

The agent-defocusing function of a Pwo Karen noun that means “thing”
Atsuhiko Kato (Osaka University)
atsuhiko@lang.osaka-u.ac.jp

0. Introduction

Pwo Karen is a Tibeto-Burman language that belongs to the Karenic branch (cf. Matisoff 2003, Shintani 2003, Manson 2003). Like the other Karenic languages, it has analytic SVO-type characteristics. All of the Karenic languages that have been found so far are SVO, which is atypical among the Tibeto-Burman languages, the large majority of which are of SOV-type. This paper discusses the Hpa-an dialect, which is spoken around Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, Myanmar. Kato (2009b) classifies the Pwo Karen dialects into Western Pwo Karen, Eastern Pwo Karen, Htoklibang Pwo Karen, and Northern Pwo Karen, based on intelligibility. The Hpa-an dialect belongs to Eastern Pwo Karen. For classification of the Pwo Karen dialects, see also Phillips (1996, 2000).

This paper is intended as a first investigation of the agent-defocusing function of the Pwo Karen noun /chə ~ chē (chè)/, which means “thing”. This noun is pronounced /chə/ before verbs and noun-modifying elements such as prepositional phrases, and is pronounced /chē/ or /chè/ in the other positions. In this paper, we use /chē/ as the citation form. Agent-defocusing is often encoded by passive constructions in many languages, but Pwo Karen does not have a passive construction.

The word *chē* is cognate with the forms which have the meaning “thing” of other Karenic languages, such as Western Pwo Karen /shê/ (Kato 1995), Htoklibang Pwo Karen /châ/ (Kato 2009b), Sgaw Karen /tà/ (Kato 1993), Geba /de/ (Kato 2008), Bwe Karen /de/ (Henderson 1997), Kayah Li /te/ (Solnit 1997), Pekon Kayan /ta/ (Manson 2007), and so on. We can reconstruct **da^B* as the Proto-Karen form. Its reflexes in many Pwo Karen dialects have /ch/ or /sh/ as the initial consonant, but in the Hot dialect of Northern Pwo Karen, which was reported by Cooke et al. (1976), the corresponding form is /thə/ (p.207). Therefore, we can assume that Proto-Pwo Karen preserved an alveolar stop as the initial and reconstruct **thə⁴* as the Proto-Pwo Karen form (for Proto-Pwo Karen see Kato 2009b).

1. The usages of *chē* in which it does not denote things

The basic usage of the word *chē* is to denote inanimate object(s). Sentence (1) to (3) are examples:

- (1) **chə** lə ʔəθàklà
thing LOC center “the thing in the center”
- (2) **chə** lànthé
thing drop “Something dropped.”
- (3) nə ʔánchâ **chē** bátəkè ʋâ
2sg sell thing convenient QUE “Are you selling the things well?”

There are, however, cases in which *chē* does not denote “thing(s)”:

- (i) the case where *chē* denotes animate being(s), and it is used for agent-defocusing
- (ii) the case where *chē* is used as the “formal subject” in sentences that denote natural phenomena

This paper treats only case (i), and will discuss it in the following sections. Sentences (4) to (7) are examples of case (ii):

- (4) **chə** γê chàn jàσ
 thing come rain PRF “It has begun to rain.”
- (5) **chə** khō θəkà
 thing hot extremely “It is extremely hot.”
- (6) **chə** ʔəwɪN tán mā
 thing get.cloudy thick very “It is thickly clouded”
- (7) **chə** khú
 thing dusty “It is dusty”

2. Agent-defocusing function of *chə*

The noun *chə* can appear in place of subject nouns that denote animate beings. See sentences (8) and (9) first:

- (8) **chə** klí
 thing run “{Someone/Anyone} ran.”
- (9) **chə** dót còʔéphlòσN
 thing hit PN
 “{Someone/Anyone} hit Mr. Kyaw Ai Phlong.”

Sentences (8) and (9) can be used in place of sentences (10) and (11) respectively if the contexts are appropriate:

- (10) { jə / nə / ʔəwê / pə / nəθí / ʔəθí } klí
 1sg 2sg 3sg 1pl 2pl 3pl run “{I / Thou / He / We / Ye / They } ran.”
- (11) { jə / nə / ʔəwê / pə / nəθí / ʔəθí } dót còʔéphlòσN
 1sg 2sg 3sg 1pl 2pl 3pl hit PN “{I / Thou / He / We / Ye / They } hit Kyaw Ai Phlong.”

Thus, *chə* may appear as a subject, and a substitute for animate nouns of all the persons and numbers. What is important is that animate noun phrases that are not in the subject position cannot be replaced with *chə*. In (12), *chə* cannot refer to an animate being because it is in the object position. This sentence only means, “He/She hit things.”

- (12) ʔəwê dót **chə**
 3sg hit thing “He/She hit things.”

In this paper, clauses with *chə* in the subject position that denotes animate being(s) are called “cher-clauses”.

In cher-clauses, agents¹ are made less prominent. I call this the agent-defocusing function of *chə*, and

¹ In this paper, the term “agent” refers generally to the referents of subjects of clauses. Thus, “agent” includes entities other than agents, such as experiencers, patients, themes, and so on. For example, in the sentence *chə θí jàσ* (thing / die / PRF), “Someone died”, *chə* refers to a patient.

consider it to be the basic function of *chā* when it denotes animate beings. The agent-defocusing function of *chā* as it signifies animate beings can be demonstrated by the following two facts. First, *chā* cannot be topicalized. Generally, subjects denoting animate beings as in (10) and (11) can be topicalized, as is shown in (13) and (14). The subjects in (8) and (9), however, cannot be topicalized, as is shown in (15) and (16).

(13) ʔəwê nó klí
3sg TOP run “As for him, he ran.”

(14) ʔəwê nó d̄ó j̄ə
3sg TOP hit 1sg “As for him, he hit me.”

(15) ***chə** nó klí
thing TOP run

(16) ***chə** nó d̄ó j̄ə
thing TOP hit 1sg

Secondly, *chā* cannot be put in the focus position of a cleft sentence. Generally, subjects denoting animate beings, such as in (10) and (11), can be put in the focus position of cleft sentences, as is shown in (17) and (18); but sentences (8) and (9) cannot be clefted as in (19) and (20).

(17) klí nó mwē ʔəwê l̄ó
run TOP COP 3sg AST “It is he that ran.”

(18) d̄ó j̄ə nó mwē ʔəwê l̄ó
hit 1sg TOP COP 3sg AST “It is he that hit me.”

(19) *klí nó mwē **chā** l̄ó
run TOP COP thing AST

(20) *d̄ó j̄ə nó mwē **chā** l̄ó
hit 1sg TOP COP thing AST

Cher-clauses can often be translated into other languages, such as English, by using agentless passive clauses because the agents are defocused in cher-clauses. Examples are shown in (21) to (23). As is mentioned above, Pwo Karen does not have a passive construction.

(21) **chə** l̄ó chā j̄ə
thing tell ache 1sg “I was spoken ill of.”

(22) **chə** mà θī ʔəwê
thing CAUS die 3sg “He was killed.”

- (23) ló pəjàn khān phàn nó chə khlain pəjàn
 LOC Burma country inside TOP thing speak Burmese
 “Burmese is spoken in Myanmar.”

Note that a “zero pronoun” also appears as the subject in Pwo Karen clauses. However, it can only appear when the referent of the subject is high in topicality. If the referent is not high in topicality, non-zero nominals, including pronouns, generally occur as subjects. Therefore, using a “zero pronoun” implies that the agent is high in topicality. (24) is an example in which a “zero pronoun” is used:

- (24) ʔəwê yê. φ dɔ̄ jə
 3sg come hit me “He came. [He] hit me.”

The effect of implying high topicality is contrary to that of agent-defocusing. Thus, a “zero pronoun” is not used for the purpose of agent-defocusing.

3. Motivations of agent-defocusing in cher-clauses

Myhill (1997), in a cross-linguistic study of agent-defocusing, points out that the motivations of agent-defocusing can be divided into discourse and semantic motivations. In Pwo Karen, uses of cher-clauses also can be grouped into these two types of motivations. The motivations discussed in the following sections have been found through the interviews with the consultant and text surveys.

3.1 Discourse motivations

Here, we will observe the cases where cher-clauses are used for discourse motivations. We will take sentences (25) and (26) as sample sentences, and see that the same sentence may be used for various motivations:

- (25) chə klí
 thing run
 “{Someone/Anyone} ran.” (=8)

- (26) chə dɔ̄ cəʔéphlòʔN
 thing hit PN
 “{Someone/Anyone} hit Kyaw Ai Phlong.” (=9)

Discourse motivations include three cases: (i) the case in which the speaker does not know the agent, (ii) the case in which the speaker does not need to refer to the agent, and (iii) the case in which the speaker wants certain information in a clause other than the agent to be prominent. In order to discuss these motivations, it is convenient to consider whether the speaker can identify the agent, as can be represented as [\pm known] (for information concerning [\pm known], see Haspelmath 1997). Out of these three motivations, (i) and (ii) are related to identifiability, while (iii) is not.

3.1.1 Motivation (i): the speaker does not know the agent ([-known])

When the speaker cannot identify the agent, such as in the case of [-known], cher-clauses are used. Generic agents are also included, because the speaker cannot identify all of the agents in that case². If the agent

² Siewierska (2004:210-213) calls forms that refer to people in general as “impersonal forms”. In the case of a generic reading, *chā* may be called an impersonal form in her terms. For representations of generic human

is specific, the hearer may be able to identify its referent, but if the agent is not specific, then the hearer cannot identify it.

In this case, sentences (25) and (26) are used in such situations as are shown in (A) and (B) below.

(A) Situations in which (25) is used include

The speaker knows someone ran, but does not know who it was ; people in general ran.

(B) Situations in which (26) is used include

The speaker knows someone hit Kyaw Ai Phlong, but does not know who did it; people in general hit Kyaw Ai Phlong.

Below are cher-clauses found in the texts that seem to be used with this motivation. For each sentence, detailed motivation is shown. In (27) and (28), the agents are specific, while in (29) to (34), the agents are unspecific.

(27) **chə** ʔáɴyú jə cɛ́bēiɴ
thing steal 1sg bicycle

“[Someone] stole my bicycle.” (Conversation 001)

(The motivation is that the speaker does not know who stole the bicycle.)

(28) ló ʔəwī ʔò, ló dòʊɴ pəkō ʔə chəpəɴ **chə** ʔáɴphôn thílá ʔá wê ʔəkhóʔcòɴ,
LOC ago that LOC town Pegu 3sg territory thing cook salt much EMP because
ʔəmèiɴ phló dɔ́ mā ló
name appear big very AST

“Long ago, in the Pegu area, [they] made so much salt that [Pegu] was quite famous.” (Essay II-03)

(The motivation is that the speaker does not know who made salt.)

(29) **chə** thín wá nə dē ʔəphlòʊɴ ló
thing think Pv(ina) 2sg COM Karen AST

“[People] will take you for a Karen.” (Conversation 003)

(The motivation is that the agent is generic)

(30) **chə** bá chəcàʊchəchâ
thing bump disease

“[People] got sick.” (Folk tale 021)

(The motivation is that the speaker do not know who got sick.)

(31) pə lái jò ʔè lə ʔəʊɴkhân, **chə** mə nītòʊɴ ʔáɴkó chèn pə lái jò
1pl script this if NEG stable thing IRR laugh criticize Pv(pl) 1pl script this

“If our [Karen] alphabet is not strong, [other peoples] will laugh at and criticize our alphabet.”(Essay IV-10)

(The motivation is that the agent is generic)

(32) nəθí phàn nəθí nòʊN nó **chə** bá θàmé ʔəlāN ʔó ʔé
 2pl spear 2pl horn TOP thing must fear place exist NEG
 “As for your spears and horns, [people] don’t have to scare them.” (Folk tale II-05)
 (The motivation is that the agent is generic)

(33) ʔē thà nī chāiN bákəN nóðò, təwāN phəN nó **chə** θîthé nī bá ʔé
 if weave get shirt excellent TOP village inside TOP thing die.suddenly get right NEG
 “When [they] weave a shirt of top-quality, [anyone] must not die suddenly in the village.” (Essay V-02)
 (The motivation is that the speaker cannot predict who will die.)

(34) **chə** dá pə nāN ʔà ʔé
 thing see 1pl any NC(psn) NEG
 “Nobody will see us.” (Folk tale III-15)
 (The motivation is the agent is generic)

3.1.2 Motivation (ii): the speaker does not need to refer to the agent ([+known])

When the speaker believes there is no need to refer to the agent, cher-clauses are used. This motivation only works when the speaker knows the agent ([+known]). Situations in which the speaker does not need to say the agent include situations when the speaker does not think it is important who the agent is, when the hearer is supposed to easily identify the agent, and when the speaker does not want the hearer to identify the agent. The hearer may be able to identify the agent because the agent is specific in the case of [+known].

In this case, sentences (25) and (26) are used in such situations as are shown in (A) and (B) below.

(A) Situations in which (25) is used include

The speaker thinks that it is not important who ran; the speaker feels no need to refer to the agent because the hearer also knows who ran; the speaker does not want the hearer know who ran.

(B) Situations in which (26) is used include

The speaker thinks that it is not important who hit Kyaw Ai Phlong; the speaker feels no need to say the agent because the hearer also knows who hit Kyaw Ai Phlong; the speaker does not want the hearer know who hit Kyaw Ai Phlong.

Below are cher-clauses found in the texts that seem to be used with this type of motivation.

(35) jə mə lì méchàʊ jò, **chə** məthái thá jə
 1sg IRR go Maesot when thing obstruct Pv(kr) 1sg
 “When I was going to go to Maesot, [someone] obstructed me.” (Conversation 001)
 (The motivation is that it is not important who obstructed the speaker.)

(36) nə ʔè lì, **chə** mə phón nə
 2sg if go thing IRR catch 2sg
 “If you go, [he] will arrest you.” (Conversation 001)
 (The motivation is that the hearer also knows the policeman.)

- (37) ʔánmâN [**chə** θòʊN phílân ló kòtə̀ràì ʔò] chī ló
 order thing send give LOC Kawkareik that too AST
 “[She] ordered that [her acquaintance] send [her letter] to the Kawkareik town.” (Short novel IV-04)
 (The motivation is that the writer of the novel does not need to let the reader know who sent the letter.)

3.1.3 Motivation (iii): the speaker wants certain information in a clause other than the agent to be prominent ([±known])

Cher-clauses are used when the speaker wants certain information in a clause other than the agent to be prominent. They are typically used when the speaker wants to emphasize the patient or emphasize the event itself that the verb denotes. In a case such as this, it is irrelevant whether the speaker can identify the agent.

Sentences (25) and (26) are used in such situations as are shown in (A) and (B) below.

(A) Situations in which (25) is used include

The speaker wants to emphasize the action of “running”.

(B) Situations in which (26) is used include:

The speaker wants to emphasize the action of “hitting”; the speaker wants to emphasize the patient Kyaw Ai Phlong.

Below are cher-clauses found in the texts that seem to be used with this motivation.

- (38) **chə** thàin mjòN khwái wê ʔə kəchân chī ló
 thing return drag Pv(thour) EMP 3sg elephant too AST
 “His elephant was dragged away [by the person who bought the elephant].” (Folk tale VI-12)
 (The motivation is that the speaker wants to tell about the elephant.)

- (39) ló cháipràn cháipə̀jāN nàin ʔò **chə** dò làn thá dē phòʊN
 LOC rice.field footpath edge that thing set down Pv(kr) COM fish.trap
 “[The farmer] set a fish trap near the footpath of the rice field.” (Folk tale II-05):
 (The motivation is that the speaker wants to tell about the fish trap.)

- (40) **chə** khlàin thòN ʔēthaó
 thing speak till end
 “[I and my friend] talked until we had nothing more to say.” (Conversation 001)
 (The motivation is that the speaker wants to emphasize how much he and his friend talked.)

- (41) **chə** ēā thán jàʊ chī wêdá bò
 thing old up PRF too (emphasis) SFP
 “[My mother] has gotten old.” (Short novel VI-10)
 (The motivation is that the speaker wants to emphasize his mother’s being old.)

3.2 Semantic motivation: motivation (iv)

Chə may occur as the subject of a sentence that expresses emotions or other physiological phenomena. In this case, *chə* denotes that the emotions or physiological phenomena take place spontaneously and are outside the control of the agent. Obviously, this usage of *chə* is semantically motivated. Only one semantic motivation has been found so far. Examples are shown in (42) to (45). This “spontaneity usage” of *chə* might be semantically related to the usage denoting natural phenomena, as is demonstrated in sentences (4) to (7).

- (42) **chə** p wàiθà jàʋ
 thing tired PRF
 “(I am; You are; He/She is etc.) tired.”
- (43) **chə** mə ʔán báθà mì yàʋ
 thing IRR eat want.to rice PRF
 “(I want; You want; He/She wants etc.) to eat now.”
- (44) **chə** èàʋ
 thing startled
 “(I; You; He/She etc.) got startled.”
- (45) jə pō lái, **chə** maʔθà
 1sg read book thing comfortable
 “When I read the books, [I] was happy.” (Conversation 003)

In this usage, a nominal that directly refers to the agent sometimes occurs in the topic position, as is shown in (46) and (47):

- (46) chərá **chə** p wàiθà jàʋ ʋá
 teacher thing tired PRF QUE
 “Is the teacher tired?” (Conversation 018)
- (47) nəθí **chə** ɛā thán jàʋ
 2pl thing old up PRF
 “You guys are old now.”

4. Conclusions

Motivations of using cher-clauses are summarized in (48):

- (48)
- (a) Discourse motivations
- (i) The speaker does not know the agent ([-known])
 - (ii) The speaker does not need to say the agent ([+known])
 - (iii) The speaker wants certain information other than the agent to be prominent ([±known])
- (b) Semantic motivation
- (iv) *chə* denotes that emotions or physiological phenomena take place spontaneously

Of these motivations, motivations (i) and (ii) cannot work simultaneously for a single sentence, while it seems possible that the other motivations can work for a single sentence. In (35), for example, it is possible that motivation (iii) is at work, as well as motivation (ii) at the same time.

As can be seen from studies such as Shibatani (1985), Myhill (1997), and Sansò (2006), agent-defocusing is encoded in various strategies, such as passive constructions and impersonal constructions. Agent-defocusing in Pwo Karen is attained by the noun that has a general meaning “thing”. In this respect,

cher-clauses can be classified into Sansò's (2006) "man-clauses", or agent-defocusing constructions that have some general noun as the subject, which were named after a Danish impersonal construction.

It is important that *chā* can only appear in the subject position but not in others. It implies that the subject of Pwo Karen is a prominent element of a clause. It is likely that other nominals, such as the object, do not need to be defocused because they are not as prominent in Pwo Karen.

In Pwo Karen, other syntactic strategies such as topicalization and middle voice seem to be related to agent-defocusing. In (49), the agent becomes less prominent by virtue of topicalizing the patient. In (50), the agent cannot appear since middle voice is used in this sentence.

(49) *kəchân* *nó* *ʔəwê* *thàN* *mjòN* *khwái*
 elephant TOP 3sg return drag Pv(thour) "The elephant was dragged away by him."

(50) *pàitərân* *pàʋ* *thán* *θà*
 window open(tr.) up MID "The window opened."

Sansò (2006) discusses what kinds of constructions associated with agent-defocusing are used according to various "situation types", such as "patient-oriented process", "bare happening", "agentless generic event", and so on. We need to consider which constructions are likely to be used in what kind of situations in Pwo Karen. As is pointed out in Kato (2009a), middle voice in Pwo Karen functions to fill a gap when the language lacks a verb that denotes an intransitive event. It seems that this is an important role of middle voice, while its role in agent-defocusing is of small importance. Exploring the functional relationship between cher-clauses and topicalization will probably be the more important work in future studies.

Abbreviations

AST	particle indicating assertion	PN	person's name
CAUS	verb particle indicating causation	PRF	particle indicating perfect
COM	particle indicating accompanier or instrument	Pv(ina)	verb particle indicating inadvertency
COP	copular verb	Pv(pl)	verb particle indicating plurality of the subject
EMP	verb particle indicating emphasis	Pv(kr)	verb particle indicating keeping a result
IRR	verb particle indicating irrealis modality	Pv(thour)	verb particle indicating thoroughness.
LOC	particle indicating location, goal, and source	SFP	sentence final particles
MID	middle voice marker	QUE	particle indicating question
NC(psn)	numeral classifier for a person	TOP	topic marker
NEG	verb particle indicating negativity		

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Data

Numbers attached to the sentences such as "Folk tale II-05" are my data numbers. The notations such as "Folk tale", "Short novel", or "Conversation" indicate genres of the texts.

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Appendix 1: Phonemic inventory of the Hpa-an dialect

The transcription of this paper is phonemic. /N/ occurs only as a final. It is a uvular nasal, but its closure often is not complete, and as a result it only nasalizes the preceding vowel. Nasalization of the rhymes /eɪN/, /əʊN/, and /oʊN/ is so weak that these are sometimes pronounced [ei], [əʊ], and [oʊ], respectively. Note: /θ/ [t̪ ~ θ], /c/ [tɕ], /ch/ [tɕʰ]. The rhyme /iN/ only occurs in borrowings from Burmese.

Consonants

p	θ	t	c	k	ʔ
ph		th	ch	kh	
b[β]		d[dʰ]			
			ɛ	x	h
			ɣ	ʁ	
m		n	ɲ	ŋ	N
w			j		
			l		
			r		

Vowels

i	i	ɯ
ɪ	[ɪ]	ʊ
e	ə	o
ɛ	a	ɔ

Tones

má	[55]
mā	[22(3)] (breathy)
mà	[11]
mâ	[51]
(mə atonic)	

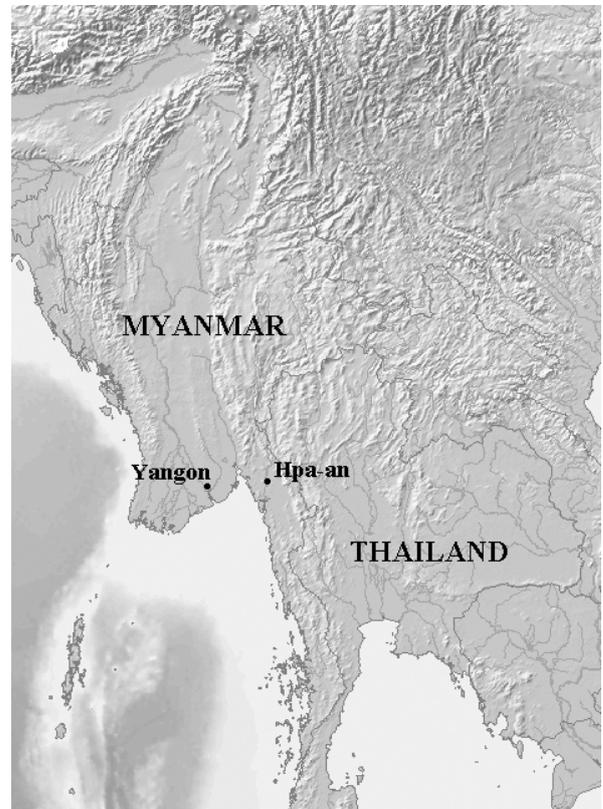
All rhymes

i	i	ɯ	ai	aʊ	(iN)	əN	eɪN	əʊN	oʊN
ɪ		ʊ			aN	oN	aiN		
e	ə	o							
ɛ	a	ɔ							

Appendix 2: Pronouns of the Hpa-an dialect

The form I is mainly used before verbs (i.e. subject) or nouns (i.e. possessor), while the form II is mainly used after verbs (i.e. object) and with adpositional particles. The emphatic form is typically used when the pronoun is topicalized, but also in the subject or object slots.

	Form I	Form II	Emphatic form
1sg	jə	jə̀	jəwê, jəwêdá
1pl	hə (pə)	hə̀ (pə̀)	həwê (pəwê) həwêdá (pəwêdá)
2sg	nə	nə̀	nəwê, nəwêdá
2pl	nəθí	nəθí̀	nəθíwê, nəθíwêdá
3sg	ʔə	ʔə̀	ʔəwê, ʔəwêdá
3pl	ʔəθí	ʔəθí̀	ʔəθíwê, ʔəθíwêdá
	ʔəθíʔə (before nouns)		



Map: The location of Hpa-an