"Nominalisation, focus and case particles: The case of Burmese and other verb-final languages of Southeast Asia"

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One of the most striking features of modern spoken Burmese is the ambiguity of nominalized verb forms ("ha") which can occur as nominal arguments of a verb as well as in sentence final position with the function of a finite verb. Another notoriously difficult phenomenon is the ambiguity of nominal particles ("kou", "ka") which can either mark the thematic role of a nominal argument similar to case particles or which can mark emphasis without any thematic specification. The same kind of ambiguities with nominalized verb forms and nominal particles are documented in Lahu, Akha and other Tibeto-Burman languages of Southeast Asia. However, in the reference grammars and dictionaries that are available for Burmese and Lahu these ambiguities are treated as categorically different and mutually unrelated phenomena.

In a historical syntactic analysis which treats syntactic ambiguities as signs of grammaticalization processes, I argue that both phenomena are systematically interrelated. Drawing on a parallel development which can be found in Japanese I will show that today's case marking function of Burmese "kou" and finite verb particle "de" is a grammaticalized form of an old Burmese focus construction with kou as focus marking particle and thi as nominalized verb form. Along the same lines I will explain the ambiguity of modern vernacular nominalized verb forms with "ha" in finite position. These constructions can be analysed as modern forms of focus constructions that are undergoing the same process of grammaticalization.

Whereas for Burmese, Lahu and Japanese this process has not been discussed in an integrated manner, the reduction of bi-clausal structures to mono-clausal structures is a well documented phenomenon.

A brief overview of focus phenomena and nominalizations in other verb-final languages suggests that this pattern is related to the head parameter rather than genetic affiliation or areal distribution.