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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>spoken Mon</th>
<th>old Mon</th>
<th>Nyah Kur</th>
<th>Khmer</th>
<th>Burmese</th>
<th>Thai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'1'</td>
<td><code>mu</code></td>
<td><code>moy</code></td>
<td><code>mu</code></td>
<td><code>mu</code></td>
<td>ti`</td>
<td>nuy^1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'2'</td>
<td><code>ba</code></td>
<td><code>baar</code></td>
<td><code>baar</code></td>
<td><code>pii(r)</code></td>
<td>hni`</td>
<td>sooy^4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'3'</td>
<td><code>pɔɔʔ</code></td>
<td><code>piʔ</code></td>
<td><code>piʔ</code></td>
<td><code>bri</code></td>
<td><code>boun</code>^2</td>
<td>saam^4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'4'</td>
<td><code>pɔʔ</code></td>
<td><code>pan</code></td>
<td><code>pan</code></td>
<td><code>buən</code></td>
<td>lei^2</td>
<td>sii^1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'5'</td>
<td><code>paʔɔəŋ</code></td>
<td><code>masuən</code></td>
<td><code>chuun</code></td>
<td><code>pram</code></td>
<td><code>ŋa^2</code></td>
<td>ha^2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'6'</td>
<td><code>ʔɔrəu</code></td>
<td><code>tuəɔu</code></td>
<td><code>trau</code></td>
<td><code>pram</code>-<code>mʊi</code></td>
<td><code>chau^2</code></td>
<td>hok^1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'7'</td>
<td><code>həpəoŋ</code></td>
<td><code>dupəoŋ</code></td>
<td><code>mʊpəoŋ</code></td>
<td><code>pram</code>-<code>pii(r)</code></td>
<td><code>khunii</code>^2</td>
<td>cet^1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'8'</td>
<td><code>həkəm</code></td>
<td><code>dɨŋcaam</code></td>
<td><code>ncəam</code></td>
<td><code>pram-bri</code></td>
<td><code>fi</code>^2</td>
<td>peet^1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'9'</td>
<td><code>hʊcɪt</code></td>
<td><code>dɪncɪt</code></td>
<td><code>ncɪt</code></td>
<td><code>pram-buən</code></td>
<td><code>kʊ2</code></td>
<td>kaau^2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'10'</td>
<td><code>cəh</code></td>
<td><code>cas</code></td>
<td><code>cas</code></td>
<td><code>dəp</code></td>
<td><code>həi</code></td>
<td>naam^3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'child'</td>
<td><code>kʊn</code></td>
<td><code>kʊn</code></td>
<td><code>kʊən</code></td>
<td><code>kʊon</code></td>
<td><code>θa</code>^2</td>
<td>luuk^2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'water'</td>
<td><code>dəiɕ</code></td>
<td><code>dəak</code></td>
<td><code>dəak</code></td>
<td><code>tʊuk</code></td>
<td><code>yei</code></td>
<td>naam^3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'cooked rice'</td>
<td><code>pɤŋ</code></td>
<td><code>pʊŋ</code></td>
<td><code>pʊŋ</code></td>
<td><code>(sbiŋ)</code></td>
<td><code>thʊmɪn</code>^2</td>
<td>khaau^2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'eat'</td>
<td><code>ciʔ</code></td>
<td><code>caʔ</code></td>
<td><code>caʔ</code></td>
<td><code>sii</code></td>
<td><code>sa</code>^2</td>
<td>kin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'go, run'</td>
<td><code>ʔeə</code></td>
<td><code>dəw</code></td>
<td><code>tʰəu</code></td>
<td><code>t[uv]</code></td>
<td><code>θəw</code>^2</td>
<td>pai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'move down'</td>
<td><code>cih</code></td>
<td><code>cis</code></td>
<td><code>cih</code></td>
<td><code>coh</code></td>
<td><code>hsin</code>^2</td>
<td>lo^2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 $h\varepsilon?$ in spoken Mon is spelt $s\varepsilon,$ $h\varepsilon kau?$ 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:

2. 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 period\(^1\) (13\(^{th}\) and 11\(^{th}\) 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 (6\(^{th}\) 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**: ?uə ciəʔ pʰʔn ‘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: ‘huiʔ ciəʔ? ‘[I do] not eat.’

**Modifiers** (adjectives/stative verbs, possessors, demonstratives) follow the noun they modify: hɔʔ ‘/nok ‘at/the big house’, also ‘the house is big’, lit. ‘house be.big’, hɔʔʔ ?uə ‘my house’, lit. ‘house I’, hɔʔʔ 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: ?uəʔ ?a vɔʔ bɛŋkɔk rəʔ ‘I went to Bangkok’, lit. ‘I go arrive Bangkok REAL’.

The most common ‘true’ prepositions are: ɗiə ‘in, at, LOCATIVE’, ‘nu ‘from’, kp ‘with, for, to, OBLIQUE’. The latter is homophonous with the verb kp ‘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: klɛŋ ‘come’ ~ klɛŋ ‘boat’, kwɪ ‘cart’ ~ kwɪ ‘to wrap’. Apart from breathiness in the second register, the quality of the vowel differs in the two registers. First register vowels tend to diphthonguize, while second register vowels keep their pure vowel sounds. The complete phonological system of Mon remains to be worked out,

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\(^1\) 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* in many speakers pronunciation approaches \[\text{æ}\] or \[\text{æ}\], \(e\) sounds rather like \[\text{i}\]. \(u\) usually is \[\text{u}\] or diphthongized to \[\text{ou}\], \(\varepsilon\) \[\text{ou}\] or \[\text{u}\], \(r\) to \[\text{y}\].

The ‘regular’ diphthongs include

\[\text{ai, au, uə, ɛə, æə, øə, øə.}\]

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:

\(k, kh, \gamma, c, cy, ch, j, hj, d, t, th, n, hn, b, p, ph, m, hm, y, r, l, hl, w, hw, s, h, ?.\)

In loans the from Burmese and Thai, \(f\) and \(ʃ\) occur, though rarely. The palatal spirant \(e\) occurs only in one word; \(cio\? ‘eat’.\)

Some people pronounce this sound as \(f\).

In word final position, the following consonants are allowed:

\(k, \gamma, c, j, t, n, p, m, h, ?.\)

The possible syllable structures of Mon are the following:

\(CV, CVC, CCV, CCVC, CaCV, CaCVC, CaCCV, CaCCVC\)

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: \(?, h, k, t, p\) (\(c, ch, n, m, y, l, s\) 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 \(am\sim are\sim is\), \(girl\sim girls\), 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:

\(\text{?uə ɕio? prep. ‘I eat rice.’} \sim \text{prep. ?uə ’hui? ɕio? ‘puh. ‘Rice, I don’t eat.’}\)

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

\(\text{deh ?a bąŋkɔ̀k ra?}. ‘He is going/went to Bangkok.’\)

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 \(ra?\) to \(ya?\) or \(təə ya?\):

\(\text{?uə ɕio? prep təə ya?}. ‘I have [already] eaten.’ (lit. ‘I have finished eating.’)\)

\(\text{deh klon ya?}. ‘He has done it.’\)
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:
?Ła 'hu? 2a ('puh). ‘I don’t go there.’
If other than verbal expressions have to be negated, the expression 'hu? seŋ' is used:
?Ła hseŋ 2a 'hu? seŋ. ‘This is not my house.’

For questions the interrogative particle 'ha' is added in sentence final position:
'peh ciə? pəŋ 'ha? ‘Do you [want to] eat rice/something?’

Relative questions (WH-questions) end in rao/rɔ/ro (dialect variations). The question word usually stands at the beginning of the sentence, sometimes with a copy in object position:
?ən 2a ro? ‘Where are you going?’ (?ən 2a ən? is frequently heard in Sangkhlaburi and Thai Mon, presumably due to Thai influence: 'nən 2a ən? ‘go where’.)

Instead of pronouns titles such as əcə ‘teacher’, əmi ‘mother’, əapa ‘brother’, etc. are commonly used, especially for the second person. The basic personal pronouns are the following:
‘I’ 2ə  ‘We’ əoi
‘you’ 'peh  ‘you (pl)’ 'peh əo
‘he, she’ 'nəh  ‘they’ 'nəh əo
‘he, she, it’ ‘deo  ‘they’ 'deo əo

The following interrogatives are common:
‘who’ 'nəh 'kəh  ‘nəh 'kəh kəŋ ro? ‘Who is coming?’
‘how’ 'pəm əp  ‘pəm əp pa? ro? ‘How do you do it?’
‘where’ ?ən, ən  ‘?ən 2a ro? ‘Where are you going?’
‘when’ ɔəs, əs  ‘ɔəs 2a ro? ‘When will you go back?’

Three demonstratives are used in Mon:
‘here’ ?ənə?, ən  ‘there’ ?ərx?, ərx  ‘there (mentioned before )’ ‘kəh, 'cəh
‘this’ nə?, nə?  ‘that’ ərx?, ərx  ‘that (mentioned before )’ ‘kəh, 'cəh

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 2a ‘go’ can take direct (goal) objects:
?ən 2a 'phe ‘I go to school/to the temple.’

There is no verbs that translates as ‘have’ in Mon. ‘I have money.’ is expressed as hləə 2ən 'num ‘my money exists’ or dəə 2ən hləə 'num ‘there is money with/in me’. If negated, 'num ‘exist, be there’ is replaced by the numeral 'muə ‘one’:
ka 'deo 'hu? 'muə ‘He doesn’t have a car.’ (lit. ‘his car not one.’)
The most common auxiliaries are:

- ‘t`eh + V ‘must, have to’
- V + ‘t`eh ‘know how to do, do involuntarily’
- ‘k`a? + V ‘have (had) a chance to do’
- V + ‘k`a? ‘can, may’
- V + ‘man ‘be able (physically, mentally)’
- V + ‘lep ‘know how to do’
- kp + V ‘let, allow’
- V + kp ‘do for someone else’
- ‘mok`e? + V ‘want to’
- ‘hu`e? ‘not want to’
- ‘k`a? ‘dare’

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

- chan ‘to love’  
  - `se?han ‘love (n)’
- ci`a? ‘to eat’  
  - ?ona? (<<cna?) ‘food’
- pa? ‘to do’  
  - powa? ‘fact, act’
- cut ‘to put in’  
  - ?ocut ‘stroke, instance, moment’
- klon ‘to work, to do’  
  - ?olon/kolon ‘work (n)’

In the modern spoken language, verbs are usually nominalized by adding p`ere`a, lit. ‘matter, fact’: p`ere`a 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 pa? ‘to do, make’. In other instances the prefix is pa/pa- or ha- (<p`a-).

- hum daic ‘take a shower’  
  - phum daic ‘bathe so.’
- `lup ‘go into, enter’  
  - plob ‘insert’
- ci`a? ‘eat’  
  - ha`ci`a? (<<pci`a?) ‘feed so.’
- ci`h ‘go down, descend’  
  - phyih (<<pci`h) ‘put down, to lower’
- frc ‘be confused, in disorder’  
  - pafa‘ ‘bother, disturb, confuse so.’

Some verbs with initial consonant clusters use an infix:

- p`hoic ‘fear, be afraid’  
  - p`hoic ‘frighten, scare so.’
- kl`y`i ‘come’  
  - kl`y`i ‘to welcome’
- kl`a? ‘cross over’  
  - klo‘ ‘to send over, take across’

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

- ?a ‘go’  
  - na ‘take away’
- kl`y`i ‘come’  
  - ne`y ‘bring along’

The most common way to link sentences is with t`a or t`a t`eh ‘and then’. Other possibilities are ‘haman ’nu ‘because’, ‘p`ere`a ‘in order to’, ‘y`a ra? ‘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’) ‘k`oh.
He ate and then he went to the market.' (lit. 'he eat and then he go buy market.)

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

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

‘Hello’, ‘goodbye’
‘I’m leaving now.’
‘Thank you’
‘How are you?’
‘I am fine.’
‘Come here for a moment!’
‘Where are you going?’
‘I go working.’
‘I go for a walk.’
‘I’m going back home.’
‘Yes’/ ‘no’
‘Are you hungry?’
‘Do you like the food?’
‘Do you like Mon food?’
‘It’s very delicious.’
‘Is it too spicy?’
‘I am sleepy.’
‘I want to go to the temple/market.’
‘Do you have some water/rice/sugar/salt?’
‘Do you want this?’
‘Yes, I do.’ / ‘No, I don’t’
‘May I take a picture?’
‘Have you taken a shower?’
‘Do you want to go swimming?’
‘Can you speak Mon?’
‘I can’t speak Mon.’
‘Can you teach me English?’
‘When are you coming back here?’
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:
• [n] for the sound in English ‘hot’: [hɒt]
• [o] as in English ‘law’: [lɔː]
• [æ] as ‘a’ in English ‘bad’: [bæd]
• [e] between English ‘a’ in ‘bad’ [bæd] and ‘e’ in ‘bed’ [bed] (British pronunciation)
• [ː] in English ‘law’ without the ‘r’-sound: [ɡɹː]
• [uː] 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’: [əbəut]

Most consonants are pronounced as in English. Notice the following symbols:
• [k] is an 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.
• [ʃ] is the aspirated version.
• [d, ɹ] are implosives. They sound similar to ‘d’ and ‘b’ respectively, but the air is sucked in instead of blown out.
• [ɛ] occurs only in one word in Mon (cιoʔ ‘eat’). It sounds similar to ‘sh’ in English.
• [n] is a velar nasal, as English ‘ng’ in ‘sing’. This consonant can start a syllable in Mon!
• [n̥] is a palatal nasal, as in ‘ny’ English ‘canyon’ (ñ in Spanish).
• [ɾ] 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 [n̥, n, m] and [l] can be aspirated: [hʌn, hn, hm, hl]

References and further reading (all books at the MCL library, Sangkhlaburi)

Shorto, H.L. 1971. *A Dictionary of the Mon Inscriptions from the sixth to the sixteenth Centuries.* London: Oxford UP.