

**FOCUSING MECHANISMS AND THE DISCOURSE
-FUNCTIONAL STATUS OF COPULATIVE VERBS**
—A Typological Survey with a Special Reference to Modern Spoken Karen—

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Abstract: The present paper argues that copulative verbs, or their possible candidates in the process of grammaticalisation, acquire several different auxiliary characteristics to function as discourse controlling devices by utilising their semantic *bi*-polarity. Depending upon the grammaticalising «source material», there seem to be several structuralising patterns. In Karen, one of the candidates *mēi* functions as a syntactic marker for the following constituent to be interpreted as the focus of predication, hinting upon that this language is on the way to consolidate its «verb-medial» syntax. Starting from the theoretical view that Karen emerged genealogically from the Burman group, this finding may have some typological and areal-linguistic importance.

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1. ON THE BASIC CLAUSE STRUCTURE OF MODERN SPOKEN KAREN

Karen is a verb-medial language, spoken mainly in Burma, or «Myanmar» as is officially called today, whose formal syntax is somewhat very similar to that of English.

1.1 The so-called «Basic Order» (in verbal sentences)

The syntactic verb, which corresponds to the finite in European major languages such as English or German and functions as the grammatical centre of a sentential expression, is placed after the (sentential) subject and is directly followed by the direct object:

- (1) a. Kpôthu *phá* lì lỏ. ASS
 Kpothu read book
 'Kpothu is reading a book.' / 'Kpothu is learning.'
- b. Kpôthu *phá* lì *leo kyou* lỏ. ASS
 Kpothu read book at school
 'Kpothu is learning at school.'

Since Karen does not differentiate the tense in its strict sense of the term, (1a) might also mean, among others: «Kpothu read (a book)» or «Kpothu was learning» according to proper contexts.

In the other grammatical persons than the third, the syntactic verb receives a personal prefix, which is formally identical to the genitive form of the corresponding personal pronoun, so that it DOES look like the finite in the traditional sense of the term as in Example (2), revealing the phenomenon of a kind of grammatical agreement as well, especially when a further pronominal subject is employed for emphasis:

- (2) a. Y-*phá* lì lỏ. 'I am learning.'
 b. N-*phá* lì lỏ. 'You are learning.'
- (3) a. Ye-něi y-*phá* lì lỏ. 'Moi, je lis un livre.'
 b. Ne-něi n-*phá* lì lỏ. 'Toi, tu lis un livre.'

At any rate, the basic order of sentential constituents, especially with regard to the syntactic verb, seems to be much more tight than, e.g., Chinese, which is surely an SVO language, but nevertheless preposes prepositional phrases to the syntactic verb as in (4), or even than English, where adverbs modifying the verb precede this as is indicated in (5):

- (4) a. Chi. Zhāng-Sān niàn shū. (≅ 1a)
 Zhang-San read book
 'Zhang-San is learning.'
- b. Chi. Zhāng-Sān zài xuéxiào niàn shū. (≅ 1b)
 Zhang-San at school read book
 'Zhang-San is learning at school.'
- c. Chi. *Zhāng-Sān niàn shū zài xuéxiào. (cf. 1b)
- (5) a. Eng. John sliced the salami (carefully). (cf. 6a-b)
 b. Eng. John carefully sliced the salami. (cf. 6a-b)

In Karen, in contrast, an adverb can never be preposed to the syntactic verb, nor is it inserted between the verb and its direct object:

- (6) a. Kar. *Kpôthu gēigēi *phá* lì lỏ. ASS
 Kpothu well read book
 'Kpothu read the book well.'
- b. Kar. Kpôthu *phá* lì gēigēi lỏ.

I discussed verbal sentences so far.

1.2 «Nominal Sentences»

Now, we want to turn our attention to the so-called nominal sentence, which I would like to refer to as «copulative construction», since the structure in question is typically based on the copula in a number of languages including English.

As opposed to the verbal construction discussed so far, it is characteristically observed that the subject noun is marked either by *-nêi* or by *-mêi*, whereas the copula itself may be omitted:

- (7) a. *Kpôthu-Ø (mêi) kyouphou lô. (cf. 7b-c)
 b. Kpôthu-*nêi* (mêi) kyouphou lô. (cf. 7a, 7c)
 c. Kpôthu-*mêi* (mêi) kyouphou lô. (cf. 7a, 7b)

Both (7b) and (7c) may be translated into English as: «Kpothu is a schoolboy.» Although the subject *Kpôthu* in (1a-b) MAY be suffixed with either *-nêi* or *-mêi* as well, (7a) lacking this marking is somehow ungrammatical. What mechanism underlies this «irregularity»?

Furthermore, as indicated in (7c), the nominal postposition *-mêi* is formally identical to the copulative verb. Is there any relationship between them? In the following, I shall endeavour to illuminate these «mystery» about the Karen syntax.

2. ON THE NOTION OF «FOCUSING MECHANISMS»

At this point, I'd like to make some theoretical notions clear which I am going to use in the following presentation: By «focus», I mean the centre of the informational structure of a sentential expression. Typically, it represents «new information» as opposed to its notional counterpart «presupposition», which conveys «old information».

As against to other related notions like «rheme» or «comment», however, «focus» comes to effect only when the propositional frame of a sentential expression is taken for granted due to the previous discourse. In such an utterance, thus, its purpose exists only in identifying the argument in the frame, which is expressed by the focus to fill the lacking information.

Characteristically, a focusing structure is represented by the so-called «cleft sentence» in English:

- (8) a. Eng. John came from Germany.
 b. Eng. It is **John** [who came from Germany].
 c. Eng. It is **from Germany** [that John came].

In the course of on-going discourse regarding these examples, the propositional frame that someone came from Germany is set as given; and by the utterance of (8b) or (8c), the speaker solely intends to identify the one who came from Germany. He practically chooses the correct one out of the set of several possible candidates which fit into the slot within a presupposed propositional frame.

Theoretically, there are a number of possibilities to bring about a focusing structure. As can easily be imagined, the phonological device to put a certain expression into a focus of the sentence in question represents one of the most simple but also reasonable mechanisms.

I think, in English as well, it is throughout possible to focus on *John* in (8a) by simply stressing the expression without employing the cleft construction. In Japanese, too, for example, focused expressions are accompanied by a phonological marking, concretely a higher pitch:

- (9) a. Jap. Taroo -ga Doitu -kara ki -masi -ta. ($\hat{=}$ 8a)
 Taroo -SBJ Germany -from come -HON -PFT
 ‘Taroo came/is from Germany.’
- b. Jap. TAROO -ga Doitu -kara ki -masi -ta. ($\hat{=}$ 8b)
 (‘It is Taroo who came/is from Germany.’)
- c. Jap. TAROO -ga Doitu -kara ki -ta -n -desu. (cf. 9b)
 Taroo -SBJ Germany -from come -PFT -NOM -COP/HON
 ‘It is Taroo who came/is from Germany.’

Thus, it is altogether possible to utter (9b) as focused on *Taroo* and it suffices entirely to put the expression in question into a marked focus, at least from a theoretical point of view.

Nevertheless, I’m probably not the only one who has the tendency in practice to embed (9b) additionally into a cleft construction, which is like (9c) in Japanese. As will be shown in the following, the same holds for a number of languages as well.

What is the difference between, say, (9a) and (9b)? Structurally speaking, (9b) is based on the copulative verb in Japanese *-desu*, the predicate *Doitu-kara ki-ta* ‘having come from Germany’ being nominalised by way of the formal noun *-n*, attached to the temporal-aspectual auxiliary *-ta*, whereas (9a) represents a normal verbal sentence.

From a functional point of view, the focusing interpretation depends solely on the phonological emphasis with (9a), while such an emphasis might theoretically be omitted in the case of clefting construction.

But why is it just the copula, which is chosen for use in clefting, beyond the border of language types, of all other syntactic devices which theoretically might be employed? How should clefting be characterised in this regard? As long as clefting avails itself of a copulative verb in a *quasi*-universal scale, the copula must be considered to offer a more appropriate feature to capture the focusing structure of the whole sentence rather than the others.

The syntactic function of a copulative verb roots in its *di*-valency, combining the logical subject and the predicate by expressing an equation. As opposed to the copula in this sense, the valency of other verbs varies strongly, making difficult to define the informational focus of the sentence, since the logical/grammatical subject is not always identical to the topic of the sentence.

Furthermore, there are also cases in which the whole sentence consists of a comment. Needless to say, the level of discourse theoretically differs from that of the proposition of a sentential expression in a strict way, so that a proposition which represents an equation might semantically very well be embedded into a «thetic judgement» to use Marty/Kuroda's term (1972). But in an independent predication which represents an equation, an adequate act of reference to identify the logical subject is almost without exception taken for granted. In other words, the copula is practically predestined for use in «categorical judgements». Thus, if a sentence can be transformed into the one employing the copula, the position of the focus will be easily marked. In the case of English, it is laid on the expression following the copula, as has already been seen in (8b-c).

At any rate, the whole predicate is characteristically nominalised by using a conjunction which introduces a nominal clause like *that* in English or a kind of «dummy noun» like *-n(o)* in Japanese, attached to the connominal form of a verbal lexeme, in order to fit into the construction on the copula.

3. A CASE STUDY IN MODERN SPOKEN KAREN

This is exactly the case also with Karen. Consider the following examples now:

- (10) a. Kpôthu he leo Gyeomnêi lô. (≅ 8a)
 Kpothu come from Germany ASS
 'Kpothu came/is from Germany.'
- b. Kpôthu-nêi he leo Gyeomnêi nêi lô. (≅ 8b)
 'It is Kpothu who came/is from Germany.'
- c. Kpôthu-mêi he leo Gyeomnêi nêi lô. (≅ 8c)
 'It is Germany that Kpothu came/is from.'

Apparently, the postposition *-nêi* marks the focus, while *-mêi* implies that not the logical subject at the top of the sentence, but the certain part of the predicate expression is under the focus.

Possessing these discourse-functional particles which morphologically define the functional status of the preceding nominal expressions, Karen need not utilise word order to mark the position of the focus of the sentence, exactly as Japanese:

- (11) a. Jap. TAROO-ga Doitu -kara ki-ta-*n-desu*. (≅ 8b, 10b)
 'It is Taroo who came/is from Germany.'
- b. Jap. TAROO-wa DOITU -kara ki-ta-*n-desu*. (≅ 8c, 10c)
 'It is Germany that Taroo came/is from.'

Lacking this kind of particles, however, Chinese, e.g., behaves entirely analogous to English in this regard. Compare (12a-b) with (8a-b):

- (12) a. Chi. Zhāng-Sān *shì* cóng DÉGUÓ lái -de. (≅ 8c, 11c)
 Zhang-San COP from Germany come -NOM
 'It is Germany that Zhang-San came/is from.'
- b. Chi. *Shì* ZHĀNG-SĀN cóng Déguó lái -de. (≅ 8b, 11b)

'It is Zhang-San who came/is from Germany.'

At any rate, our observation of the plain-clefting dichotomy clearly indicates that the copulative construction with or without the copula itself represents one of the most favourite devices to form a focusing structure.

4. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR GENEALOGICAL AND AREAL-LINGUISTIC ISSUES

Now talking about the typological and/or genealogical status of the nominal postpositions *-nêi* and *-mêi*, these particles are formally very similar, or even entirely identical to grammemes of other categories: *-nêi* as a demonstrative «that» and *-mêi* as a full verb in the meaning «to be correct», so that (7b-c) might be paraphrased as: «It is correct that Kpothu is a schoolboy.»

As has already been pointed out, however, the copula itself may be omitted in Karen, even in case of nominal predications. This is not at all peculiar, as is well-documented like the traditional case Classical Chinese, the present tense in Russian *etc.* Since the predicate noun entirely suffices to make a meaningful predication in this case, the employment of *-mêi* makes the whole sentence rather emphatic: «Kpothu actually is a schoolboy» or simply «Kpothu IS a schoolboy.» Thus, the discourse function of the copula in this position comes somewhat similar to that of stressed auxiliaries in English, emphasising the truth of the proposition which underlies the sentential expression in question. It seems, therefore, not to be adequate to interpret the Karen *mêi* as a full copula, at least for the moment. Functionally, we have rather with an emphatic marker to do.

The same is also true for the other nominal postposition with a discourse function *-nêi*. Although the demonstrative origin of the copula is well-substantiated in a number of languages like Chinese as a typical case, it is impossible to postulate *nêi* as a copulative verb for Modern Spoken Karen.

5. ON THE ORIGIN OF THE «POSTPOSITIONAL SYNTAX» IN KAREN

A theoretical problem arises in this regard as to whether such a postpositional syntax is originated in the Karen language itself or it is to be ascribed to a Burman influence. Although it may be strongly speculated that this usage represents an innovation in this language as the postpositional forms themselves are unequivocally associated with their possible origins, it is, at the present stage of investigation, entirely uncertain what events may have caused the emergence of these discourse-functional particles.

6. CONCLUSION

In sum, starting from a discourse-functional analysis of the copulative construction in Modern spoken Karen, I hope to have shown a theoretical possibility to investigate into the typological and genealogical status of diachronically less documented languages like Modern spoken Karen.

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