

A Comparative Analysis of Contemporary Phrase Structure Grammar of English and Burmese

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Abstract

This research had the objectives to 1) to investigate the contemporary phrase structure grammar of Burmese language, 2) to compare the contemporary phrase structure grammar of English and Burmese languages, and 3) to analyze the similarities and differences between contemporary phrase structure grammar of English and Burmese language. This research design was a qualitative study using the methodological procedure for a study gathering through documentary and in-depth interviews. The researcher employed tools such as questionnaires and interviews, by utilizing the phrase structure in the Burmese Language used by respondents.

The result exposed as follows:

The findings directly address the three primary objectives of the study by providing a systematic examination of Burmese contemporary phrase structure grammar, a cross-linguistic comparison with English, and an analysis of their structural similarities and differences. The analysis demonstrates that Burmese phrase structure is fundamentally organized around the relationship between the head and its modifiers, comparable to English, yet governed by distinct syntactic principles. Burmese noun phrases typically follow a Modifier + Head configuration, whereas English commonly exhibits a Determiner + Modifier + Head pattern. Verb phrases in Burmese are predominantly verb-final, in contrast to the verb-medial structure associated with English subject-verb-object alignment. Adjective and adverb phrases also display divergent structural positioning, with Burmese permitting greater flexibility in post-head modification. Furthermore, although prepositional phrases in both languages fulfill similar semantic roles, Burmese structurally realizes these relationships through postpositions rather than prepositions. In addition, Burmese employs classifiers and grammatical particles to encode grammatical relations that English generally expresses through prepositional and inflectional mechanisms.

Keywords: English; Burmese; Phrase Structure; Second Language; Modifier

Introduction

Language serves a fundamental in individuals convey thoughts, emotions, and cultural values. Language is also a complex system that enables human communication and expression. Chomsky (2009:3) defines language as: "A language is a set of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements." language is composed of a limited set of symbols such as phonemes, morphemes, or words, and speakers can generate an infinite number of



sentences through recursive rules. The phrase is a simple structure of language. It provides valuable insights into the grammatical principles and syntactic patterns of different languages. The purpose of the study is comparative analysis in the phrase structures of English and Burmese.

The study of language structure, particularly phrase structure, plays a pivotal role in influencing communication and linguistic comprehension. Odlin (1989) said that the powerful effect of the first language in the efforts of learners is to master the second language. When the rules of the two languages match the learners can achieve their first language knowledge in learning the second language, making learning easier and quicker. This is the condition for positive transfer. In the second language, the linguistic phenomena involved the important perspectives of first languages. However, Patterning is achieved in sounds, letters, words, phrases, and sentences in language that have unique ways of communicating.

In grammar, a phrase is a word or, more commonly, a group of words that functions as a unit in the syntax of a sentence, usually consisting of a head, and a defining word. Stone (2015:112) also said the phrase is a unit in a sentence that functions as a whole with a larger construction. The concept of phrase structure refers to the hierarchical arrangement of words and constituents within a sentence. The phrase structure is crucial for comprehending the syntactic rules and patterns that govern sentence formation in a language. types of phrases, noun phrases (NP), verb phrases (VP), adjective phrases (AdjP), adverb phrases (AdvP), and prepositional phrases (PP) are structured in each language. The study presents these elements combined with heads and modifiers and how their syntactic positions differ across the two languages.

English, a member of the Germanic language family, is widely spoken in various parts of the world. The language is spoken by 350 million people globally and is the major language of communication: international relations, media, and education. It is also a required subject in Myanmar schools (Grade 1 to Grade 12). English exhibits a subject-verb-object (SVO) word order, where the subject typically precedes the verb, and the verb precedes the object. However, English phrase structure goes beyond simple word order and involves various syntactic devices such as determiners, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions. Noun phrases, verb phrases, and other types of phrases in English possess specific structural characteristics and constituent arrangements.

On the other hand, Burmese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, is the official language in Myanmar and is spoken by a significant population in the region. Burmese exhibits a subject-object-verb (SOV) word order, where the subject comes first, followed by the object, and finally the verb. Burmese grammar consists of nine parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, proposition markers, conjunctions, interjections, and particles. Each part of speech serves a unique function in constructing meaningful sentences. The Myanmar Thadda (2013), does not specifically address the structure of phrases within grammar rules. This omission creates an important breach in consideration of the difficulties of Burmese syntax, especially since phrases play a fundamental in sentence construction. This study will examine scholarly theories on the classification of phrases.

In previous study, Pongsawat (2022) conducted in sentence structure that English sentences are categorized into four types: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. In contrast, Burmese sentences are primarily divided into simple and complex types. The study emphasized the use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in English, whereas Burmese relies on postpositional markers and particles to connect clauses.

Moreover, in clause structure, according to Wheatley (1987), Burmese allows a high degree of clause chaining and subordination. Clauses can be simple or complex, with embedded subordinate clauses frequently marked by clause-final particles. On other hand, Pe Maung Tin (1956:192) pointed out that in the phrase "the Burmese part of speech actually has only two parts, noun and verb" these nouns and verbs need the help of suffixes or particles to show grammatical relations. Then, Okell (1994) surveyed in noun phrases, modifiers such as adjectives, demonstratives, and numerals typically precede the noun, while classifiers and postpositions follow it. So, the phrase structure is significant to study and comparative analysis in English and Burmese.

This study investigates the phrase structure of the Burmese language in comparison with English, with the aim of uncovering both structural differences and similarities. Phrase structures are fundamental units in sentence construction, and understanding them is essential in linguistic analysis, second language acquisition, and cross-linguistic comparison. English and Burmese are linguistically distinct. Therefore, a comparative study contributes valuable insights into syntactic typology and enhances pedagogical strategies for language teaching.

Research Objective

- 1) to investigate the contemporary phrase structure grammar of Burmese language,
- 2) to compare the contemporary phrase structure grammar of English and Burmese languages,
- 3) to analyze the similarities and differences between contemporary phrase structure grammar of English and Burmese language.

Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to solve the problems of the data analysis of the phrase structure in the Burmese language. This research is aimed to investigate the phrase structure of Burmese with comparative study in English phrases. As population of the study, the researcher selected informants from Mandalay in order to derive the data. They are over 20 years old so that they can be responsible in interviews and fluent in their Burmese language. These informants have chosen both male and female to check a little difference in daily Burmese speaking. These samples in Burmese language for the data collection by questionnaire and interview. There were two parts in the questionnaire. Part one consists of general information including gender, educational level, age and status. The second part interviews questionnaires in advance to produce the data for Burmese phrase structure. In order



to collect data, the researcher used the primary and secondary. Primary data was directly collected from the persons of research that consists of 10 by answering the questionnaire from face to face interview. The data was the responses provided by Burmese native speakers. As the secondary data, the researcher collected information from documentary surveys such as thesis books, academic books, academic articles, journals and online. For English Phrase Structure of data, it used books related to English Grammar and General Linguistics for all the data necessary. had analyzed by the content analysis. The recorded data used the phonetic symbols as standard Burmese pronunciation or alphabet IPA (International Phonetic Association). Regarding the phrase analysis, the researcher had presented according to grammatical hierarchy, which contains "the structure of modern English". Then, the researcher created tables showing and the action in the data. Finally, the researcher noted some conclusions after completing the analysis. The analysis of the data led to a comprehensive understanding of the similarities and differences between English and Burmese languages based on phrase structure.

Research Results

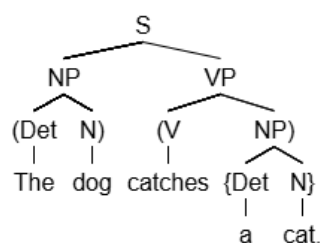
This research had intended to explore the phrase structures of Burmese and English within a comparative analytical framework, focusing on both organization and the distribution of phrase elements, with the purpose of identifying significant similarities and differences between the two languages.

Moreover, by the way phrases, a sentence constructing noun and verb ($S \rightarrow N + V$) is obviously more abstract and clearer as a bone of phrase-structure rules. But it is not very informative, because sentences have a lot more words than nouns and verbs. So, the sentence rule ($S \rightarrow N + V$) changes to Sentence $\rightarrow$ Noun Phrase + Verb Phrase ($S \rightarrow NP VP$). A noun phrase may consist of an optional determiner and a noun ($NP \rightarrow (Det) N1$). A noun can include an optional adjective phrase, a noun as the head, and an optional prepositional phrase ($N1 \rightarrow (AdjP) N1 (PP)$).

The simplified examples of such the diagram illustrating the comparative analysis of phrase structure between English and Burmese describe the hierarchical organization of phrases in both languages below.

English example: The dog catches a cat. (SVO)

In English, the word order is SVO: " The dog " (subject) + " catches" (verb) + " a cat." (object).



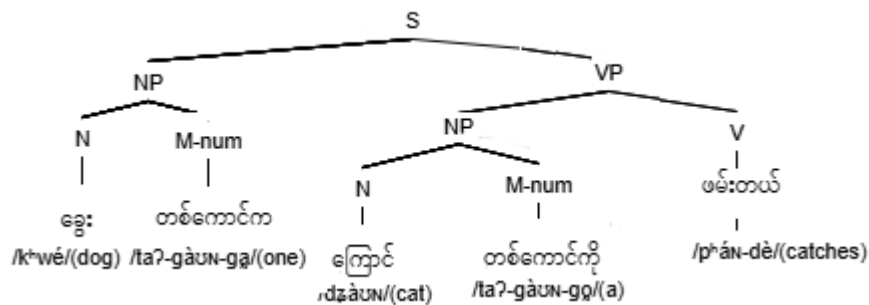
In English diagram: Sentence = Noun Phrase (Determiner + Noun) + Verb Phrase (Verb + Noun Phrase [Determiner+ Noun]). S = NP (Det + N) + VP (V + NP [Det + N]).

Burmese example: ခွေး(တစ်ကောင်)က ကြောင်တစ်ကောင်ကို ဖမ်းတယ်။

IPA: /k^hwé (ta^ʔ gə^ʔUN) gə^ʔdʒə^ʔUN ta^ʔ gə^ʔUN gə^ʔp^hāN dè/ (SOV)

(In English: The dog a cat catches.)

In Burmese, the word order is SOV: "ခွေး(တစ်ကောင်)က" /k^hwé (ta^ʔ gə^ʔUN) gə^ʔ/ (The dog, subject) + "ကြောင်တစ်ကောင်ကို" /dʒə^ʔUN ta^ʔ gə^ʔUN gə^ʔ/ (a cat, object) + "ဖမ်းတယ်" /p^hāN dè/ (catches, verb). The verb comes after the subject and object in Burmese.



In Burmese diagram: Sentence = Noun Phrase (Noun + Modifier) + Verb Phrase (Verb + Noun Phrase [Noun + Modifier]). S + NP (N + M) + VP (NP [N + M] + VP).

In these simplified diagrams, they observe the basic structure of sentences. The English sentence consists of a Noun Phrase (NP) followed by a Verb Phrase (VP). The Noun Phrase consists of a Determiner (Det) followed by a Noun (N), while the Verb Phrase consists of a Verb (V) followed by another Noun Phrase. On the other hand, the Burmese sentence follows a similar pattern but shows some structural differences. The Noun Phrase in Burmese consists of a Noun followed by a Modifier in normal daily conversation, while the Verb Phrase follows in the final. At last, it is important to note that these diagrams provide a simplified representation and do not capture the full complexity of phrase structures in English and Burmese.

However, Briton (2000) said that subject and predicate are functions not categories; not all noun phrases serve the function of subject, nor do all verb phrases serve the function of predicate. Sentences can be divided into groups of words that belong together. The group of words is called a phrase. The lexical words make up the majority of the head of the phrase. As a result, the lexical categories become phrasal categories such as the noun phrase (NP), adjective phrase (AP), adverb phrase (Adv P), prepositional phrase (PP), and the verb phrase (VP). Its phrase structures are characterized by a head-initial configuration, where the head of the phrase precedes its modifiers. In both English and Burmese, phrase structures commonly exhibit a head-initial configuration, where the head precedes its modifiers. This syntactic similarity provides a useful basis for comparative analysis between the two languages.

Noun Phrases

English noun phrase consists of a noun as a head and its modifiers. Modifiers can include determiners, adjectives, and prepositional phrases. While, Burmese noun phrases, modifiers, such as adjectives or demonstratives, precede the noun.

English Noun Phrase

NP	1. N	cat.
	2. Det + N	the cat.
	3. Det + Adj + N	the black cat.
	4. Det + AdjP + N	the softly purring cat.
	5. Det + N + PP	the cat on the window.
	6. Det + Adj + N + PP	the curious cat near the fireplace.
	7. Det + AdjP + N + PP	the constantly meowing cat under table.
	8. ProN	She.
	9. PN	Whiskers.

Burmese Noun Phrase

NP	1. N	ကြောင် /dZàUN/ (cat).
	2. N + M-Num	ကြောင် + တစ်ကောင် /dZàUN ta? gáUN/ (the cat).
	3. Adj + N + M-Num	အနက်ရောင် + ကြောင် + တစ်ကောင် /ʔaŋɛ? jàUN dZàUN ta? gáUN/ (the black cat).
	4. AdjP + N + M-Num	ပျော့ပျောင်းစွာ အော်နေတဲ့ + ကြောင် + တစ်ကောင် /pjəʔ pjáUN zwa? ʔə nè dè dZàUN ta? gáUN/ (the softly purring cat).
	5. PP + N + M-Num	ပြတင်းပေါ်မှာ + ကြောင် + တစ်ကောင် /pjəʔ tɪN bə mha dZàUN ta? gáUN/ (the cat on the window).
	6. PP + Adj + N + M-Num	မီးဖိုခန်းမှာ + စူးစမ်းသော + ကြောင် + တစ်ကောင် /mí fò ná mha.sù sáN dZàUN ta? gáUN/ (the curious cat near the fireplace).
	7. PP + AdjP + N + M-Num	စားပွဲအောက်မှာ + အမြဲ + အော်နေတဲ့ + ကြောင် + တစ်ကောင် /sàbwɛ ʔəʔ mha? ʔə nè dè dZàUN ta? gáUN/ (the constantly meowing cat under table).
	8. ProN	သူမ /tʰùma/ (she).
	9. PN	ဝစ်စကား /wɪʔ sɪkà/ (Whiskers).

Adjective Phrase

English adjective phrase Include an adjective and its modifiers, often adverbs. Burmese adjective phrases, the adjectives precede the nouns they modify, and intensification can be achieved through reduplication.

English Adjective Phrase

AdjP	1. Adj	nice.
	2. Deg + Adj	very nice.
	3. Adv + Adj	kindly speaking.

4. Deg + Adv + Adj very kindly speaking.

5. Adj + PP nice to me.

Burmese Adjective Phrase

- AdjP 1. Adj ကောင်းသော /káUN θa/ (nice).
2. Deg + Adj အလွန် + ကောင်းသော /ʔaUN káUN θa/ (very nice).
3. Adv + Adj ကောင်းကောင်း + ပြောနေသော
/káUN káUN pjə nè θa/ (kindly speaking).
4. Deg + Adv + Adj အလွန် + ကောင်းကောင်း + ပြောနေသော
/ʔaUN káUN káUN pjə nè θa/ (very kindly speaking).
5. PP + Adj ကျွန်တော်အတွက် ကောင်းသော
/təUNdə ʔə:ɸ? káUN θa/ (nice to me).

Adverb Phrases

English adverb phrase comprises an adverb and its modifiers. Burmese adverb phrases formed by reduplication or by combining adverbs with particles.

English Adverb Phrase

- AdvP 1. Adv quickly.
2. Deg + Adv very quickly.

Burmese Adverb Phrase

- AdvP 1. Adv မြန်မြန် /mjIN mjIN/ (quickly).
2. Deg + Adv အရမ်း + မြန်မြန် /ʔəjəN mjIN mjIN/ (extremely quickly).

Preposition Phrase

English preposition phrase begins with a preposition followed by a noun phrase. Burmese postposition phrases function similarly to English prepositional phrases but follow the noun.

English Preposition Phrase

- PP 1. P + NP on the beach.
2. P + P + NP from behind the door.
3. P + P + P + NP out from under the table.

Burmese Preposition Phrase

- PP 1. NP + P မန္တလေး+က /məN.təlé kà/ (from Mandalay).
2. NP + P + P မန္တလေး+အနီး+က /məN.təlé ʔəni kà/ (from near Mandalay).
3. NP + P + P + P မန္တလေး+အနီး+တဝိုက်+က /məN.təlé ʔəni təwài? kà/ (from around near Mandalay).

Verb Phrase

English verb phrase consists of a main verb and its auxiliaries, objects, or complements. Burmese verb phrases, verbs appear at the end of the sentence, and aspect or mood is indicated through particles. Modifiers in English typically precede the head noun, and the language employs auxiliary verbs to express tense, aspect, and voice. Burmese does not conjugate verbs for tense

instead, it uses particles and context to convey temporal aspects. The language's reliance on particles and its flexible word order, especially in colloquial usage, allow for various sentence constructions while maintaining clarity.

English Verb Phrase

- | | | | |
|----|----|---------------|--|
| VP | 1. | V + NP | read a book. |
| | 2. | V + NP + NP | write a friend a letter. |
| | 3. | V + NP + PP | give a reason to the friend. |
| | 4. | V + AdjP | feel lonely. |
| | 5. | V + NP + AdjP | make a friend happy. |
| | 6. | V + PP | go to the canting. |
| | 7. | V + PP + PP | discuss about the problem with a friend. |

Burmese Verb Phrase

- | | | | |
|----|----|---------------|--|
| VP | 1. | NP + V | စာအုပ် + ဖတ်သည်။ /sà ʔoʔ pʰaʔ dʰè/ (read a book). |
| | 2. | NP + NP + V | မိတ်ဆွေကို + စာတစ်စောင် + ရေးသည်။
/meiʔ sʰwè kò sà taʔ zaʔUN jé dʰè/ (write a friend a letter). |
| | 3. | NP + PP + V | မိတ်ဆွေထံ + အကြောင်းပြချက် + ပေးသည်။
/meiʔ sʰwè tʰaʔN ʔə dʰáʔUN pjàʔ tʰəʔ pè dʰè/ (give a reason to the friend). |
| | 4. | AdjP + V | အထီးကျန်သည်/ʔaʔtʰi.tʰəʔN dʰè/ (be lonely). |
| | 5. | NP + AdjP + V | မိတ်ဆွေကို + ပျော်ရွှင်အောင်လုပ်သည်။
/meiʔ sʰwè kò pjəʔ ʔwɪN aʔUN loʔʔ dʰè/ (make a friend happy). |
| | 6. | PP + V | စားသောက်ဆိုင်သို့ + သွားသည်။
/sà ʈàʔʔ sʰaiʔN ʈəʔwá dʰè/ (go to the canting). |
| | 7. | PP + PP + V | မိတ်ဆွေတစ်ဦးနှင့် + ပြဿနာအကြောင်း + ဆွေးနွေးသည်။
/meiʔ sʰwè taʔ ʔú nʰiʔN pjiʈàʔà ʔə dʰáʔUN sʰwé nwé dʰè/ (discuss about the problem with a friend). |

The findings reveal that while both languages organize phrases around a head and its modifiers, they operate in distinct grammatical worlds due to their opposing head-directionality. In the Noun Phrases, English follows a head-initial pattern, typically using Determiner + Modifier + Head. Burmese is head-final, often following a Modifier + Head order. Particularly, Burmese lacks articles like "a" or "the" and instead utilizes a complex system of numeral classifiers that follow the noun.

In the Verb Phrases, English is an SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) language where the verb precedes its complements. Burmese adheres to an SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) structure, consistently placing the verb in a verb-final position. Burmese verbs do not conjugate for tense but rely on post-verbal particles to indicate time and mood.

In the Adjective and Adverb Phrases, Burmese allows for more post-head modification than English. Adjective phrases in Burmese are often stative verbs and can function as predicates

without a copula. Adverb phrases in Burmese frequently employ reduplication to indicate intensity.

In the Prepositional Phrases, a major distinction is that English uses prepositions before the noun, while Burmese uses postpositions or relational markers that follow the noun phrase.

The research highlight that a lack of knowledge regarding these phrase structure rules is a "big problem" for learners in Myanmar, leading to persistent grammatical errors. The results emphasize that understanding these detailed rules is essential for improving translation accuracy, instructive strategies, and second-language acquisition. The research process comfortably that every stage of data collection had performed systematically.

Conclusion and Discussion

In the language picture of the world, a comparative analysis is of great importance nowadays as it helps to define similarities and distinguishing features in the English and Burmese. This study has observed the phrase structures of English and Burmese languages. The findings expose the phrase structures of Burmese differ significantly in their phrase structures, the use of grammatical particles, and the function of modifiers. Additionally, after analyzing this study, Burmese relies heavily on particles and postpositions to express grammatical relations, whereas English employs prepositions and auxiliaries.

In a detailed study of Burmese phrase structure, the researcher found that, according to Pe Maung Tin (1956), the two fundamental parts of speech, nouns and verbs serve as the main building blocks of the language. Other categories such as adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions are generally derived through the use of particles and suffixes. From the perspective of both functional words and lexical categories, Burmese was analyzed as comprising five main phrase structures: noun phrases, adjective phrases, adverb phrases, prepositional phrases, and verb phrases.

Moreover, in comparing the phrase structures of English and Burmese, several important differences appear in the five major categories. In noun phrases, both languages modifiers such as adjectives, demonstratives, and numerals before the noun. However, English follows prepositions before the noun phrase to convey similar relational meanings. Burmese uniquely places classifiers and postpositional particles after the noun that affirms Okell (1994) investigated in modifiers.

Then, adjective phrases in Burmese typically arise from verbal or nominal roots through affixation or particle modification, while English treats adjectives as a distinct category regulated primarily by the word order. For adverb phrases, Burmese creates adverb expressions from verbs or nominals, often marked by suffixes or particles and placed flexibly. Conversely, English has a dedicated class of adverbs that occupy relatively fixed positions in a sentence. Finally, English employs prepositions that head the noun phrase, whereas Burmese uses postpositions, which follow the noun. This difference reflects English's head-initial nature and Burmese's head-final tendency.

Regarding verb phrases, Burmese verbs act as central lexical units, often forming compound or nominalized structures, and use particles to mark tense, aspect, and mood. In contrast, English verb phrases are structured using auxiliary verbs and inflections. English follows a subject-verb-object structure, whereas Burmese adheres to a subject-object-verb order. This directly impacts the positioning of verbs and objects within clauses.

Another notable finding is the flexible and composite nature of Burmese, often expressed through the use of suffixes, particles, and categorization. In contrast, English relies more on fixed word order and auxiliary constructions. The predicate structure in Burmese allows adjectives to function as adjectives without having to connect verbs in a different way than in English.

Furthermore, the study offers the distance between English and Burmese part functional phrase types such as noun phrases, adjective phrases, adverb phrases, prepositional phrases, and verb phrases which can serve as a foundation for comparative analysis. These contrasts illustrate how Burmese relies heavily on particles and positional variation, while English depends more on fixed word categories and structures. Learners can benefit from explicit instruction in these commonalities and differences, especially regarding the placement of modifiers, particles, and relational words.

New Body of Knowledge

This study contributes to the body of linguistic and educational knowledge. While previous works have explored Burmese grammar at a general level, this study offers a focused examination of phrase structures. By documenting real spoken data from native speakers, it provides detailed insights into the phrase types phrases are constructed in natural communication.

This study highlights the significant differences in phrase structure between English and Burmese, particularly in phrase structure relationships. English phrase structure uses prepositions, auxiliaries, and a fixed word order (SVO), and Burmese phrase structure relies on particles, suffixes, and a subject-object-verb (SOV) structure. As Okell (1994) notes, in Burmese noun phrases, modifiers come before the noun, while classifiers and postpositions follow it. English noun phrase structure, however, places prepositions before noun phrases to express similar meanings. These contrasts show the overall phrase patterns and modifier placement. The study identifies five main phrase structures common to both languages but their internal formations differ.

The study states a clear way for comparing English and Burmese phrase structures, particularly in terms of word order, modifier placement, use of grammatical particles, and structural function. This comparative model serves as a tool for future research in typology, especially for language pairs from different families Germanic vs. Sino-Tibetan. It fills a gap in contrastive linguistic literature involving underrepresented Southeast Asian languages. These findings help language learners and researchers better understand the structural logic of each language and navigate their differences more effectively.

Suggestions

This research was limited to insights from the study of the phrase structures. Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions are recommended for future research in the field of comparative phrases and second language acquisition between English and Burmese. These recommendations aim to encourage continued exploration into Burmese-English comparative linguistics, supporting language researchers, and learners with bilingual communities. The following topics offer opportunities for deeper exploration:

1. A Comparative Analysis of Determiner Usage in English and Burmese Phrases.
2. A Corpus-Based Study of Spoken Burmese Phrase Structures.
3. An Investigation of Phrase Structures in Burmese Social Media Communication.

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