Myanmar as a (new) field for linguistic work

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Myanmar - overview

The number of individual languages listed for Myanmar is 117. Of these, 116 are living and 1 is extinct. Of the living languages, 10 are institutional, 34 are developing, 50 are vigorous, 18 are in trouble, and 4 are dying. (Ethnologue online)

Official language: Burmese
Ethnic languages used in some schools
Burmese and ethnic languages as lingua francas at different levels
UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger: 28 languages in Myanmar are endangered
Geographically Myanmar is not isolated, but the central plain is surrounded by hills separating it from adjacent regions (South Asia, Southeast Asia).

Linguistic diversity greater in hill areas than in the plains, but not restricted to these.

Shared cultural traits with both SA and SEA.
Linguistic history of Burma/Myanmar

Pyu (Tibeto-Burman, extinct since the 12th c.):
ca. 7th century (?) in central Myanmar
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Mon (Austroasiatic):

6th century in Thailand (Dvāravatī)

11th century in Myanmar (Thaton(?), Bagan)
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ca. 7th century (?) in central Myanmar

**Mon** (Austroasiatic):
6th century in Thailand (Dvāravatī)
11th century in Myanmar (Thaton(?), Bagan)

**Burmese** (Tibeto-Burman):
12th century at Bagan, central Myanmar

*Myazedi Inscription in Pali, Pyu, Mon, and Burmese (12th century, Bagan)*
Profiles of the languages of Myanmar

Tibeto-Burman - ex. Burmese, Kachin, Kadu:
Verb-final, postpositions, possessor-possessed, RC-N
Subordinate clauses preceding matrix, clause-final subordinators
Finiteness marked by clause-final particles (status/tense)
Use of classifiers
Nuclear verb serialization
Differential object marking (semantically and pragmatically based)

Karen (Pwo, Sgaw, Bwe, Pa-o, etc.):
Verb-medial, possessed-possessor
Prepositions and postpositional relator nouns
RC preceding or following N, other subordinate clauses usually follow matrix
Use of Classifiers
Verb serialization
Tai-Kadai languages - ex. Shan, Khün:
Verb medial, prepositions
No finiteness marking on V
Subordinate clauses usually following matrix
Modifiers follow modified
Use of classifiers

Austroasiatic languages - ex. Mon, Palaung:
Verb medial, prepositions; Palaung frequently verb-initial
No finiteness marking on V
Subordinate clauses usually following matrix
Modifiers follow modified
Classifiers not used regularly
Present socio-linguistic and political situation in Myanmar

Burmese only official language, spoken as L1 or L2 by almost all inhabitants
Use of local languages not prohibited, but not officially encouraged
Media only in Burmese (and English)
Use of local languages in some cases as political statement (Mon, Shan, Karen)
Use of local languages by children often discouraged by parents
Use of local languages in some schools officially allowed (Mon, Shan)
Some local languages with long literary tradition, some with literary activity
Local language maintenance through entertainment industry (Karaoke videos)

Many languages still very vital, but use decreasing in most cases

Increasing Burmese influence in vocabulary and grammatical structure
Difficulties in fieldwork in Myanmar

Thai-Myanmar border 2002

Three Pagodas Pass

စားနားလမ်းများသည်မှာမူ ဝန်ထမ်းများနှင့် စီမံခွန်များအတွက် အသိအမှတ်ရှိသည်။
• Political situation not favorable for work with ethnic minorities
• Visa restrictions (only 7 days in the 1980s and early 1990s, later 28 days)
• Equipment not easily brought to field sites (no video cameras until ‘90s)
• Many languages spoken in restricted areas (not accessible for foreigners)
• Transport and communication within Myanmar difficult
• Closed land borders
Changing situation 2013

- Easier access to more areas
- Better transport and communication
- Increasing mobile phone coverage
- More widespread internet access, also with mobile phones
- Increasing spread of mass media in Burmese (TV, newspapers)

→ More internal travel, more exchange between ethnic groups
→ Faster and more thorough spread of Burmese as lingua franca
The changing situation of ethnic languages

Ethnic media call for recognition

Monday, 29 April 2013 18:13 | Myat Kyaw Thu

Myanmar’s ethnic reporters, editors and publishers are calling for more recognition for the role of ethnic media in the country, and have urged Parliament to address the status of ethnic publications and broadcasting.

At the first conference of its kind in Myanmar—held at the Strand Hotel in Mon State capital Mawlamyine (Moulmein) from April 25 to 27—more than 100 representatives of various ethnic media gathered to exchange views and discuss the difficulties that minority groups face in Myanmar’s emerging media sector.

Concluding the conference, the assembled ethnic representatives called for a new media law set at an international standard whereby ethnic media work together with ministries to promote all forms of media in minority regions.

The groups also called for de facto freedom to work in radio and television broadcasting.

Ko Min Latt, the editor of the Mon-based Than Lwin Times, told Mizzima that ethnic media groups have an insufficient number of reporters, a lack of news sources, and rising costs to deal with.

Other minority journalists addressed the matter of reporting in their own language.

“Many of our people cannot read or write Burmese,” said one. “Why would we want to publish in a language that readers or listeners would not understand?”
Increasing use of local languages in

- Media
- Education
- Telecommunication (SMS, chat, etc.)
- Entertainment

leading to

- Increased formalization of languages
- Increased leveling of dialect differences
- Increased convergence with Burmese on the structural and lexical level
Burmanization of Khün (Tai-Kadai, Shan State)

Very close to Lanna (Kammueang) spoken in northern Thailand and Lü spoken in Xishuangbanna (Yunnan), probably originally dialects of the same language. Same script as Lanna and traditional Lü.

Historically and culturally close relation with northern Thailand.

Heavy influence from dominant Shan and Burmese replacing Thai/Lanna influence.
<table>
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<th>Khün</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Explanation in Khün</th>
<th>Burmese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pʰǒn</td>
<td>result</td>
<td>ʔəkyo</td>
<td>ʔəteò</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sǎmkʰan</td>
<td>important</td>
<td>ʔəye ʔャ̀y</td>
<td>ʔəyè ʔèi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>níʔyaay</td>
<td>story</td>
<td>hŇη-haaw, ʔəpùm</td>
<td>ʔəpoun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lûk sit</td>
<td>pupil</td>
<td>ʔəpɛ dəbé (dəbyí)</td>
<td>dəbè (dəbyí)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?atsəcǎn</td>
<td>amazed</td>
<td>ʔaam, ʔâan-ʔɔ</td>
<td>ʔán-ʔɔ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>háan</td>
<td>shop</td>
<td>sɛŋ sʰain</td>
<td>sʰain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sâmdeŋ</td>
<td>show</td>
<td>pyáʔ</td>
<td>pyá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lótdu</td>
<td>season</td>
<td>ʔuʔtuʔ, yâasì</td>
<td>ʔúdú, yaði</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fút</td>
<td>foot</td>
<td>pè</td>
<td>pe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pɛ̀k</td>
<td>strange</td>
<td>thusaان</td>
<td>tʰù.sʰan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naay câaŋ</td>
<td>mechanic</td>
<td>səlàa câaŋ</td>
<td>ʔə?-sʰəya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sămlít</td>
<td>succeed</td>
<td>ʔəŋ.myâaŋ</td>
<td>ʔəun.myin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mon syntax: Burmanization of syntax (Austroasiatic, Mon State)

Increasing verb-final structures in modern prose

Gmail wùʔ file həkao təŋɤ̀ tɔʔ kɔ̀h hɒt nù pəriəŋ-kəm.klɒm

swak cx.حنئة ꜠ɔntəray ꜠virus ꜠toə ꜠dɛh ꜠hùʔ kp

permission praŋ raʔ.

‘For security reasons, in order to prevent the danger of viruses, Gmail does not allow some kinds of files to be sent.’ (Guide to using internet)
Locally dominant languages, e.g. Shan influence in Jinghpaw

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muhse JP</td>
<td>ɕi-pʰe ʣɔʔ sa na kun.</td>
<td>3SG-OBJ give go FUT Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myitkyina JP</td>
<td>ɕi-pʰe sa ɕəkʰun na i.</td>
<td>3SG-OBJ go CAUS FUT Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Will you let him go?’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muhse JP</td>
<td>ɕi-pʰe n-kam ʣɔʔ sa ai.</td>
<td>3SG-OBJ NEG-want give go SP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myitkyina JP</td>
<td>ɕi-pʰe n-kam sa kʰun na ai.</td>
<td>3SG-OBJ NEG-want go CAUS FUT SP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I don’t want him to go.’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shan</td>
<td>tě heuŋ mén kwà hä.</td>
<td>FUT give 3SG go Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?èm kʰheuŋ heuŋ mén kwà.</td>
<td>NEG want give 3SG go</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Burmese varieties

Burmese (Upper Myanmar)

ʔəme θá-go zè θwà kʰàin-dɛ.
mother son.DEP-OBJ market go order-NFUT
‘The mother allows/tells her son to go to the market.’

Burmese (Lower Myanmar)

ʔəme θá-go zè θwà kʰàin-dɛ.
mother son.DEP-OBJ market go order-NFUT
‘The mother tells her son to go to the market.’

Burmese (Lower Myanmar)

ʔəme θá-go zè pè θwà-dɛ.
mother son.DEP-OBJ market give go-NFUT
‘The mother allows her son to go to the market.’
Burmese (Mon State)
θwà mə-pyɔ̀-tʰí-dɔ́-bù.
go NEG-speak-touch-CONTR-NEG

Mon
pèh hùʔ tɛ̀h ?a hym raʔ.
2SG NEG touch go speak FOC

Burmese (Standard)
mə-θwà-yá-dó-bù.
NEG-go-get-CONTR-NEG
mə-θwà-zəya mə-lo-dó-bù.
go-GRNDV NEG-need-CONTR-NEG

‘You don’t have to go to tell him anymore.’
Burmese (Mon State)

 FTCnC  θwà  mə-tʰî-bù.
1SG.M  go  NEG-touch-NEG

Mon

ʔuə ʔa  hùʔ  tɛ̀h.
1SG  go  NEG  touch

Burmese (Standard)

 FTCnC  mə-θ̀wà-daʔ-pʰù.
1SG.M  NEG-go-able-NEG

'I don’t know the way.'

→ Speakers of Southern Burmese living in Yangon try to avoid tʰî-construction:

 FTCnC  θwà  mə-taʔ-pʰù.
1SG.M  go  NEG-able-NEG
Fieldwork in Myanmar - new possibilities

Improved over past few years

- Better equipment can be brought to field sites
- Better communication enables access to more speakers
- More publications (incl. mass media) in more languages
- New areas open to research, e.g. Lao speakers in Kayin State
Lao/Isaan-Mon/Myanmar connections?

Lao speaking communities in Chaunghnakhwa, Kayin State

- 11 villages with Lao/Isaan speaking population
- Lao temples in the villages
- Settled in the area since “the British time”
- Originate in Isaan
- Speakers, also younger generations, fluent in Lao and Burmese, many also Thai
- Little (no?) Burmese influence in Lao, also in young speakers
- Culturally adapted to Myanmar, but retain some Lao traditions (sotam and sticky rice eaten “sometimes”)
Lao-Thai-Mon literature: Sangsinchai and Sangada
the boy with the conch and ivory bow

*Sangsinchai* exists in different Thai versions:

1. *Kloon suat* (prayer poem) - complete story in rhyming verses
2. *Lakhoon duekdamban* (musical theater) - only parts of the story in rhyming verses
3. *Lakhoon nook* (theater performed by men) - royal composition of parts of story

Different Lao (and Isaan) versions of *Sangsinsai* in traditional (non-rhyming) Lao verses; most important 16th century poem by Pang Kham; more extensive than Mon and Thai versions; considered one of three master pieces of Lao literature

Different Mon versions of *Sangada*, at least two in print

Presumably editions of palm leaf manuscripts (yet to be located)

Composed in rhyming verses (traditional Mon style)
สิ่งที่ควรปฏิบัติ

(1) แจ้งสุทธิชื่อเรียนว่า ชื่อก่อน
(2) โทรศัพท์ที่อยู่
Phonemic Transcription

1 kəɓɔŋ thɔk kəlɔ
kwə̀ pəʔ ɬənɔ
kùn kyac kəmyàŋ
ʔuə ma lənɔ kla
2 kùn thɔ tərao sə?
taɔ kəniŋ caʔ phədun
ʔuə ɗoc lənɔ pəʔəŋ
ʔəvəya? seŋ
3 cədəh nǔ rəʔəkə?
ʔuə ɗoc lənɔ hiŋ
ϕə ʔuə lənɔ ɕiʔ?
ʔəntərəy chək cəh
4 kə lay ləŋ ʔut
prəcə lɔn ʔəchɔt
ʔuə ɬənɔ ʈəʔaʔ
phəʁəng cetana mùə
5 ʔuə priəŋ lɔ ʰənii?
taŋ ləŋka pləa
hom ʈə ləc mùə
pədəʔə rèh ɦənəsa

Transliteration

kəŋ thok kaluiw
dwɔ pι lñow
gun kyək gamyuiŋ
ʔay ma lñow klə
gun dhaw trəo swə?
tuŋ kneŋ cwaʔ phəŋ
ʔay dik lñow pənuŋ
ʔariŋya saŋ
cdbə hə raga
ʔay dik lñow ʰenŋ
phuiuŋ ʔay lñow ci
ʔantarəy chak cəh
kuiuŋ ləŋ ʰəŋ ʔuit
prəy lon ʔəchət
ʔay lñow tuy ʔau
phyun cetnə mway
ʔay preŋ law ʰəŋ
tuŋ laŋkə blay
huim law lik mway
pədy rəŋ həmsə

1 kəŋ thok kaluiw
dwɔ pə lñow
gun kyək gamyuiŋ
ʔay ma lñow klə
gun dhaw trəo swə?
tuŋ kneŋ cwaʔ phəŋ
ʔay dik lñow pənuŋ
ʔariŋya saŋ
cdbə hə raga
ʔay dik lñow ʰenŋ
phuiuŋ ʔay lñow ci
ʔantarəy chak cəh
kuiuŋ ləŋ ʰəŋ ʔuit
prəy lon ʔəchət
ʔay lñow tuy ʔau
phyun cetnə mway
ʔay preŋ law ʰəŋ
tuŋ laŋkə blay
huim law lik mway
pədy rəŋ həmsə
**Sangada**

I will tell a story that happened in the land of the Mon, in the country of the Hamsa Swan. The story has been told before, composed by other people long time ago.

Because many years have since passed, the verses have become corrupt, the memory of the story vague. The words have become confused, the rhymes broken. Therefore I want to compose it again, to restore the old poem.

I shall write down the story in new verses. My heart is set on the task, my attention shall not quiver and drift.

---

**Sangsinchai**

I will compose a poem, a Mon tale of the old days, an old story, that has become worn and defective over the years.

The books were lost in the turmoil after the loss of the big city. The verses, though, I remember well. I will put them together again, to make the story known. I will adorn the verses, just enough to make the story flow.

If you read the poem and don’t like it, please, knowledgeable reader, help to make the verses smooth, don’t accuse me. The verses are not perfect, not as good as they could be. This is because I have never before composed a poem, so be lenient and forgive my weakness.
**Introduction typical Mon style:**

The story has been written before, but the verses have become corrupted, so the author rewrites them and makes them complete again.

Not usually found in Thai literature, where the text starts with a *bot way khruu* before telling the plot.

This suggests that the Thai *kloon suat* of *Sangsinchay* is indeed composed in Mon style, but using Thai verses (mostly *surangkhanaang*, but also *chabang*, *yaani* and others), which are similar to Mon, but with different rhyme patterns. The Mon text seems to be composed in a single verse style.

No similar introduction is found in the Lao (Isaan) version, which is composed in traditional non-rhyming Lao verses.
Sangada

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 roads were made of hard bricks, covered with clean white plaster. A drum tower was in the center of the city.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Detail</th>
<th>Mon</th>
<th>Thai</th>
<th>Lao</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Velukaccā</td>
<td>Pāñcāl</td>
<td>Peñcāl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hero</td>
<td>Saṅgadā</td>
<td>Saṅkh Śilpjay</td>
<td>Saṅkh Silpjay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father of hero</td>
<td>King Senāgutta</td>
<td>King Senāguṭ, son of Kuśarāj</td>
<td>King Kusarāj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother of hero</td>
<td>Devīpadma</td>
<td>Pradum</td>
<td>Nāh Lun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister of king</td>
<td>Pāladevī</td>
<td>Kesarasumaṇḍā</td>
<td>Sumundā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister is abducted by</td>
<td>Akāy Bala, ghost</td>
<td>Kumbhaṇḍ, ogre</td>
<td>Kumband, ogre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King becomes</td>
<td>ascetic</td>
<td>Buddhist monk</td>
<td>Buddhist monk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven maidens are</td>
<td>poor farmers’ daughters</td>
<td>poor farmers’ daughters</td>
<td>princesses of Campā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother of lion-boy</td>
<td>servant, no name</td>
<td>servant, Kraisara</td>
<td>first queen of Kusarāj, Candā</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Mon and Thai texts clearly state that *Sangada/Sangsinchay* is an old Mon legend.

The Thai *kloon suat* indicates that the text is written by someone who “remembers” the story after the books had been lost during the destruction of Hamsavati (Pegu) in 1757. This suggests that the author of the Thai text was a Mon refugee in the 18th century. He had good knowledge of Thai literature, though, so maybe he was rather a Mon resident of Thailand.

No connection with a Mon origin is made in later compositions and editions of the story in Thailand.

The theater plays are believed to be “based on a traditional popular folktale widespread in central and northeastern Thailand” (Naamanukrom Wannakhadi Thai, 2005).

Lao version more independent in style and content, but in some respects the Thai text is closer to the Lao than to the Mon version.

Lao versions dating to at least the 16th century (Pang Kham), no dates available for Mon and Thai versions.

**Origin:** Local legend popular in different places? Mon legend brought to Thailand and Laos? Lao legend brought to Monland? Connection with Lao villages in Kayin State?
Conclusions about Thai-Mon literary connections

It is not known whether there was a (substantial) Mon speaking population in Thailand during Sukhothai and early Ayudhya periods, but this seems possible.

Not much is known about the (cultural) connections between Thailand and the Mon kingdom of Pegu before the Burmese invasion, but a certain degree of exchange is suggested by shared literature and other cultural items.

There are some hints suggesting that Mon speakers in Thailand were active in spreading literary texts in both directions. These speakers may in some (or most?) cases have been monks (the traditional authors in Mon society).

The authors of the translations must have been fluent and well versed in both languages, including the literary style. This suggests intimate contacts and exchanges over a long time in little centralized states.
Where to go from here?

• Increased access to more areas in Myanmar opens up possibilities to explore more linguistic and cultural connections
• These connections will probably show that Myanmar is an integral part of SEA
• A better understanding of cultural and linguistic connections and shared features and traditions leads to a better integration of SEA as a living space of different populations
• One important factor leading to a better understanding is the knowledge of each other’s languages, traditions and histories
Challenges for fieldwork

Still not easy:

• Visa restrictions to 28 days
• Still many restricted areas
• Cooperation with local institutions restricted or impossible

Increasing complexity of contact situations

→ Increasing mixing of linguistic systems
→ Increasing difficulty to establish direction of influence

Increasing recognition of local languages

→ Increasing literacy → increasing formalization → increasing leveling
→ Increasing importance of standard variety vs. local dialects

→ Decreasing diversity of languages and linguistic structures
Time for a break - thank you for your attention!