

A Short Introduction to the Mon Language

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Sangkhlaburi

1. General Information

The Mon language belongs to the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family. Its closest relative is Nyah Kur, a language spoken by a few thousand people in central and northeastern Thailand. The Nyah Kur are believed to be remnants of the old Mon nation of Dvaravati, which flourished in central Thailand between the 4th and 10th centuries. More distant, but clear relatives are Khmer, the language of the ancient empire of Ankor and the official language of the modern kingdom of Cambodia, and Vietnamese, the Austroasiatic language with the most speakers (over 60 mio.). Compare the following samples of basic vocabulary and sentences in Mon, Nyah Kur, Khmer, and the not related neighbors of Mon, Burmese and Thai:

Gloss	spoken Mon	old Mon	Nyah Kur	Khmer	Burmese	Thai
'1'	<i>`muə</i>	<i>moy</i>	<i>`muəi</i>	<i>`muəi</i>	<i>ti?</i>	<i>nuuy¹</i>
'2'	<i>ba</i>	<i>baar</i>	<i>baar</i>	<i>`pii(r)</i>	<i>hni?</i>	<i>səwɰ⁴</i>
'3'	<i>pəə?</i>	<i>pi?</i>	<i>pii?</i>	<i>bxi</i>	<i>θoun²</i>	<i>saam⁴</i>
'4'	<i>pən</i>	<i>pan</i>	<i>pan</i>	<i>buən</i>	<i>le²</i>	<i>sii¹</i>
'5'	<i>pəsɔŋ</i>	<i>masuun</i>	<i>chuun</i>	<i>pram</i>	<i>ɣa²</i>	<i>haa²</i>
'6'	<i>ʔərau</i>	<i>turow</i>	<i>trau</i>	<i>pram-`muəi</i>	<i>chau?</i>	<i>hok¹</i>
'7'	<i>həpəh</i>	<i>dumpoh</i>	<i>mpəh</i>	<i>pram-`pii(r)</i>	<i>khuni?</i>	<i>cet¹</i>
'8'	<i>həcam</i>	<i>dijcaam</i>	<i>ncaam</i>	<i>pram-bxi</i>	<i>fi?</i>	<i>pəet¹</i>
'9'	<i>həcit</i>	<i>dincit</i>	<i>nciit</i>	<i>pram-buən</i>	<i>kou²</i>	<i>kaau²</i>
'10'	<i>cəh</i>	<i>cas</i>	<i>cas</i>	<i>dəp</i>	<i>hse</i>	<i>sip¹</i>
'child'	<i>kon</i>	<i>kon</i>	<i>kuən</i>	<i>koon</i>	<i>θa²</i>	<i>luuk²</i>
'water'	<i>daic</i>	<i>daak</i>	<i>daak</i>	<i>`tuk</i>	<i>yei</i>	<i>naam³</i>
'cooked rice'	<i>pɣŋ</i>	<i>puɰ</i>	<i>pooy</i>	<i>(sbiəŋ)</i>	<i>thəmin²</i>	<i>khaau²</i>
'eat'	<i>ciə?</i>	<i>ca?</i>	<i>caa?</i>	<i>`sii</i>	<i>sa²</i>	<i>kin</i>
'go, run'	<i>`təə</i>	<i>dow</i>	<i>`thəu</i>	<i>`tuv</i>	<i>θwa²</i>	<i>pai</i>
'move down'	<i>cih</i>	<i>cis</i>	<i>cih</i>	<i>coh</i>	<i>hsin²</i>	<i>loy</i>

Gloss: 'I go to eat rice.'

Mon: *ʔuə ʔa ciə? pɣŋ.*

Old Mon: *ʔey ʔaar ca? puɰ.*

Nyah Kur: *wəi ʔaar caa? pooy.*

Khmer: *khɿɔm `tuv `sii bai.*

Burmese: *cəŋ thəmin² θwa² sa² me.*

Thai: *phom⁴ pai kin khaau².*

'Today it's raining.'

ɣuə nə? `pruə `ku/cih.

tɣey wo?/no? brey gur/cis.

thɣai nəw? `phrei cih.

thɣai `nih phleəŋ (coh).

di nei¹ mou² ywa te.

wan nii³ fon⁴ tok¹.

From the above data it is evident that Mon and Nyah Kur are relatively close to each other, while Burmese and Thai are not related to either Mon-Khmer nor to each other.

Today Mon is widely spoken in southern Burma, approximately from the Sittaung River all the way down to Mergui (Beik) and Kawthaung opposite the Thai town of Ranong. Centuries of oppression by the Burmese reduced the number of Mon speakers considerably, especially in urban areas such as Moulmein, the official capital of Mon state, where Burmese is normally used. The use of the Mon language as a

spoken language as well as written medium seems to be increasing, though. The last few years saw a resurrection of Mon literature, many old books being republished. Literacy also seems to be increasing, as Mon is now taught in over 100 schools in areas controlled by the New Mon State Party, i.e. out of the reach of the Burmese government. Popular Mon music is readily available and this year saw the production of the first Mon karaoke video, an important factor in the preservation and promotion of the Mon language.

The total population of Mon speakers today is guessed at about 1 mio. in Burma and Thailand, where mostly only people above 60 can speak the language fluently. Heavy influence from the dominant national languages can be seen in both Burmese and Thai varieties of Mon.

2. The Mon Script

The Mon script originates in a southern Indian alphabet that was brought to Southeast Asia around the 3rd - 4th centuries. The Mon adapted the script to their own language. In the 11th resp. 13th centuries the Burmese and Thai took over the writing system from the Mon. The Mon script is basically a syllabic system. Vowel signs are added to the front, back, bottom or top of the consonant signs. The original values of many letters have changed during the recorded history of the Mon language, while the spelling has hardly been adjusted. The present day situation is therefore similar to the one of English, where there is a great discrepancy between the written and the spoken forms of the language. What is pronounced *həə?* in spoken Mon is spelt *syi*, *həkau?* corresponds to the written form *jaku*, to quote only two extreme examples.

The overall appearance of the Mon script, dubbed 'bubble script' by the British colonists, is due to the fact that round lines can be inscribed on palm leaves more easily than straight ones.

Although the Mon and Burmese writing systems are basically the same, Mon is more complex, making use of more superscript consonants (indicating consonant clusters) than Burmese. The sound values of many consonants are very different today, due to independent historical development of the two languages. This results in Burmese not being able to read Mon or Mon to read Burmese correctly.

The Mon alphabet:

က ခ ဂ ဃ င စ ဖ ဇ ဈ ည ဋ ဌ ဍ ဎ ဏ တ ထ ဒ ဓ န ပ ဖ ဗ ဘ
 မ ယ ရ လ ဝ သ ဟ ဇ ဝ အ မ္ဗ ကူ ကူ ကူ ကျ ကြ ကွ ကွ မှ
 အာ အိ အီ အု အူ အေ အဲ အော အ် အို အံ အး

3. Structure of the Mon Language

The Mon language differs in several aspects from its powerful neighbor languages, Burmese and Thai. Unlike these, Mon is not a tonal language, i.e. tones are not used to distinguish lexical items. Mon makes use of two different registers (phonation types) instead of tones, the clear or head register and the breathy or chest register. Words in the first (clear) register are pronounced in a clear, rather high tone, while second register words (marked by ` in front of the word) sound rather muddy or

breathy, usually in a lower pitch. Some vowel sounds are restricted to either first or second register words.

Mon has preserved some relics of an older rich inflectional system, including prefixes and infixes. Neither Thai nor Burmese show any traces of morphological inflection throughout the recorded period¹ (13th and 11th centuries resp.).

While both Thai and Burmese make use of numeral classifiers (e.g. friend - one - person, car - two - vehicle, etc. versus one - day, two - kilo, etc.), classifiers in Mon rarely occur, both in the spoken and written varieties. This is also true for the earliest records (6th century onwards), although the word order in modern Mon seems to suggest an older form with classifiers: friend - one, car - two, etc. versus one - day, two - kilo, etc. It is not clear yet how this phenomenon is to be analyzed.

The basic word order of a simple Mon sentence is

Subject - Predicate - Object: *ʔuə ɕiəʔ pɕɕɪ* ‘I eat rice.’

with the **Predicate** being the only obligatory part of a sentence. If the subject and/or object are known/retrievable from the context, they are usually omitted: *ʔhuʔ ɕiəʔ* ‘[I do] not eat.’

Modifiers (adjectives/stative verbs, possessors, demonstratives) follow the noun they modify: *hɕeʔ ʔhnok* ‘a/the big house’, also ‘the house is big’, lit. ‘house be.big’, *hɕəʔ ʔuə* ‘my house’, lit. ‘house I’, *hɕəʔ nɔʔ* ‘this house’, lit. ‘house this’. As can be seen from the first example, adjectives are expressed by stative verbs in Mon. There are no ‘true’ adjectives in the language.

Only a few **prepositions** are used in Mon. In most cases, nouns or verbs take their place: *ʔuə ʔa ɕvɔ ɕaŋkək raʔ* ‘I went to Bangkok’, lit. ‘I go arrive Bangkok REAL’. The most common ‘true’ prepositions are: *diuə* ‘in, at, LOCATIVE’, *ʔnu* ‘from’, *kv* ‘with, for, to, OBLIQUE’. The latter is homophonous with the verb *kv* ‘give’, from which at least some of its meanings are derived (‘I bought this for you’ < ‘I bought it and gave it to you’). Historically the two are to be kept apart, though.

4. The Sounds of the Mon Language

As there is no generally accepted standard pronunciation of Mon and the dialects sometimes differ dramatically from one another, any description of the Mon sounds must necessarily restrict itself to one specific dialect or describe the sounds in a more general way, trying to reach a compromise among the different dialects. The language described here is mainly the dialect spoken around Ko’ Dot village in Ye township, with some minor adjustments to the language used by younger people in Sangkhlaburi.

As pointed out above, the Mon language makes use of two registers to distinguish words: *klɕɪ* ‘come’ ~ *ʔklɕɪ* ‘boat’, *kwi* ‘cart’ ~ *ʔkwi* ‘to wrap’. Apart from breathiness in the second register, the quality of the vowel differs in the two registers. First register vowels tend to diphthongize, while second register vowels keep their pure vowel sounds. The complete phonological system of Mon remains to be worked out,

¹ In Burmese there are some phenomena that can be ascribed to morphological processes, such as the aspiration of the initial consonant of verb bases for **causative** and the ‘induced creaky’ tone to indicate **oblique** case with some nominal roots. The status of the inflectional suffixes (clitics? postpositions?) is not clear.

but the following **vowel** sounds seem to be phonemic (important in distinguishing meaning):

a v i e ε u x o ɔ and *ə*, the shva sound that appears in weak syllables.

a in many speakers pronunciation approaches [æ] or [ɛ], *e* sounds rather like [i]. *u* usually is [u] or diphthongized to [uu], *i* [i] or [ii], *ɔ* [ɔo, vo], *o* [ou] or [uɔ], *x* to [xi]. The ‘regular’ diphthongs include

ai, au, ua, ɔə, əe, ea, εə. The phonemic status of some of these is not definitely established yet.

The **consonants** of Mon make a basic distinction between aspirated and non-aspirated, rather than voiced and voiceless as in English.

While all consonants can occur in syllable initial position, only a restricted selection can close a syllable. The following consonants occur in prevocalic position:

k, kh, ŋ, c, cy, ch, ɲ, hɲ, d, t, th, n, hn, b, p, ph, m, hm, y, r, l, hl, w, hw, s, h, ʔ.

In loans from Burmese and Thai, *f* and *ʃ* occur, though rarely. The palatal spirant *ç* occurs only in one word; *çiəʔ* ‘eat’. Some people pronounce this sound as *ʃ*.

In word final position, the following consonants are allowed:

k, ŋ, c, ɲ, t, n, p, m, h, ʔ.

The possible syllable structures of Mon are the following:

CV, CVC, CCV, CCVC, CəCV, CəCVC, CəCCV, CəCCVC

C stands for consonant, **V** for vowel. Only restricted combinations of clusters **CC** are allowed, e.g. *kr, kl, pr, pl*, etc, but not **st, *sp, *sn, *tr, *tl*, etc.

The initial consonant of weak presyllables can be one of the following:

ʔ, h, k, t, p (*c, ch, n, m, y, l, s* are rare and mostly restricted to reading style).

5. Grammatical Structure

The Mon language today presents itself as a basically inflectionless language, i.e. there is no change in the shape of words as in English *am~are~is, girl~girls*, etc. A few remnants of the rich inflectional system of Old Mon can still be seen in the modern language, but most of the processes are not productive any more, i.e. can not be applied to build new forms. Though the basic word order is **Subject - Verb - Object**, some variation is permitted, especially the fronting of the object for reasons of stress or emphasis:

ʔuə çiəʔ pxɲ. ‘I eat rice.’ ~ *pxɲ ʔuə ʔhuʔ çiəʔ ʔpuh*. ‘Rice, I don’t eat.’

Statements usually end in the ‘realis’ (‘assertive’ according to Shorto, 1962) particle *raʔ*:

dəh ʔa baŋkək raʔ. ‘He is going/went to Bangkok.’

The exact status of this particle is not clear. It can also be used with purely nominal expressions.

The **Perfect** tense is indicated by changing *raʔ* to *yaʔ* or *təə yaʔ*:

ʔuə çiəʔ pxɲ təə yaʔ. ‘I have [already] eaten.’ (lit. ‘I have finished eating.’)

dəh klon yaʔ. ‘He has done it.’

Negation is made by putting *hu?* in front of the verb to be negated and adding an optional *puh* to the end of the sentence:

luə hu? la (puh). ‘I don’t go there.’

If other than verbal expressions have to be negated, the expression *hu? seəŋ* is used:
ju? hɔə? luə hu? seəŋ. ‘This is not my house.’

For **questions** the interrogative particle *ha* is added in sentence final position:

peh ɕiə? pɕɲ ha? ‘Do you [want to] eat rice/something?’

Relative questions (WH-questions) end in *rao/ro/ro* (dialect variations). The question word usually stands at the beginning of the sentence, sometimes with a copy in object position:

mo? ɕiə? mo? ro? ‘What do you eat?’

ləw la ro? ‘Where are you going?’ (*la ləw?* is frequently heard in Sangkhlaburi and Thai Mon, presumably due to Thai influence: *pai nai*⁴? ‘go where’.)

Instead of **pronouns** titles such as *ləca* ‘teacher’, *mi?* ‘mother’, *ləpa* ‘brother’, etc. are commonly used, especially for the second person. The basic personal pronouns are the following:

‘I’	<i>luə</i>	‘We’	<i>poi</i>
‘you’	<i>peh</i>	‘you (pl)’	<i>peh tɔ?</i>
‘he, she’	<i>neh</i>	‘they’	<i>neh tɔ?</i>
‘he, she, it’	<i>deh</i>	‘they’	<i>deh tɔ?</i>

The following **interrogatives** are common:

‘what’	<i>mo?</i>	<i>mo? ket ro?</i>	‘What do you want?’
‘who’	<i>neh kɔh</i>	<i>neh kɔh klɕɲ ro?</i>	‘Who is coming?’
‘how’	<i>pɕm lɔ</i>	<i>pɕm lɔ pa? ro?</i>	‘How do you do it?’
‘where’	<i>ləw, yv</i>	<i>ləw la ro?</i>	‘Where are you going?’
‘when’	<i>chəlɔ?</i>	<i>chəlɔ? cau ro?</i>	‘When will you go back?’
‘why’	<i>mo? tɔh, mo? pa?</i>	<i>mo? tɔh hu? la ro?</i>	‘Why don’t you go?’
‘how muc’	<i>mo? ci?</i>	<i>ju? yuh mo? ci? ro?</i>	‘How much is this?’

Three **demonstratives** are used in Mon:

‘here’ *lənɔ?, ju?* ‘there’ *lətɕi?, ɕɕi?* ‘there (mentioned before)’ *ləkɔh, ɕɕh*
‘this’ *nɔ?, ju?* ‘that’ *tɕi?, ɕɕi?* ‘that (mentioned before)’ *kɔh, ɕɕh*

Minor differences between the non-palatal and palatal forms exist or are developing.

The distinction between **transitive** and **intransitive verbs** in Mon is somewhat problematic, as also verbs like *la* ‘go’ can take direct (goal) objects:

luə la phe ‘I go to school/to the temple.’

There is no verbs that translates as ‘have’ in Mon. ‘I have money.’ is expressed as *hlɔə luə num* ‘my money exists’ or *dɔə luə hlɔə num* ‘there is money with/in me’. If negated, *num* ‘exist, be there’ is replaced by the numeral *muə* ‘one’:

ka deh hu? muə ‘He doesn’t have a car.’ (lit. ‘his car not one.’)

The most common **auxiliaries** are:

`teh + V ‘must, have to’
V + `teh ‘know how to do, do involuntarily’
`kxʔ + V ‘have (had) a chance to do’
V + `kxʔ ‘can, may’
V + `man ‘be able (physically, mentally)’
V + `lep ‘know how to do’
kv + V ‘let, allow’
V + kv ‘do for someone else’
`mākxʔ + V ‘want to’
`huʔ `moic + V ‘not want to’
`kəŋ + V ‘dare’

There is no regular way to **nominalize** verbs in Mon. Some morphologically derived forms in the modern language, e.g.

chan ‘to love’ `seʔhan ‘love (n)’
çiaʔ ‘to eat’ ʔanaʔ (< cnaʔ) ‘food’
paʔ ‘to do’ pəwaʔ ‘fact, act’
cut ‘to put in’ ʔəcut ‘stroke, instance, moment’
klon ‘to work, to do’ ʔəlon/kəlon ‘work (n)’

In the modern spoken language, verbs are usually nominalized by adding *pəreəŋ*, lit. ‘matter, fact’: *pəreəŋ chan* ‘love (n)’.

The traditional way to form **causatives** in Mon is by adding the prefix *p-* to the verb root. This prefix is probably related to (or the origin of?) the verb *paʔ* ‘to do, make’. In other instances the prefix is *paʔ/pə-* or *hə-* (< *pə-*).

hum daic ‘take a shower’ *phum daic* ‘bathe so.’
`lup ‘go into, enter’ *plop* ‘insert’
çiaʔ ‘eat’ *həçiaʔ* (< *pçiaʔ*) ‘feed so.’
cih ‘go down, descend’ *phyih* (< *pçih*) ‘put down, to lower’
ʃxc ‘be confused, in disorder’ *pəʃxc* ‘bother, disturb, confuse so.’

Some verbs with initial consonant clusters use an infix:

phəic ‘fear, be afraid’ *pəhoic* ‘frighten, scare so.’
klxŋ ‘come’ *kəlxŋ* ‘to welcome’
klvʔ ‘cross over’ *kəlvʔ* ‘to send over, take across’

There are a few verbs that use unrelated forms for the causative:

ʔa ‘go’ *na* ‘take away’
klxŋ ‘come’ *`neŋ* ‘bring along’

The most common way to **link sentences** is with *təə* or *təə teh* ‘and then’. Other possibilities are *həman`nu* ‘because’, *ʔəreŋ`kxʔ* ‘in order to’, *ʔəraʔ* ‘if’. In many cases no overt linker is present. **Relative clauses** in Mon remain unmarked, although they are often followed by the **topic** marker (‘the one mentioned before’) *kəh*.

dēh ɕiəʔ pɕɿn tɔə (teh) dēh ʔa `ran pɰya raʔ.

‘He ate and then he went to the market.’ (lit. ‘he eat and then he go buy market.’)

`həman `nu hlɔə ʔuə `huʔ `muə ʔuə ʔa `ran pɰya `huʔ `kɕʔ `puh.

‘Because I don’t have any money I can’t go shopping.’

ʔɔ raʔ `peh `məkɕʔ ʔa pɰya teh, `peh ʔa `kɕʔ raʔ.

‘If you want to go to the market, you can go.’

6. Useful Expressions

'Hello', 'goodbye'	<i>`møyx ra? ?au.</i>
'I'm leaving now.'	<i>?a ra?.</i>
'Thank you'	<i>ta? `kun ra? ?au.</i>
'How are you?'	<i>`møy `mip `møy ha?</i>
'I am fine.'	<i>`møy `mip.</i>
'Come here for a moment!'	<i>klxj nj? `muə ?əcut.</i>
'Where are you going?'	<i>?əlv ?a ro?/ ?a ?əlv?</i>
'I go working.'	<i>?a klon ?əlon.</i>
'I go for a walk.'	<i>?a kwaic `wəjn.</i>
'I'm going back home.'	<i>cau həə?.</i>
'Yes' / 'no'	<i>`yxx?(`təh) / `hu? seə??</i>
'Are you hungry?'	<i>`pyx pxj ra ha?</i>
'Do you like the food?'	<i>ciə? khvə ha?</i>
'Do you like Mon food?'	<i>hwa? `mən ciə? khvə ha?</i>
'It's very delicious.'	<i>ciə? khvə kweh.</i>
'Is it too spicy?'	<i>`roi? ha?</i>
'I am sleepy.'	<i>?uə `mot həkui ra?.</i>
'I want to go to the temple/market.'	<i>?uə `məxx? ?a `phe / phya.</i>
'Do you have some water/rice/sugar/salt?'	<i>dəic/pxj/`həkre/βx `num `møy ha?</i>
'Do you want this?'	<i>ket ha?</i>
'Yes, I do.' / 'No, I don't'	<i>ket ra? / `hu? ket `puh</i>
'May I take a picture?'	<i>tak `pxm `kx? ha?</i>
'Have you taken a shower?'	<i>hum dəic təə yə? ha?</i>
'Do you want to go swimming?'	<i>?a `wəjn dəic ha?</i>
'Can you speak Mon?'	<i>həm `?əre `mən `lep ha?</i>
'I can't speak Mon.'	<i>həm `?əre `mən `hu? `lep.</i>
'Can you teach me English?'	<i>həton kv ?uə `?əre ?əjkə `loic `man ha?</i>
'When are you coming back here?'	<i>chəlv? cau klxj nj? ro?</i>

APPENDIX

Explanation of the IPA phonetic symbols

In rendering Mon in this introduction, the standard symbols of the International Phonetic Association (IPA) are used. The following explanations are provided for people who are not familiar with the IPA phonetic script. It should be noted, however, that many sounds of the Mon language can not be properly represented in English.

Vowels basically have their continental values (as e.g. in Spanish). Additional symbols are:

[ɔ] for the sound in English ‘hot’: [hɔt]

[ɔ] as in English ‘law’: [lɔ:]

[æ] as ‘a’ in English ‘bad’: [bæd]

[ɛ] between English ‘a’ in ‘bad’ [bæd] and ‘e’ in ‘bed’ [bed] (British pronunciation)

[ɣ] as in English ‘girl’ without the ‘r’-sound: [gɣ:l]

[u] is a back, unrounded vowel, like u (‘oo’) spoken with spread lips.

[i] is a central, unrounded vowel, somewhere between [i] (‘ee’) and [u] (‘oo’)

[ə] is the weak vowel sound as ‘a’ in English ‘about’: [əbaut]

Most **consonants** are pronounced as in English. Notice the following symbols:

[k] is a non-aspirated (without ‘h’-sound) k, as in English ‘sky’, [kh] is its aspirated counterpart, as in English ‘cat’ [kæt]. The same goes for the difference between [t] and [th], and [p] and [ph].

[c] is a palatal stop, somewhat resembling English ‘ch’ in ‘church’, but without aspiration.

[ch] is the aspirated version.

[ɖ, ʙ] are implosives. They sound similar to ‘d’ and ‘b’ respectively, but the air is sucked in instead of blown out.

[ɕ] occurs only in one word in Mon (*ɕiəʔ* ‘eat’). It sounds similar to ‘sh’ in English.

[ŋ] is a velar nasal, as English ‘ng’ in ‘sing’. This consonant can start a syllable in Mon!

[ɲ] is a palatal nasal, as in ‘ny’ English ‘canyon’ (ñ in Spanish).

[r] sounds rather like the Spanish ‘r’.

[ʃ] occurs only in loans from Burmese and sounds like English ‘sh’

[h] is pronounced in all positions, also word finally!

[ʔ] is the glottal stop heard in English words beginning with a vowel when stressed.

Notice that the nasals [ɲ, n, m] and [l] can be aspirated: [hɲ, hn, hm, hl]

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