



**University of  
Zurich<sup>UZH</sup>**

# **Language diversity and endangerment in Asia - the case of Thailand and Myanmar**

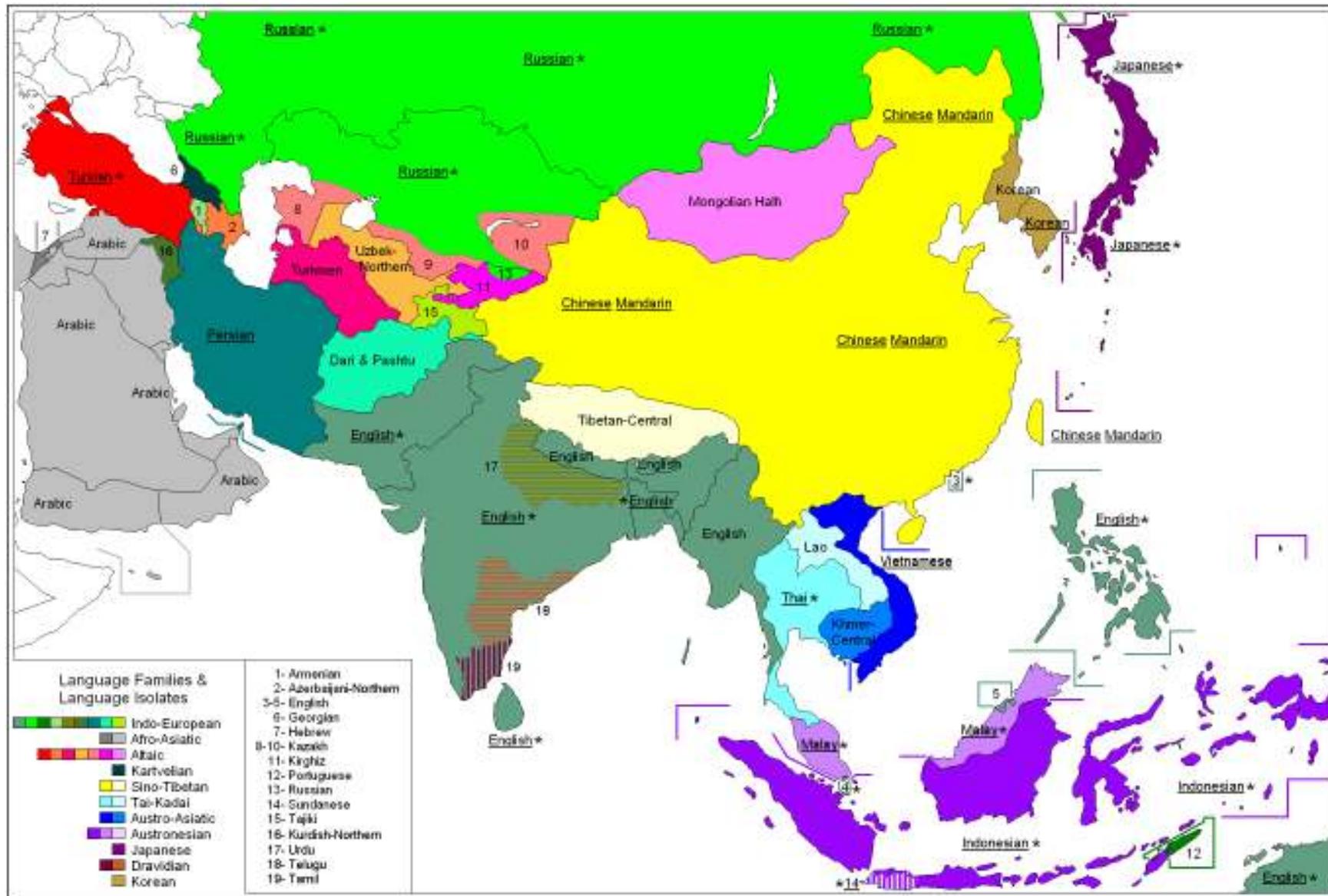
LSCAC 3, Mahasarakham University

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- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Language diversity in Thailand**
- 3. Language diversity in Myanmar**
- 4. Endangerment factors**
- 5. Why care?**
- 6. Conclusions**

# 1. Introduction - Languages of Asia?



## **Case studies: Thailand and Myanmar** (source: [www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov))

### **Thailand**

Capital:	Bangkok
Area:	510,890 sq km
Population:	67,741,401
Major Languages:	Thai 90.7% (official), Burmese 1.3%, other 8%

### **Myanmar**

Capital:	Rangoon (Yangon); <i>note:</i> Nay Pyi Taw is the administrative capital
Area:	676,578 sq km
Population:	55,746,253
Major Languages:	Burmese (official); <i>note:</i> minority ethnic groups have their own languages

## **A closer look**

Both Thailand and Myanmar have strong national languages and a large number of minority languages.

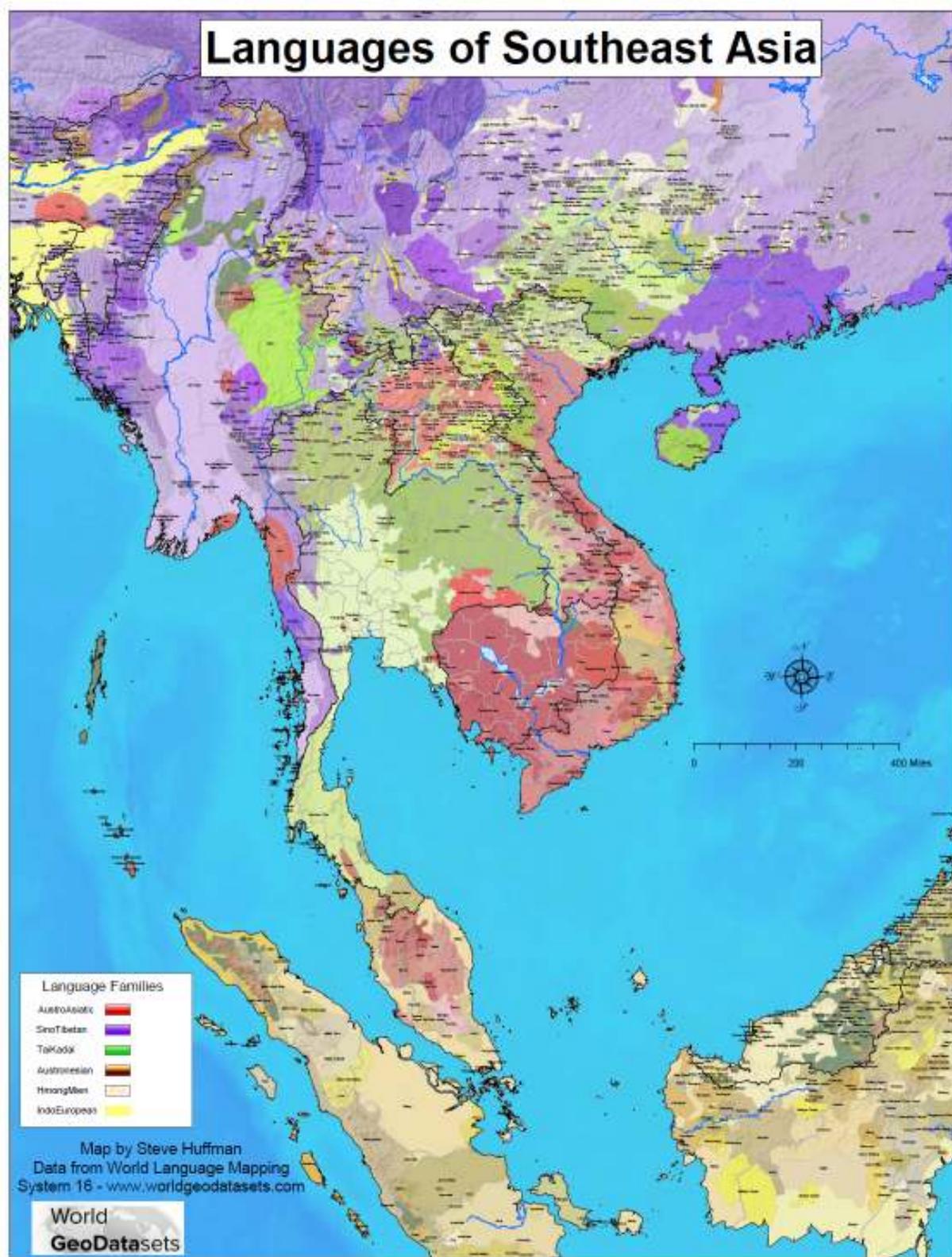
In both countries, many minority languages are in danger of disappearing.

In both countries, efforts are undertaken to save or revitalize the minority languages - or at least some of them.

In spite of the superficial similarities, the actual situation is very different in the two countries.

Having different languages in one country used to be seen as a problem, rather than an asset for the nation. This view has been slowly changing in the last years.

# Languages of Southeast Asia



## 2. Language diversity in Thailand

73 living languages according to Ethnologue ([www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com))

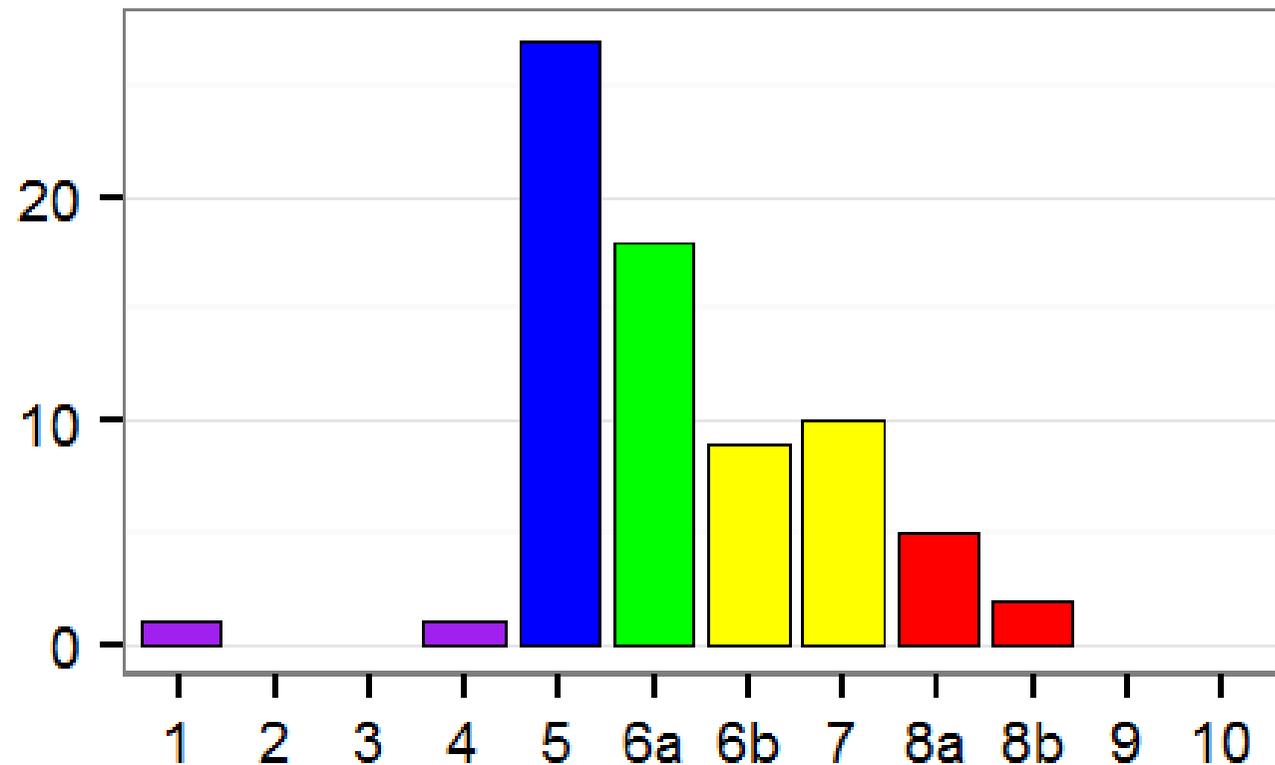
**2 institutional**

**27 developing**

**18 vigorous**

**19 endangered**

**7 dying**



Level	Label	Description
0	International	The language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange, and international policy.
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the national level.
2	Provincial	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government within major administrative subdivisions of a nation.
3	Wider Communication	The language is used in work and mass media without official status to transcend language differences across a region.
4	Educational	The language is in vigorous use, with standardization and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education.
5	Developing	The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.
6a	Vigorous	The language is used for face-to-face communication by all generations and the situation is sustainable.
6b	Threatened	The language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but it is losing users.
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves, but it is not being transmitted to children.
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active users of the language are members of the grandparent generation and older.
8b	Nearly Extinct	The only remaining users of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community, but no one has more than symbolic proficiency.
10	Extinct	The language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language.

1 (National)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Thai</b>	[ <a href="#">tha</a> ] 1 (National). De facto national language. 20,200,000 in Thailand (2000). 400,000 Khorat. 4,700,000 mother-tongue Thai are ethnic Chinese, or 80% of the Chinese (1984). Population total all countries: 20,396,930. L2 users: 40,000,000 in Thailand (2001 A. Diller).	
4 (Educational)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Lahu</b>	[ <a href="#">lhu</a> ] 4 (Educational). 32,000 in Thailand (Johnstone and Mandryk 2001).	
5 (Dispersed)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Chinese, Mandarin</b>	[ <a href="#">cmn</a> ] 5 (Dispersed). 5,880 in Thailand (1984).	
5 (Developing)		Show Details »
6a (Vigorous)		Show Details »
6b (Threatened)		Show Details »
7 (Shifting)		Show Details »
8a (Moribund)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Chong</b>	[ <a href="#">cog</a> ] 8a (Moribund). 500	
<b>Mlabri</b>	[ <a href="#">mra</a> ] 8a (Moribund). 130 in Thailand (Bradley 2007). Population total all countries: 154.	
<b>Palaung, Pale</b>	[ <a href="#">pce</a> ] 8a (Moribund). 5,000 in Thailand (1989).	
<b>Ugong</b>	[ <a href="#">ugo</a> ] 8a (Moribund). 80 (2000 D. Bradley). Ethnic population: 500.	
<b>Yong</b>	[ <a href="#">yno</a> ] 8a (Moribund). 12,600 (2000).	
8b (Nearly extinct)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Kintaq</b>	[ <a href="#">knq</a> ] 8b (Nearly extinct). 1 in Thailand (2007 SIL).	
<b>Mok</b>	[ <a href="#">mqt</a> ] 8b (Nearly extinct). 7 (Wurm and Hattori 1981).	

<b>Ban Khor Sign Language</b>	<a href="#">[bfk]</a> 6a (Vigorous).
<b>Blang</b>	<a href="#">[blr]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 1,200 in Thailand (1998 SIL).
<b>Bru, Western</b>	<a href="#">[brv]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 20,000 in Thailand (1991).
<b>Hmong Njua</b>	<a href="#">[hni]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 60,000 in Thailand (Hattaway 2000).
<b>Karen, Phrae Pwo</b>	<a href="#">[kit]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 6,000 (Dawkins and Phillips 2009).
<b>Kayah, Eastern</b>	<a href="#">[eky]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 18,000 in Thailand (2000). 2 camps of 15,000 refugees from Myanmar.
<b>Lahu Shi</b>	<a href="#">[lhi]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 15,000 in Thailand (2007).
<b>Lamet</b>	<a href="#">[lbn]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 100 in Thailand.
<b>Lawa, Eastern</b>	<a href="#">[lwl]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 7,000 (Nahhas 2007). Ethnic population: 8,000. L2 users: Some who marry into the community learn to speak it.
<b>Malay, Satun</b>	<a href="#">[meo]</a> 6a (Vigorous).
<b>Nyaw</b>	<a href="#">[nyw]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 50,000 (Diller 1990).
<b>Phu Thai</b>	<a href="#">[pht]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 470,000 in Thailand (2006 Mahidol University). Population total all countries: 866,000.
<b>Phuan</b>	<a href="#">[phu]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 200,000 in Thailand (2006 Mahidol University). Population total all countries: 307,000.
<b>Prai</b>	<a href="#">[prt]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 20,000 in Thailand (2001). Possibly 3,000 Ban Wen dialect speakers. Population total all countries: 41,900.
<b>Pray 3</b>	<a href="#">[pry]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 38,800 (2000).
<b>Sô</b>	<a href="#">[sss]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 70,000 in Thailand (2006 Mahidol University).
<b>Thai, Northeastern</b>	<a href="#">[tts]</a> 6a (Vigorous). De facto language of provincial identity in east, northeast provinces. 15,000,000 (1983 SIL). At least 1,000,000 in Bangkok. Kalerng has a few thousand speakers (1990 A. Diller).
<b>Yoy</b>	<a href="#">[yoy]</a> 6a (Vigorous). 5,000 in Thailand (Diller 1990). Population total all countries: 6,000.

## **Socio-political situation in Thailand**

Well integrated centralized state based on Central Thai culture

Central Thai culture perceived as 'own' also by peripheral ethnicities

No (or almost no) separatism based on ethnic or linguistic group

Few parallel cultures in daily life

Local languages used as means of daily communication

Decreasing usefulness of local languages, mostly home/village use

### 3. Language diversity in Myanmar

117 living, 1 extinct languages according to Ethnologue

**11 institutional**

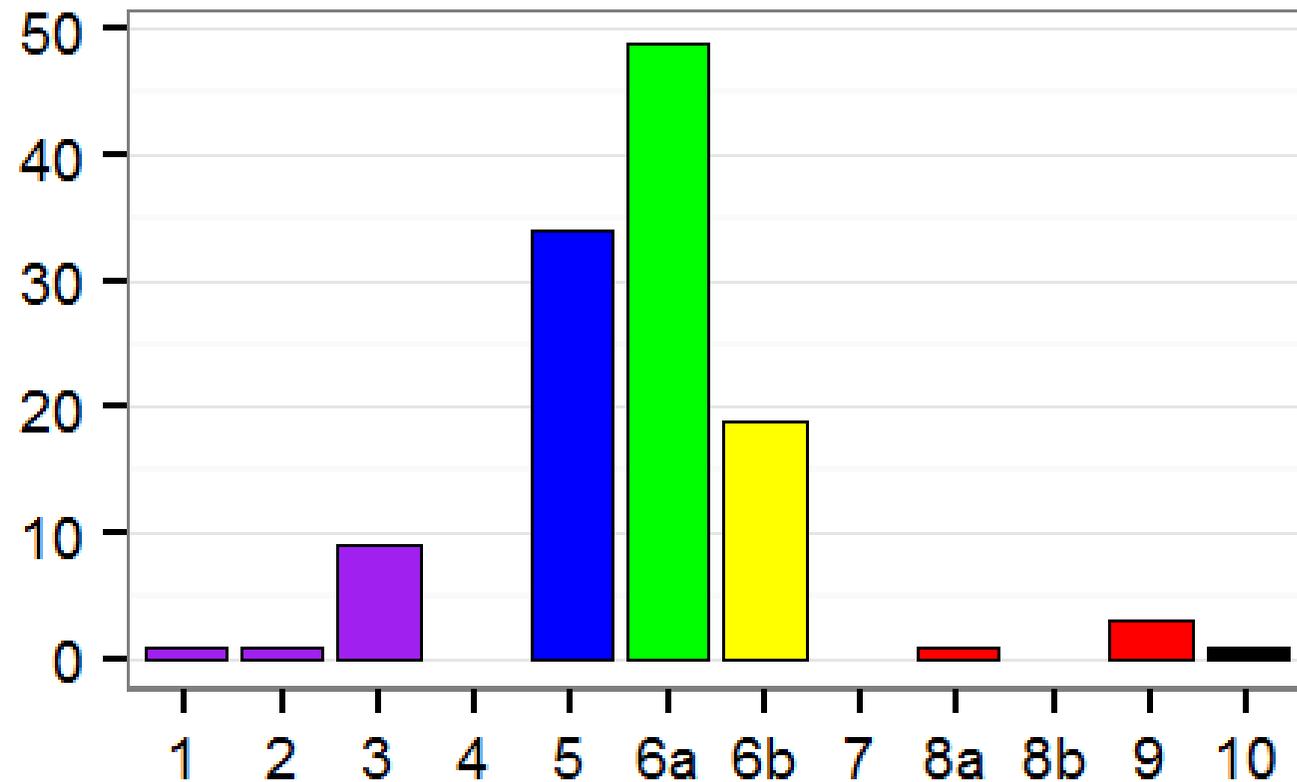
**33 developing**

**50 vigorous**

**19 endangered**

**4 dying**

**1 extinct**



1 (National)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Burmese</b>	[ <a href="#">mya</a> ] 1 (National). Statutory national language (1974, Constitution, Articles 102, 152(b), 198). 32,000,000 in Myanmar (2000 D. Bradley), increasing. 250,000 Beik, 20,000 Yaw (Bradley 2007). Population total all countries: 32,035,300. L2 users: 10,000,000 in Myanmar. Minority peoples throughout the country.	
2 (Provincial)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Wa, Parauk</b>	[ <a href="#">prk</a> ] 2 (Provincial). De facto provincial language in Shan State. 400,000 in Myanmar (2000 census). Population total all countries: 805,700.	
3 (Wider communication)		Show Details »
5 (Dispersed)		Show Details »
5 (Developing)		Show Details »
6a (Vigorous)		Show Details »
6b (Threatened)		Show Details »
8a (Moribund)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Anong</b>	[ <a href="#">nun</a> ] 8a (Moribund). 400 in Myanmar (2000 D. Bradley), decreasing. Population total all countries: 450. Ethnic population: 10,000 (Bradley 2007).	
9 (Dormant)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Hpon</b>	[ <a href="#">hpo</a> ] 9 (Dormant). No known L1 speakers (Bradley 2007), decreasing. Southern dialect extinct; northern dialect moribund; some older people remember lexical items but none can speak it (Bradley 2007). Ethnic population: 1,500 (Bradley 2007).	
<b>Taman</b>	[ <a href="#">tcl</a> ] 9 (Dormant). No known L1 speakers. Last Taman speaker died in 1990s. Descendants intermarried and now speak other languages.	
9 (Second language only)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Pali</b>	[ <a href="#">pli</a> ] 9 (Second language only). No known L1 speakers in Myanmar.	
10 (Extinct)		Hide Details ▾
<b>Wewaw</b>	[ <a href="#">wea</a> ] 10 (Extinct). No known L1 speakers.	

## **Socio-political situation in Myanmar**

'Empire' (Union) consisting of different peoples for many centuries

Burman majority culture not seen as 'own' by peripheral ethnicities

Strong tendencies for separatism based on ethnic and linguistic group

Strong parallel cultures in daily life

Local languages used as identifying means to distinguish oneself from central government, which is perceived as 'foreign' by many ethnic peoples

Usefulness of local languages stable or decreasing, some regional use

## 4. Endangerment factors

Why and how do languages die?

*Non-dead languages:*

### **Pali, Latin, Old Thai, Old Khmer**

→ not extinct, but transformed into new languages

Latin HABERE 'have'	>	French	<i>avoir</i>
	>	Italian	<i>avere</i>
	>	Spanish	<i>haber</i>
	>	Rumantsch	<i>avair</i>
	>	Romanian	<i>avea</i>

*Extinct languages:*

No known languages that have their origin in

**Sumerian, Etruscan, Egyptian/Coptic, Pyu, Tasmanian, ...**

## Languages die if

their speakers disappear (war, natural disaster, genocide)

(Tasmanian)

speakers don't speak or transmit them anymore (language shift)

(Etruscan, Coptic, Pyu)

## Speakers give up their language because

they are forced to speak a politically dominant language

(indigenous languages → English, Russian)

they move to a new place where their language is not spoken

(Irish, Italian in USA → English)

they see another language as more useful

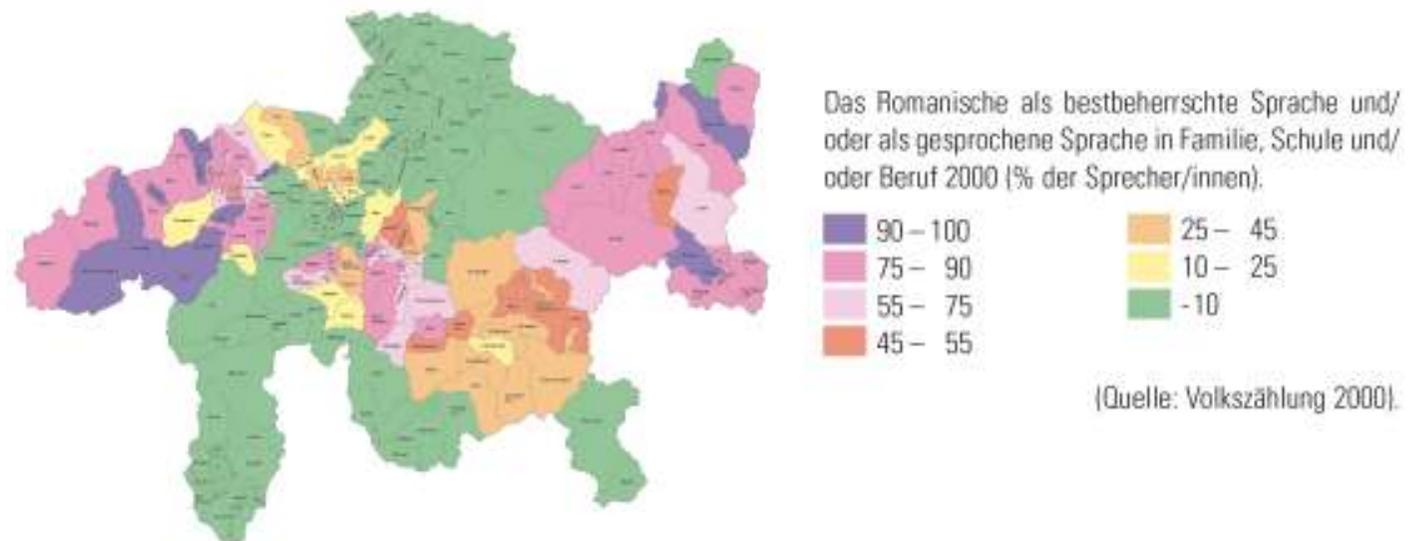
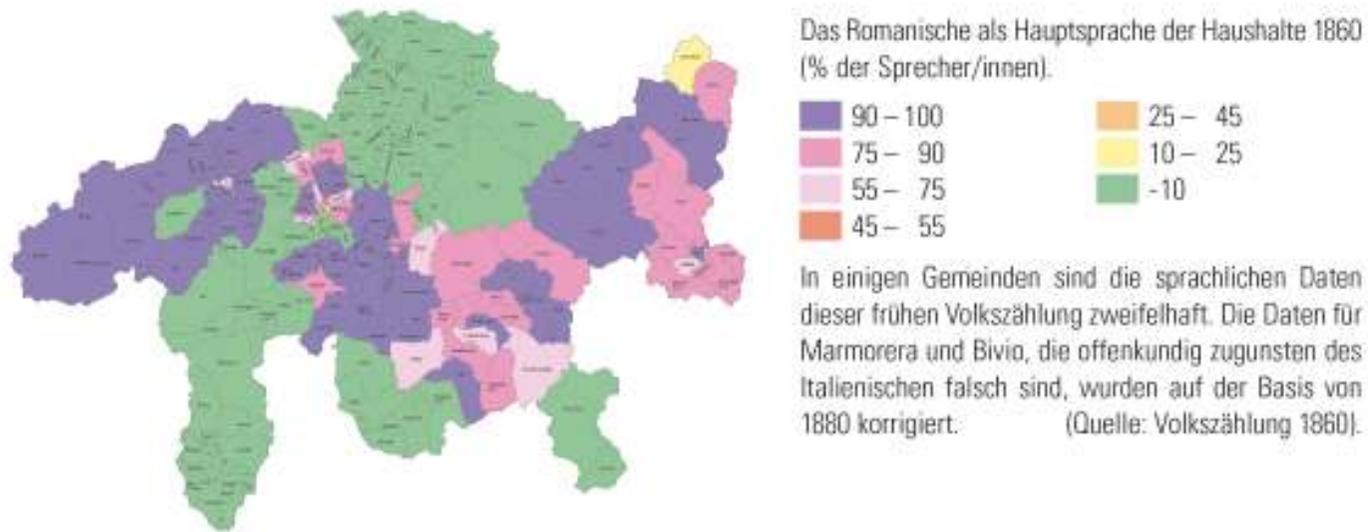
(Kammueang → Thai)

they become bilingual and then shift to their L1

(Mon~Burmese → Burmese)

## Example:

### The spread of German and retreat of Romansh in southeastern Switzerland



## 5. Why care? The importance of ethnic and linguistic variety

### Sangatea

There was a town, a big land, prosperous and good. Velukaccā was its name. Woodcarvings adorned the houses, and windows of melted gold. The palace was decorated with gemstones, a truly noble place. A crystal cave was there, shining like the sun. The palace in the park was made of gold, surrounded by white elephants, pure like jasmine petals. The buildings were all arranged in perfect order. Light-footed horses trotted daringly and straight. Soldiers carrying lances and swords stood lined up on every side of the city wall. **Many tongues were spoken, all languages were heard, the place was filled with Chinese and Haw, Siamese, Mon, and Burmese, Indian, Chin, and Parsi.** Wells and ponds were abundant in all quarters of the city.

### Sangsinchai

There was a city, Pañcāl it was called, it had existed as long as memory went back, prosperous and big. King Kuśarāj reigned there, and the people were happy and content. Layfolks and monks, priests all over the land lived in happiness. **Rich Ferenghis, Indians and Khom, Burmese and Mon, Yuan Lao and Lawa, people from Lanka were to be seen all over the city.** Business and religious practices, magic powers and Yogis were abundant, many people came visiting, making the city a cheerful place. palaces and gold treasuries more than anywhere else, and strong soldiers on elephants and horses and bulls. Trade was good, with ships and wagons relentlessly moving in and out. The kings palace was beautiful beyond comparison, of heavenly rather than earthly splendor. The houses and shops were arranged in perfect lines, as were markets and bazaars.

Wouldn't having only one language be more convenient?

Only one language in one country?

Or in the world?

Which language?

English? Chinese? Burmese? Thai?

**Or Esperanto?**

*Respekto al la instruistoj prezentiĝis,*

*Komenco de tiu malnova sagao fariĝis,*

*De kiam sia Reĝa Moŝto Phanvasa*

*La povon posedis en Ajutthaja.*

## Khun Chang Khun Phaen (opening verses)

*k<sup>h</sup>rán wâ: wâ:j k<sup>h</sup>ru: lé:w còp bòt*

*hâj pra:kòt rûəŋ-ra:w ma: tè kò:n*

*k<sup>h</sup>rán sǝmdèt p<sup>h</sup>rát-p<sup>h</sup>an-wəsă: nəra:kɔ:n*

*k<sup>h</sup>rɔ:ŋ nək<sup>h</sup>ɔ:n kruŋ-sǐ:-ʔəjút<sup>h</sup>əja:*

*kəsě:m-sùk sě:n sənùk daŋ muəŋ səwǎn*

*p<sup>h</sup>rát-dè:t nán p<sup>h</sup>è: paj naj t<sup>h</sup>íʔsă:*

*pen pìn p<sup>h</sup>óp lóp lô:k lo:ka:*

*k<sup>h</sup>rô:p-k<sup>h</sup>rɔ:ŋ p<sup>h</sup>râj-fá: prəc<sup>h</sup>a:kɔ:n*

*muəŋ-k<sup>h</sup>ûn nó:j-jàj naj ʔa:na:k<sup>h</sup>èt*

*kre:ŋ p<sup>h</sup>rát-dè:t t<sup>h</sup>ûə mòt səjòt-səjǔ:n*

*t<sup>h</sup>úk prət<sup>h</sup>ê:t k<sup>h</sup>è:t k<sup>h</sup>ɔ:p p<sup>h</sup>rát-nək<sup>h</sup>ɔ:n*

*c<sup>h</sup>əli: kɔ:n ʔən klâ:w ʔəp<sup>h</sup>íʔwan*

*p<sup>h</sup>róm dūəj p<sup>h</sup>o:k<sup>h</sup>aj ʔajsǔ:n*

*sǝmbu:n p<sup>h</sup>u:n sùk-kəsě:m-sǎn*

*p<sup>h</sup>rát-ʔoŋ soŋ t<sup>h</sup>ótsəp<sup>h</sup>ítt<sup>h</sup>ərâ:tc<sup>h</sup>ət<sup>h</sup>am*

*râ:tsədɔ:n t<sup>h</sup>áŋ nán kô jin-di:*

## English by Chris Baker & Pasuk Phongpaichit (Silkworm Books, 2010)

*Respect to the teachers has been paid,  
a start be made on this old saga,  
Of when His Majesty King Phanwasa  
at Ayuththaya did power wield.  
Paramount throughout the world,  
his writ unfurled far afield,  
A source of joy, like heaven revealed,  
s shield and shelter of the commonality.  
Dependencies diverse within his power  
did cower in awe of such authority.  
All lands around the sacred city  
in humility clasped hands, heads bowed.  
The sovereign holder of the royal wealth,  
perfect in health, with happiness endowed,  
Ten Royal Virtues duly avowed.  
The common crowd as one was joyful.*

# Languages of Southeast Asia

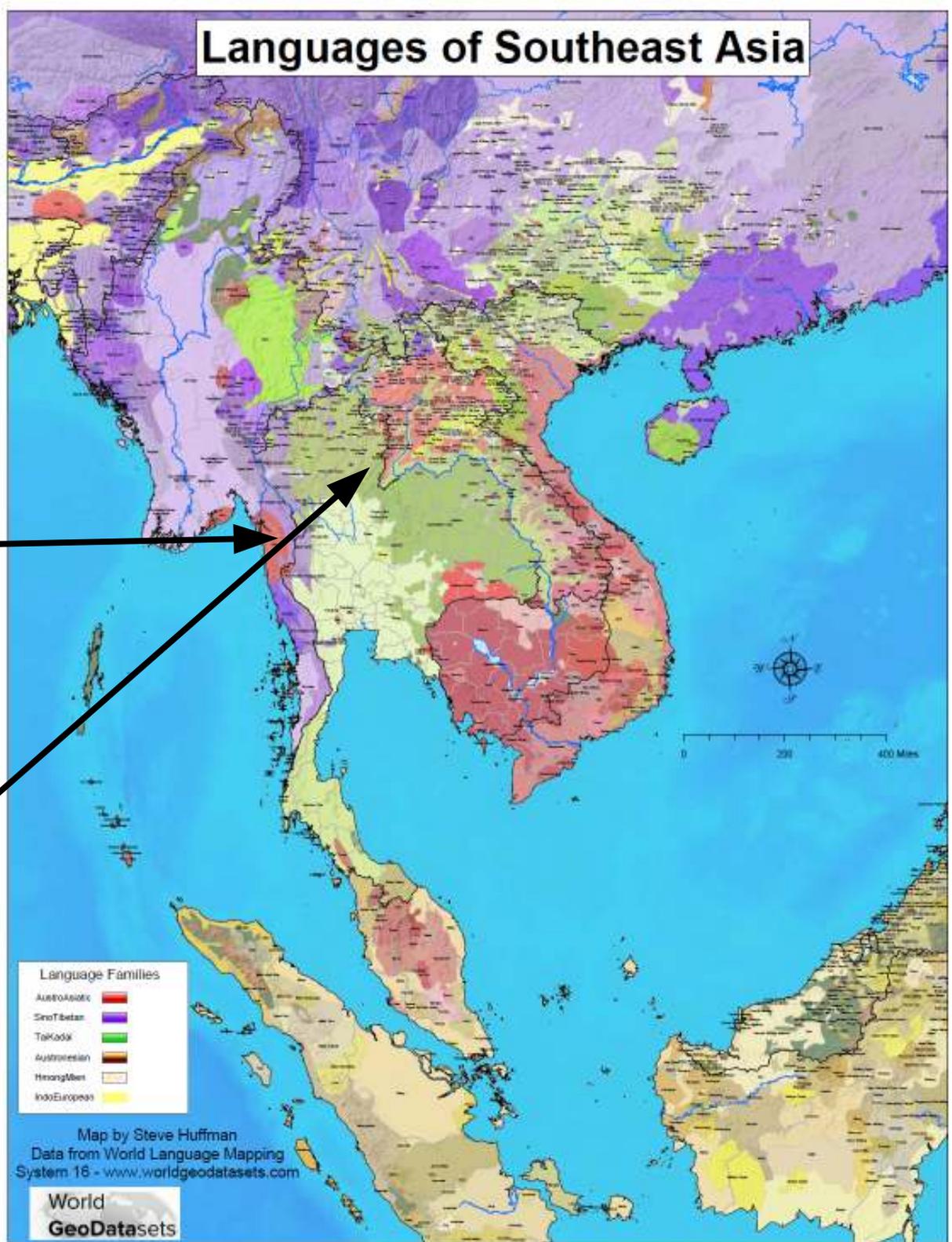
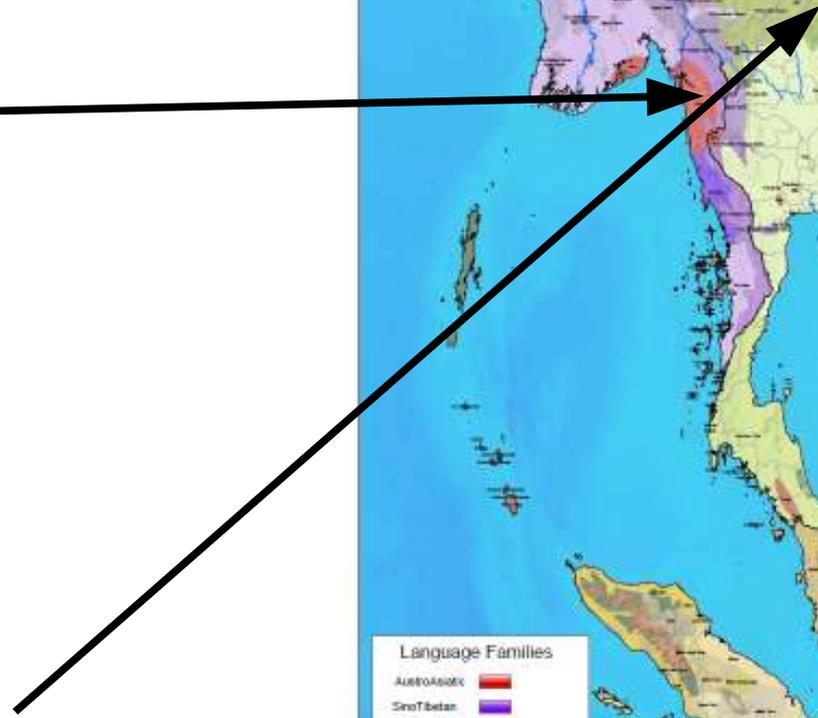
Two cases:

Austroasiatic languages  
in Myanmar and Thailand

Mon



Mlabri



# Mon in Myanmar

Status: developing, 800,000 speakers



Formerly dominant language in Central Thailand, parts of Northeastern Thailand, Northern Thailand (4th-10th century)

Language of learning for some time in Bagan (11th-12th century)

Language of State in Hamsāvati (14th-18th century)

Literary tradition for over 1500 years

Source and conveyor of cultural and religious ideas, Pali vocabulary

Source of an unknown number of Thai words

Recipient of loanwords from Pali/Sanskrit, Burmese, Thai

# Importance of Mon

## Mon in early Burmese culture

Burmese writing system based on Mon

Burmese religious architecture influenced by Mon

Theravāda Buddhism introduced to Burma by Mon (?)



## Mon loans in Burmese

### Old/Middle Mon

### Burmese

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<i>kindoʔ/kinḍoʔ</i>	‘pay respect’	<i>gəḍó</i>	‘beg pardon’
<i>kindar/kandar</i>	‘wife’	<i>gəḍɔ</i>	‘wife of official’
<i>kanā</i>	‘pavilion’	<i>kəṇà</i>	‘pavilion’
<i>clɛc, clac</i>	‘ornament on roof’	<i>səliʔ</i>	‘flame ornament’
<i>tāl</i>	‘7 cubits’	<i>ta</i>	‘7 cubits’
<i>pūjāw</i>	‘worship’	<i>puzɔ</i>	‘worship’ (Pali <i>pūjā</i> )

Some shared function words, where the connection and direction of borrowing is unclear.

<i>mā</i>	‘TOPIC marker’	<i>hma</i>	‘TOPIC marker’
<i>tūn</i>	‘return’	<i>toun</i>	‘particle denoting ALTERNATING act’
<i>toʔ</i>	‘PLURAL suffix’	<i>tó</i>	‘PLURAL suffix’
<i>lew</i>	‘ADDITIVE particle’	<i>lè</i>	‘ADDITIVE particle’

Particle *lè* also found in Shan (*lɛ*), maybe connected with Thai *léʔ*?

## Probable Mon loanwords in Thai

Old Mon		Thai	Gloss
<i>kwel</i>	[kwel]	<i>kwian</i>	'cart'
<i>brāw</i>	[braw]	<i>máʔ-p<sup>h</sup>rá:w</i>	'coconut'
<i>blāñ</i>	[blaiŋ]	<i>p<sup>h</sup>la:ŋ</i>	'(at the same) moment'
<i>kindam</i>	[kəndəm]	<i>krət<sup>h</sup>am</i>	'do, build'
<i>ḍek/ḍik</i>	[ḍik]	<i>dèk</i>	'servant, inferior'
<i>bley</i>	[blɔj]	<i>p<sup>h</sup>lɔ:j</i>	'pearl'
<i>blāy</i>	[blaj]	<i>p<sup>h</sup>la:j</i>	'young male (elephant)'
<i>bañā</i>	[bəɲa]	<i>p<sup>h</sup>əja:</i>	'title of rulers'

### Khmer or Mon?

*láʔ* 'leave, abandon; ENUMERATIVE particle'

*p<sup>h</sup>rɛ:* 'satin'

OK, OM *lah* 'separate, leave'

Khmer *prɛ:*, Middle Mon *brer, brew*

Mon culture and language as important factor in the make-up of “Thainess”

Mon orthography of Lamphun (early 13th century) may have influenced Sukhothai (14th century) orthography:

*thatt* [thət] ‘strong’                      ~                      *cakk* [cak] ‘IRREALIS/FUTURE marker’

Thai writing system partly based on Mon (also Lanna script, Tham script)

Shared religious and cultural traits, including pieces of literature:

*Sangsinchai*                                      ~                      ***Sangatea***  
***Khun Chang Khun Phaen***                      ~                      *Kon Phen Kon Chaeng*  
*Raachaathiraat*                                      ~                      ***Reaceathirat***

**Mon literature can give insight into the development of Thai language, culture and literature, as well as Thai Buddhism.**

*k<sup>h</sup>ənǒm cì:n* - Chinese sweets?



**Probably not ...**

**but Mon ‘cooked noodles’**

𑜆𑜤𑜂𑜫 *hənəm ~ khənəm* ‘noodles’

𑜆𑜤𑜂𑜫 *cin* ‘cooked’

## Mlabri in Thailand

Status dying, about 130 speakers



Unknown origin, more or less closely related to other Khmuic groups

Until recently one of the few remaining hunter-gatherer cultures in SEA

Language only used within the group, decreasing rapidly

All speakers bi- or multilingual (Kammueang, Thai, Hmong)

No literature apart from (a few) oral traditions

Hardly source of loanwords or cultural items

Recipient of cultural ideas and vocabulary (increasing in recent years)

## Importance of Mlabri

Mlabri is one of the few languages of Mainland SEA that did not undergo devoicing

Old Thai/Kammueang loanwords appear in forms close to the ones reconstructed for Old Thai or proto-Thai:

<b>Mlabri</b>	<b>Thai</b>	<b>Old Thai</b>	<b>gloss</b>
<i>bɛ:</i>	<i>p<sup>h</sup>ɛ:</i>	* <i>bɛ:</i>	‘raft’
<i>bɔ:</i>	<i>p<sup>h</sup>ɔ:</i>	* <i>bɔ:</i>	‘father, senior man’
<i>gem</i>	<i>k<sup>h</sup>em</i>	* <i>gem</i>	‘salty, spicy’
<i>gɯ:n</i>	<i>k<sup>h</sup>ɯ:n</i>	* <i>gɯ:n</i>	‘return’
<i>ɟɯ:</i>	<i>c<sup>h</sup>ɯ:</i>	* <i>ɟɯ:</i>	‘name’
<i>hmɯ:</i>	<i>mù:</i>	* <i>hmù:</i>	‘group, all’
<i>hleɸ</i>	<i>lèk</i>	* <i>hleɸ</i>	‘iron’

Newer loans from Kammueang and Thai show devoicing:

<b>Mlabri</b>	<b>KM/Thai</b>	<b>gloss</b>
<i>kan</i>	<i>kan</i> (Thai <i>k<sup>h</sup>rán</i> )	'if, when'
<i>ti</i>	<i>tîː</i> (Thai <i>t<sup>h</sup>îː</i> )	'place, at, in'
<i>k<sup>h</sup>ɛːn</i>	<i>k<sup>h</sup>ɛːn</i>	'mouth organ'
<i>c<sup>h</sup>ɛː</i>	<i>c<sup>h</sup>êː</i>	'soak'
<i>c<sup>h</sup>uːk</i>	<i>c<sup>h</sup>ûək</i>	'string, rope'

Mlabri and other minority languages can play an important role in the confirmation of reconstructed Old Thai forms, and in historical linguistics.

The form of the borrowing in Mlabri tells us something about the time of borrowing.

This helps understand the history of contact in (northern) Thailand.

## **6. Conclusions**

Linguistic and ethnic diversity is an asset rather than a problem.

Linguistic and ethnic diversity are important factors in the development of a civilization.

Peripheral languages and cultures can be important in the reconstruction of the history of a civilization.

Peripheral languages and cultures are in many cases vulnerable, not only to outside pressure, but also to internal pressure.

Each lost language and culture is a severe loss for the cultural inheritance of a civilization and nation.

**Having only one language ...**

**very convenient ...**

**like ...**

**eating *fried rice* every day**



**instead of ...**

