

Modality in Burmese: ‘may’ or ‘must’ – grammaticalised uses of *yá* ‘get’

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I. THE DATA

a. Full verb *yá* ‘get’: Basic semantics:

BECOME have´ (x, y);

x = RECIPIENT (ACTOR) [-VOLITION], [-CONTROL], [+ HUMAN/HIGH ANIMATE]

y = THEME (UNDERGOER) [± DESIRABLE]

Anticausative semantic component: X gets Y → Z gives Y to X

(underlying ‘giver’ is backgrounded) X Y *yá* → Z X ko Y *pè*

b. Grammatical functions of *yá*

- i. POTENTIAL MODALITY (DEONTIC)
- ii. NECESSITATIVE/OBLIGATIVE MODALITY (DEONTIC/EPISTEMIC)
- iii. TEMPORAL/MODAL FUNCTION (RESULT OF PRIOR EVENT, CAUSE)

EXAMPLES

(1) *tɕənɔ di né pwè θwà ló yá θə là?*

1m this day festival go SUB GET NF Q

‘May I go to the temple fair today?’

(2) *tɕənɔ di né tɕàù tɕ? yá mə/θə là?*

1m this day school go.up GET FUT/NF Q

‘Do I have to go school today?’

(3) *tɕənɔ tɕàù mə-θwà yá θè phù.*

1m school NEG-go GET PERS NEG

‘I haven’t been to the temple/school yet.’

(1a) *θwà ló yá tɕ. θwà ló mə-yá phù.*

go SUB GET NF go SUB NEG-GET NEG

‘Yes, you may.’ ‘No, you may not.’

- (2a) *θwà yá mε/te. mə-θwà yá phù.*
 go GET FUT/NF NEG-go GET NEG
 ‘Yes, you must go.’ ‘No, you don’t have to go.’

SYNTACTIC/SEMANTIC FEATURES:

- (1): - *yá* occurs as free operator (with subordinator, negation)
 - potential (abilitive, permissive) modality
- (2): - *yá* occurs as bound operator (negation on main verb)
 - obligative/necessitative modality
- (3): - *yá* occurs as bound operator (negation on main verb)
 - often negated in combination with PERSISTIVE marker *θè*
 - expresses situation as result of or caused by prior event
 (which is backgrounded, but implicit)

II. FURTHER OBSERVATIONS

1. In Old Burmese

- V-*yá* only used in POTENTIAL contexts
- always used as bound operator

2. In colloquial Burmese

- subordinator often dropped in context (1)
- distinction of function made by use of NON-FUTURE/FUTURE
- bound/free distinction retained, but not visible in all constructions

Colloquial Burmese data:

- (1') *tɕənɔ di né pwè θwà yá là?*
 1m this day festival go GET Q
 ‘May I go to the temple fair today?’
- (2') *tɕənɔ di né tɕâu tɕ? yá mə là?*
 1m this day school go.up GET FUT Q
 ‘Do I have to go school today?’

(1a') (θwà) *yá* *tɛ*. (θwà)mə-*yá* *phù*.
 go GET NF go NEG-GET NEG
 'Yes, you may.'
 'No, you may not.'

(2a') θwà *yá* *mɛ*. mə-θwà *yá* *phù*.
 go GET FUT NEG-go GET NEG
 'Yes, you must go.'
 'No, you don't have to go.'

III. QUESTIONS: WHY...

1. Semantic extension from POTENTIAL to OBLIGATIVE and CAUSED BY PRIOR EVENT?
2. Development from bound to free operator?
3. Use of NON-FUTURE/FUTURE distinction for POTENTIAL – OBLIGATIVE?

IV. POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

1. Semantics of V *yá* constructions:

Anticausative: volition, control transferred from X to backgrounded Y
 (parallel to semantics of main verb *yá*)

X (MAY/MUST/DO) V *BECAUSE* Y CAUSE X V
 X V-*yá* Y X-OBJ V-*se* (*se* = CAUSATIVE)

Causative can have permissive, jussive or neutral semantics →
 three distinct functions: POTENTIAL, OBLIGATIVE, CAUSED BY PRIOR EVENT

2. Development from bound to free operator

Serial verb constructions in Mon and Thai involving 'get'

(3) *khǎw tòk plaa dǎy*.
 Thai 3hum catch fish get/GET
 'He caught (and got) a fish.' → 'He can/may catch fish.'

(4) *déh rəp kə? ka?* → *déh rəp ka? kə?*
 Mon 3 catch get fish 3 catch fish GET
 'He caught (and got) a fish.' 'He can/may catch fish.'

⇒ Development from 'successful attempt' to general possibility (root possibility)

Newer Literary Burmese/Formal Burmese

- (5) *θu ηà hmyà ywé yá θi.*
 3 fish catch SUB get/GET NF
 ‘He caught a fish.’ / ‘He can/may catch fish.’

with *ywé* SEQUENTIAL and CAUSAL subordinator, i.e.

‘He got a fish after/because he tried to catch one.’

⇒ NOT bound operator to free operator, but **re-grammaticalisation**

3. NON-FUTURE/FUTURE distinction

Cognitive/psychological connection between FUTURE and OBLIGATION:

- Obligative modality can be used to express future tense (e.g. Romance languages)
- Some languages use future tense to express obligation (e.g. German)
- Obligations (negative experience) are rather seen as not yet present, permission/ability (positive experience) is construed as actual/present

V. HISTORICAL SCENARIO

1. Summary of development

	POTENTIAL	OBLIGATIVE
OB (11 th c.)	V- <i>ra</i> [+ bound], NF (?)	(V- <i>rā</i>)
LB (19 th c.)	V- <i>yá</i> , [+ bound], NF (?)	V- <i>yá</i> , [+ bound], FUT (?)
FB (20 th c.)	V SUB <i>yá</i> [-bound]	V- <i>yá</i> [+ bound]
CB (21 st c.)	V (SUB) <i>yá</i> [-bound], NF	V- <i>yá</i> [+ bound], FUT

2. Stages of development

- V-*yá* expresses non-volitional, uncontrolled events (anticausative), usually positive for the actor → POTENTIAL modality (parallel to semantics of full verb *yá* with THEME wanted/desired by RECIPIENT).

- Use is extended to OBLIGATIVE modality (corresponding to main verb use of *yá* with THEME unwanted by RECIPIENT); old obligative marker is gradually replaced (still present in literary language).
- Potential modality is re-introduced from grammaticalised use of biclausal construction expressing ACTIVITY (volitional, conative) and RESULT (non-volitional, no control), possibly influenced by Mon and/or Thai usage (constructions semantically transparent in all languages) → new free operator for potential modality, occurring with subordinator.
- Subordinator is dropped in colloquial language, leading to ambiguity in some constructions → new distinction made based on pre-existing NON-FUTURE/FUTURE distinction (not fully grammaticalised, maybe dialectal), consistent mainly in present or general contexts, much less in past and future, where NONFUTURE and FUTURE are used to marked tense distinction.

VI. FURTHER ISSUES TO BE INVESTIGATED

- Historical data and influence from neighbouring languages
- NON-FUTURE/FUTURE or REALIS/IRREALIS?
- Dropping of subordinator dialectal?
- How consequent is the NON-FUTURE/FUTURE distinction in the modal context? Dialectal?

Abbreviations

CB	colloquial Burmese
FB	formal Burmese
FUT	future
LB	literary Burmese
NEG	negation
NF	non-future
OB	old Burmese
PERS	persistive
Q	interrogative
SUB	subordinator

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