dixon, R. M. W. and A. Y. Aikhenvald (eds.) 2002. *Word. A cross-linguistic typology*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Ebert, K. H. 2008. Forms and Functions of Converbs. In Ebert, Mattissen and Suter (eds.) 7-33.
- Ebert, K. H., J. Mattissen and R. Suter (eds.) 2008. *From Siberia to Ethiopia - converbs in a cross-linguistic perspective*. Zurich: ASAS.
- Genetti, C. 2005. The participial construction of Dolakhā Newar: Syntactic implications of an Asian converb. In *Studies in Language* 29:1, 35-87.
- Haspelmath, M. 1995. The converb as a cross-linguistically valid category. In Haspelmath and König (eds.) 1-55.
- Haspelmath, M. and E. König (eds.) 1995. *Converbs in cross-linguistic perspective*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Langacker, R. W. 2008. *Cognitive Grammar. A basic introduction*. Oxford: OUP.
- Masica, C. P. 2005 [1976]. *Defining a linguistic area. South Asia*. [reprint] New Delhi: Chronicle Books.
- Matthews, P. H. 2002. What can we conclude? In Dixon and Aikhenvald (eds.), 266-281.
- Nikolaeva, I. (ed.) 2007. *Finiteness*. Oxford: OUP.
- Okell, J. and A. Allott. 2001. *Burmese/Myanmar dictionary of grammatical forms*. Richmond: Curzon.
- van der Auwera, J. 1998. Defining converbs. In Leonid Kulikov and Heinz Vater (eds.) *Typology of verbal categories*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 373-382.
- WALS Online: [http://wals.info/languoid/lect/wals\\_code\\_brm](http://wals.info/languoid/lect/wals_code_brm)