2000 years of history -
the Mon language in Thailand and Myanmar

Seminar on the Continuum of Languages and Dialects in Myanmar
Yangon, 25-26.03.2015

Mathias Jenny
1. Introduction

2. History of the Mon language and people

3. Mon in Myanmar - Bagan to Mawlamyaing

4. Mon dialects in Thailand and Myanmar

5. Mon influence on its neighbors

6. Mon in the 21st century - chances and challenges

7. Conclusions
1. Introduction

Southern Myanmar
ca. 750,000 people
(of 50 million)

Central Thailand
ca. 80,000 people
(of 60 million)

(ethnologue.com)
Status of the Mon language today (ethnologue.com)

**Population:** 743,000 in Myanmar (2004), decreasing. Population total all countries: 851,000. Ethnic population: 1,000,000.

**Location:** Mon State and Kayin State; also in northern Tanintharyi region.

**Language Status:** 5 (Developing) [UNESCO: vulnerable]

**Dialects:** Martaban/Moulmein (Central Mon, Mon Te), Pegu (Mon Tang, Northern Mon), Ye (Mon Nya, Southern Mon). Intelligibility between Mon varieties high; between Mon in Thailand and Myanmar 99% (Huffman 1976). Varieties in Myanmar and Thailand “mutually intelligible” (Bauer 1990) but lexical borrowings from Thai and Burmese may cause miscommunication (Guillon 1999). Lexical similarity: 69% with Mon and Nyah Kur [cbn] (Huffman 1976).

**Language Use:** Vigorous in some rural areas and in Three Pagodas border area. Low or no usage in urban centers. Many domains in some communities; only among the elderly, in the monastery, or not at all in other communities. All ages. Positive attitudes. Widespread bilingualism; some language shift. Also use Burmese.

**Language Development:** Literacy rate in L1: Some literacy among the older generation; very low literacy rates among those under 40 [total 25% according to some Mon sources]. Taught in some Buddhist monasteries in both Myanmar and Thailand. Some literacy efforts made on Thailand-Myanmar border. Poetry. Dictionary. Grammar.
Mon as an Austroasiatic language of the Monic branch

(Jenny & Sidwell 2015)
Typologically very different from Burmese, close to Thai

Word order in Mon compared with its neighbors

คนนั้นกินข้าวเสร็จแล้ว
kʰon nán kin kʰâːw sèt léːw.
man MEDL consume rice finished NSIT

ผู้หญิงกินข้าวครับ
mənìhkɔ̀h ciəʔ pɤŋ
toə yaʔ.
man MEDL eat cooked.rice finished NSIT

ผู้ชายกินข้าวครับ
ʔɛ̀di=lu-gá tʰəmìn sà pi-bi.
MEDL=man-SBJ cooked.rice eat finished-NSIT
The Mon alphabet - consonants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mon</th>
<th>ka?</th>
<th>kʰa?</th>
<th>kɛ̀ʔ</th>
<th>kʰɛ̀ʔ</th>
<th>ŋɛ̀ʔ</th>
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<th>Mon</th>
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</table>
2. History of the Mon language and people

First Mon inscriptions dating to the 6th century CE (Thailand)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dumpoh cwas</td>
<td>seven-ty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moy dnow</td>
<td>one dnow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hāṅ klām ti ḍey</td>
<td>? hundred earth in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...ra’ sraṅ kyāk wihār</td>
<td>... cast Buddha temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lam-ur sraṅ</td>
<td>lam-ur silver (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don ḍār ḍe ‘owo’</td>
<td>shaman two ḍe this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...r tāṁ brāw bihār</td>
<td>... tree coconut temple</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Jenny 2005)
Comparison Old Mon - Nyahkur

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6th century</th>
<th>Nyahkur</th>
<th>Modern Mon</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dumphoh</td>
<td>mpɔh</td>
<td>həpɔh</td>
<td>‘seven’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-cwas</td>
<td>-ɕuəh</td>
<td>-coh</td>
<td>‘-ty’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moy</td>
<td>mʊəy</td>
<td>mʊə</td>
<td>‘one’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dnow</td>
<td><del>tʰɔ̤w</del>təə</td>
<td>~tɛə</td>
<td>‘run’ (OM with nominal infix)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ti</td>
<td>tiːʔ</td>
<td>tɔəʔ</td>
<td>‘earth’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðey</td>
<td>pəɗɛy</td>
<td>dɔə</td>
<td>‘in’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kyāk</td>
<td>kʰəya:k</td>
<td>kyac</td>
<td>‘holy object’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḅār</td>
<td>ɓaːr</td>
<td>ɓa</td>
<td>‘two’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tam</td>
<td>tam</td>
<td>tɔm</td>
<td>‘tree’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brāw</td>
<td>mPʰla̤ːw</td>
<td>prɛə</td>
<td>‘coconut’ (NK probably from Thai)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of 18 words (types) in the first Mon inscription, 10 have cognates in Nyahkur
Formerly dominant language in Central Thailand, parts of Northeastern Thailand, Northern Thailand (4th-10th century) - Dvāravatī
3. Mon in Myanmar - Bagan to Mawlamyaing

Language of learning for some time in Bagan (11th-12th century)
Excerpt of the Mon face of the Myazedi inscription (1112 AD, Pagan)

śrī nāma buddhāya śrī sās kyek buddha tirley
glory reverence Buddha.DAT glory religion holy Buddha my.lord
‘Glory! reverence to the Buddha! Glory!’

kūlī ṭār moy bām turow klaw ūr ēwas dīncām cnām tāy
last go one thousand six hundred two ten eight year finish
When the religion of the Lord Buddha had lasted for 1628 years

dey ḍān ṭārīmaddanapur woṛ smīn śrītribhuwanādityadhhammarāj das.
in city PN PROX king PN
be
in the city of Arimaddanapura [Pagan], Śrī Tribhuwanādityadhhammarāja became
(king).

gna.kyek smīn gohh moy trilokawaṭamakādevi ṭimo?.
queen king MEDL one PN
name
One of the king's queens was named Trilokawaṭamakādevi.

kon gna.kyek gohh rājakumār ṭimo?.
offspring queen MEDL PN
name
The son of that queen was named Rājakumār.

smīn gohh kil dīk pi twān ku gna.kyek gohh.
king MEDL give servant three village OBL queen MEDL
The king gave three villages of servants to the queen.
Language of State in Ḥamsāvatī
(14th-18th century)
Decreasing political power, increasing Burmese influence in the language

Old Mon (Kubyaukgyi inscription)

 yal  kcit  sak  ñãh  ma  yām.  
If  die  not.exist  person  REL  weep
‘If they die, there is no one to weep for them.’

Conditional clause with clause-initial subordinator *yal* ‘if’

Middle Mon (Kalyani inscription)

 yow  dah  mā  
if  be  TOP
‘if it should be the case that’

Middle Mon (Ajapala inscription)

 pḍay  paṭisandhi  ey  kəp.tlā  gah,  kwon  truh  mway  ey  go?  mā  ...  
LOC  confinement  1SG  first  that  child  male  one  1SG  get  TOP/if
‘If in my first confinement I get a son, ...’

Conditional clause with clause-final topic marker *mā*
Spoken Mon

a. \textit{yɔ.na} dɛh hù kɛŋ
   if 3 NEG come

b. \textit{yɔ.na} dɛh hù kɛŋ \textit{teh}
   if 3 NEG come TOP

c. dɛh hù kɛŋ \textit{teh}
   3 NEG come TOP

‘if he doesn’t come’
Literary tradition for over 1500 years
Continued use in Lower Myanmar (Mon State)
4. Mon dialects in Myanmar and Thailand

**Dialects in Myanmar:**

- **Mon Rao vs. Mon Ro**
- **Mon Da** (Martaban)
- **Mon Nya** (Ye)
- **Mon Tang** (Pegu)

(Diffloth 1984)
Variation in pronunciation among the dialects and Literary Mon (Jenny 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LM</th>
<th>Wangka</th>
<th>Kaw Dot</th>
<th>K anni</th>
<th>Kaw Khapoun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘event’</td>
<td>&lt;poy&gt;</td>
<td>puə</td>
<td>puə</td>
<td>puə/pwə</td>
<td>puə</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘hand’</td>
<td>&lt;tay&gt;</td>
<td>tɔə</td>
<td>tɔə</td>
<td>tua/tua</td>
<td>tua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘finished’</td>
<td>&lt;tuy&gt;</td>
<td>tɔə</td>
<td>tɔə</td>
<td>tua/tua</td>
<td>tua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘sand’</td>
<td>&lt;btï&gt;</td>
<td>hətɔə</td>
<td>hətɔɪ</td>
<td>hətɔə/hətuə</td>
<td>hətuə</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Buddha’</td>
<td>&lt;kyāk&gt;</td>
<td>tɛjəlc</td>
<td>tɛjəlc</td>
<td>cəlk</td>
<td>tɛjaıc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘be torn’</td>
<td>&lt;cāk&gt;</td>
<td>tɛjaıc</td>
<td>tɛjaıc</td>
<td>cəlk</td>
<td>tɛjaıc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘return’</td>
<td>&lt;kaleŋ&gt;</td>
<td>?əliəŋ</td>
<td>?əliəŋ</td>
<td>kəliəŋ</td>
<td>kəliəŋ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘six’</td>
<td>&lt;tarau&gt;</td>
<td>?ərao</td>
<td>?ərao</td>
<td>kərao</td>
<td>kərao</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Differences between Thailand Mon and Myanmar Mon (Sungkaman 2006)

TM  hnikɔi  hraːn  kwiː  ɲɛŋ.
MM  ɲeh.kɔ̀h  ran  nɛ̀ŋ  ka.
who  buy  come  car  come
‘Who bought the car?’

MM  hùʔ  kwɔʔ?  ciəʔ  nɛm.
yet  NEG  get  eat  yet
‘I haven’t eaten yet.’

TM  tət  yanŋ  noʔ  kʰɔh  kwaiː.
MM  toc  pɔm  noʔ  kʰɔh  raʔ.
sleep  manner  PROX  good  COMP  FOC
‘It’s better to sleep like this.’
## 5. Mon influence on its neighbors

**Probable Mon loanwords in Thai** (Jenny 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old/Middle Mon</th>
<th>Thai</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kwel</td>
<td>kwien</td>
<td>‘cart’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brāw</td>
<td>máʔ-pʰráːw</td>
<td>‘coconut’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blāṅ</td>
<td>pʰlaːj</td>
<td>‘(at the same) moment’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kindam</td>
<td>krətʰam</td>
<td>‘do, build’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḍek/ḍik</td>
<td>dèk</td>
<td>‘servant, inferior’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bley</td>
<td>pʰloːj</td>
<td>‘pearl’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blāy</td>
<td>pʰlaːj</td>
<td>‘young male (elephant)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bañā</td>
<td>pʰəjaː</td>
<td>‘title of rulers’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Khmer or Mon?**

- láʔ ‘leave, abandon; enumeration particle’
  - OK, OM
  - laḥ ‘separate, leave’
- pʰreː ‘satin’
  - Khmer
  - prɛː, Middle Mon brer, brew
# Mon loans in Burmese (Jenny 2013)

## Old/Middle Mon | Burmese
---|---
kindoʔ/kindoʔ | ‘pay respect’ | gədó | ‘beg pardon’
kindar/kandar | ‘wife’ | gədɔ́ | ‘wife of official’
kanā | ‘pavilion’ | kənà | ‘pavilion’
clec, clac | ‘ornament on roof’ | səliʔ | ‘flame ornament’
tāl | ‘7 cubits’ | ta | ‘7 cubits’
pūjāw | ‘worship’ | puzɔ | ‘worship’ (Pali pūjā)

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

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

Particle lɛ̀ also found in Shan (lɛ), maybe connected with Thai lɛʔ?
Mon syntax in local Burmese

ဗိုလ်ချူ အဆိုပါသည်;

သိမ်းပိုက် နောင်မယုံကြည်;

tènɔ pyù mə-taʔ-ʔuə hɒm hùʔ lèp pùh.
1SG.M speak NEG-able-NEG

မင်း မလျှပ်စစ်တွေ;

ရောင်း နောင်မယုံကြည်;

mìn mə-louʔ-tʰí-dɔ́-bù. pèh hùʔ tèh klon raʔ.
2SG NEG-do-touch-CONTR-NEG

သိမ်းပိုက် နောင်မယုံကြည်;

အောင်မယုံကြည်;

tènɔ louʔ mə-tʰí-dɔ́-bù. ʔuə klon hùʔ tèh raʔ.
1SG.M do NEG-touch-CONTR-NEG

မင်း မလျှပ်စစ်တွေ;

ရောင်း နောင်မယုံကြည်;

ʔuə klon hùʔ tèh raʔ.
1SG do NEG touch FOC
Burmese (colloquial)
母亲 儿-OBJ 市场 给-去
ʔəme ʔà-go zè pè-θwà-dɛ.
‘The mother allows her son to go to the market.’

Burmese (standard)
母亲 儿-OBJ 市场 去-命令
ʔəme ʔà-go zè ʔwà-kʰàin-dɛ.
‘The mother allows/orders her son to go to the market.’

Mon
母親 子-OBJ 市场
mìʔ ʔa phya.
‘The mother allows/orders her son to go to the market.’
6. Mon in the 21st century - chances and challenges

Mon cultural activity is well alive
Mon National Schools

2011 statistics (Lall&South 2012):
Schools 272
Teachers 808
Students 36,227

Primary: all subjects in Mon

Middle: geography and history in Burmese, explanations in Mon, Mon modules

High: all subjects in Burmese, explanations in Mon, Mon modules
Literary and cultural activity in Mon ...

Popular literature (magazines, modern poems, short stories) and online resources
... in a changing environment for ethnic languages

Ethnic media call for recognition

Monday, 29 April 2019 13:23 • 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 Lett, 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?”
Popular Music, including subtitled Karaoke videos, Movies
Opportunities for the Mon language - past and present

*Sangatea* (classical Mon story; Jenny 2011)

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.
- Long standing literary tradition, rich history
- Mon National Schools in operation for 20 years
- Literacy programs in schools and monasteries
- Possibility of internet publications (low cost, fast, easily accessible)
- Increased production of popular material, less censorship
- Decreased pressure from central government to shift to Burmese
Challenges for the Mon language

Social challenges: In spite of a strong national/ethnic feeling of being Mon

- Mon National Schools don’t enjoy a high reputation everywhere

- Mon is not seen as a useful means of communication

- Literacy in Mon is not seen as necessary

- Low or no presence in the media and modern technology (no Mon font for chats)

- Low budget and low return of investment for Mon-specific productions

- Mon no longer seen as means of soft opposition against Burmese
Linguistic challenges: In spite of more freedom and less pressure towards Burmese

- Improved communication in Mon State means more exchange → dialect leveling

- No generally accepted standard for the written and spoken language, no center

- Lack of vocabulary in many domains → increasing number of Burmese loans

- Increased popularity of Burmese media leads to more influence of Burmese

- Not much regional and international attention (no university level teaching)
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)
7. Summary and Conclusions

- Mon as one the oldest documented languages of Myanmar and Southeast Asia has a long history and literary tradition
- Important language in the past (transmitter of Indic culture and religion)
- Source of linguistic features in neighboring languages (Thai, Burmese, Karen)
- No independent political unit since the 18th century, varying degrees of autonomy and language use
- Increasing divergence of Thailand and Myanmar varieties
- Increasing convergence among Myanmar varieties and with Burmese

**Mon needs**
- more media and literary activity
- more academic attention, both internal and external
There are many Mon in this world, working in different ways for the people. Some believe in knowledge, some use their strength to work, almost reaching the goal.

One can say that you understand and cherish your people. You love your people, who else could do that?

“Dogs that bark don’t bite, dogs that bite don’t bark” - have you ever heard this saying?

Hey, you do your job, the streets are full of drunk white shirts and red longyis. Do you know what you’re doing? Have you ever thought about it? Only when you’re drunk you know you’re Mon, that’s really too bad.

Hey, whatever job you do, don’t think the Mon people will love you each time that you love the Mon. Let the Mon love you just as you love the Mon. Love the Mon people, let the Mon people love you so we can work together in harmony.