

Certification course for Myanmar Language Studies:

**“Language and society in Myanmar and beyond”**

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Mo, We, Fr 2pm - 3pm (Myanmar time)

## **Lesson 5: The role of language in society - Myanmar**

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## Language and thinking - how language shapes our mind



What do you see on these maps?



We use language all the time to communicate with others and ourselves.

Language is a habit.

The language we speak shapes our way of looking at the world.

The language we speak is part of our identity.

... so, what about

**Identity and language in Myanmar?**

Imagine you are from a small village “Kaw Pyin” in Mon State, near Mudon.



What do you state as your origin/identity? Where do you feel you belong to?

## **Different situations:**

1.You go to the market at Mudon

2.You go to Mawlamyine

3.You go to Yangon

4.You go to Bangkok

- How do you identify yourself in each situation?
- What language do you speak with strangers in each situation?

## Myanmar or Burmese or what?

မြန်မာ                      ဘာမာ                      ဗမာ

**Burma, Birma, Birman, Burman, Burmese, Bama, Bamar, ...**

Of course, Myanmar and Burmese/Burma/Bama are the same thing:

- Literary **Myanmar** (*mjəma* / *mjanma*) is colloquially **Bama** (*bəma*)
- The British spelled /bəma/ as *Burma* or *Birma* (in English, *ur* and *ir* are pronounced the same: ə).



When the SLORC changed the name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, they gave the reason to make it more inclusive:

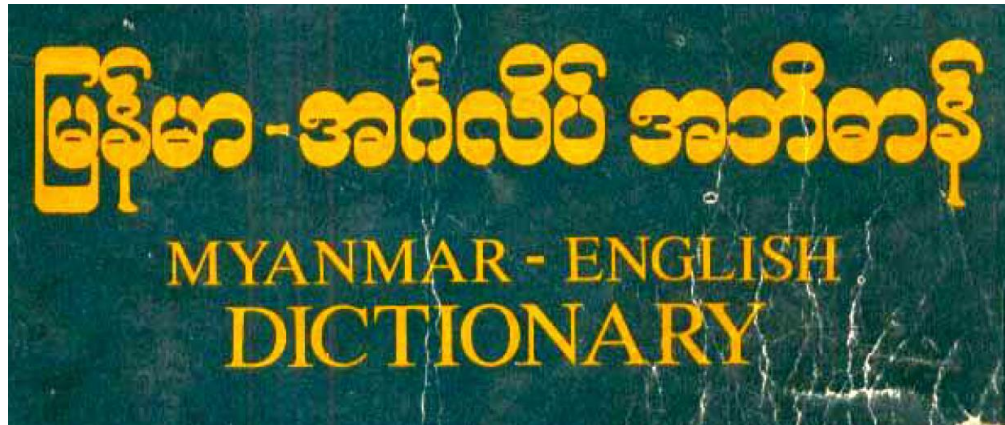
Bama (Burma) refers to the ethnic majority group and their language.

Myanmar refers to the whole country (union) with all ethnic groups and languages.



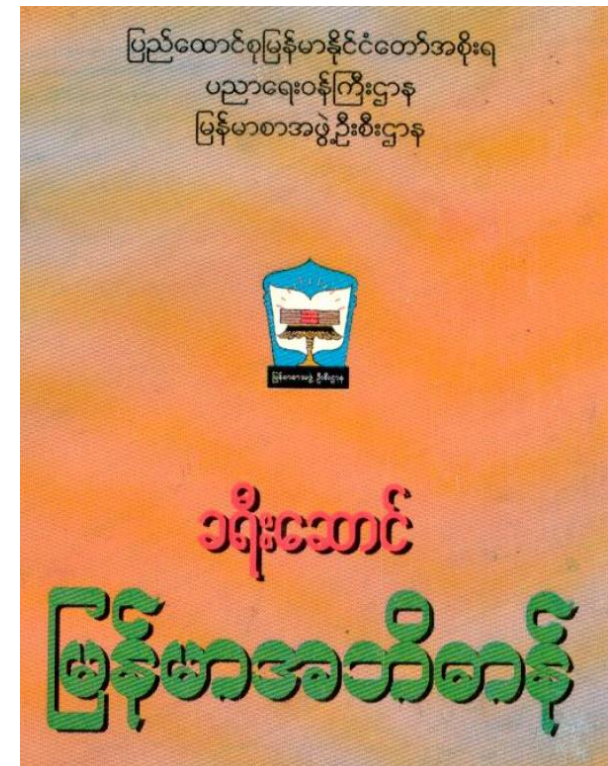


But if this is the intended meaning ...



What is the “Myanmar language”???

- The national language of Myanmar?
- The language of all people in Myanmar?
- All languages of the people in Myanmar?



## Is it good or necessary to have one language for one country?

Consider the following quote from an old Mon story (“Prince Sangada”)

နွံချင်ဇော်မွဲ ပြဲသန်ကျပ်သြို၊

ဝေလုကစ္စာ ခုတ်နာမဗ္ဗိ၊

နန်ထဝ်ဂ္ဃိရတ် သိုကုတ်ကျပ်သြို၊

ဂျိုင်ကိုဝေါဟာ ဇာပ်ဘာသာဇီ၊

သေမန်ဗ္ဗာ ဂလာချေင်ပသိ၊

ညိုင်တာဝတိင် သိုင်အိန်နဲသွဝ်။

တရိန်တူဲ ဗတင်ထဝ်လာဇီ၊

[...]

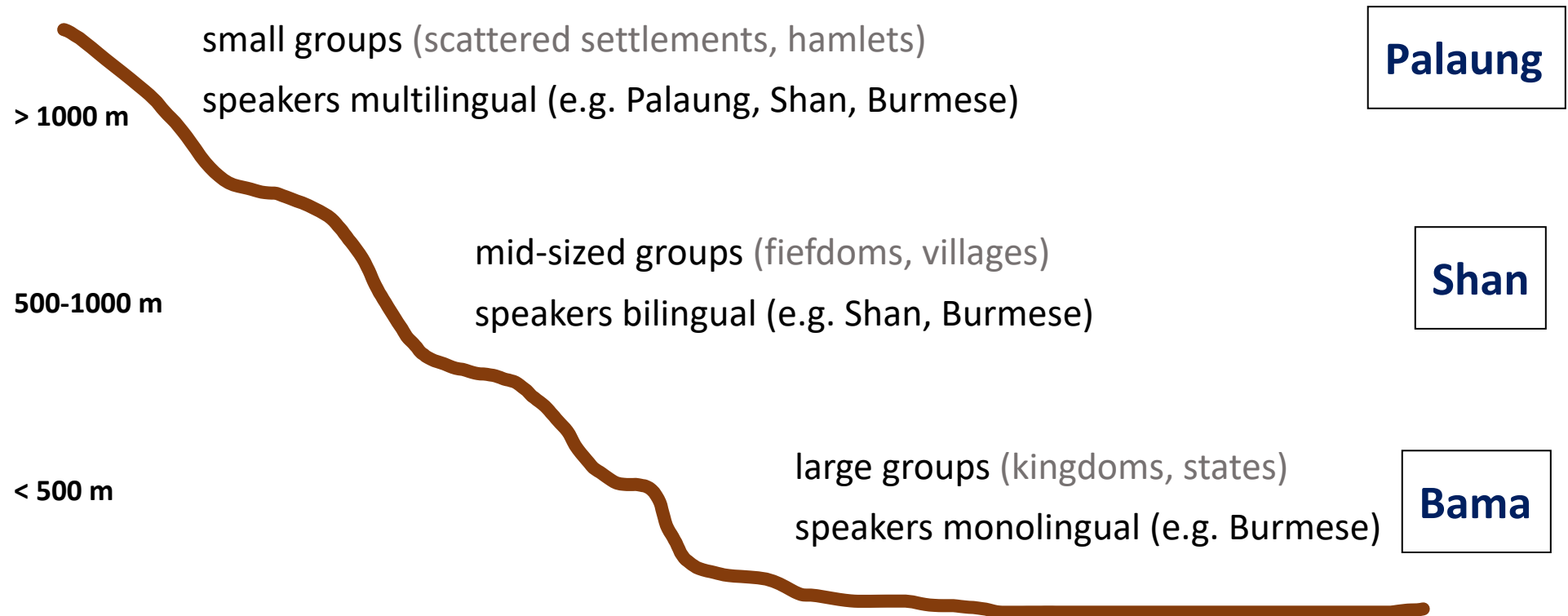
ပေင်မင်ဗပ်သ္ဗွပ် စိန်ဟင်တဝိ၊

[...]

‘There was a town, a big land, prosperous and grand. Velukaccā was its name. Woodcarvings adorned the houses, and windows of fine gold. The palace was decorated with gemstones, a truly noble place. [...] **Many tongues were spoken, all languages were heard, the place was filled with Chinese and Haw, Siamese, Mon, and Burmese, Indian, Chin, and Parsi.** [...] It looked like Lord Indra’s Tāvatiṃsa heaven.’

(*Saṅgadā*, old Mon legend, Jenny 2011)

## Different societies in Myanmar have their own languages and cultures:



ecologic diversity → cultural and social diversity → linguistic diversity

## Politeness in language and society - personal pronouns

### **Palaung** (Rumai; Austroasiatic)

|              | SG         | DU         | PL        |
|--------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| <b>1EXCL</b> | <i>ʔêw</i> | <i>ʔâj</i> | <i>ʔɛ</i> |
| <b>1INCL</b> |            | <i>jâj</i> | <i>jê</i> |
| <b>2</b>     | <i>mâj</i> | <i>pâj</i> | <i>pɛ</i> |
| <b>3</b>     | <i>ʔân</i> | <i>kâj</i> | <i>kɛ</i> |

### **Old Thai** (Tai-Kadai)

|              | SG         | DU                     | PL                     |
|--------------|------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>1EXCL</b> | <i>ku:</i> | <i>ra:</i>             | <i>raw</i>             |
| <b>1INCL</b> |            | <i>p<sup>h</sup>uə</i> | <i>tu:</i>             |
| <b>2</b>     | <i>muŋ</i> | <i>k<sup>h</sup>uə</i> | <i>su:</i>             |
| <b>3</b>     | <i>man</i> | <i>k<sup>h</sup>a:</i> | <i>k<sup>h</sup>aw</i> |

Personal pronoun systems of Palaung and Old Thai are similar to modern European languages. No politeness distinctions are made in pronouns, and the forms are used in all contexts by all people.

## Compare this to the pronouns of modern Thai and Burmese:

### Thai (Tai-Kadai)

|        | 1.Person      | 2. Person   |
|--------|---------------|-------------|
| LOW    | <i>ku:</i>    | <i>mwŋ</i>  |
| FAM    | <i>raw</i>    | <i>tʰɤ:</i> |
| INFORM | <i>cʰǎn</i>   | <i>ʔeŋ</i>  |
| POL    | <i>pʰǒm</i>   | <i>kʰun</i> |
| POL    | <i>dìcʰǎn</i> | <i>tʰân</i> |
| ...    |               |             |

### Burmese (Sino-Tibetan)

|        | 1.Person      | 2. Person      |
|--------|---------------|----------------|
| FAM    | <i>ŋa</i>     | <i>mìn</i>     |
| INFORM | <i>ko, dó</i> | <i>nín</i>     |
| FORM   | <i>cənouʔ</i> | <i>lujìmìn</i> |
| POL.M  | <i>cəno</i>   | <i>kʰəmjà</i>  |
| POL.F  | <i>cəmə</i>   | <i>çín</i>     |
| ...    |               |                |

Often, personal pronouns are replaced by kinship or social terms:

*sʰəja, ʋəmì, ʋà, ʔəko, ʔəmə, ʔùlè, ʔədɔ, ...*

The use (or non-use) of pronouns in Burmese and Thai depends on the social status of the speaker and addressee. It reflects the social structure of the society.

In languages like Palaung, personal pronouns do not reflect social structure. This does not mean that there is no social structure or politeness in Palaung society, but only that it is not expressed in the language.

Generally, in Southeast Asia, personal pronouns with social differences are found in lowland societies with more complex hierarchies. Language is used in these societies to express and therefore strengthen the hierarchy.

**What happens when you always have to express the respective social status of the speaker and the addressee?**



Each ethnic group has their own cultural tradition and in many cases this is encoded in the language of the group.

| Burmese               | Mon                | Thai       | English        |
|-----------------------|--------------------|------------|----------------|
| <i>ʔèinʃi</i> အင်္ကျီ | <i>pəlpʔ</i> ပလောံ | <i>sûa</i> | <i>shirt</i>   |
| <i>ʔèinʃi</i> အင်္ကျီ | <i>pəlpʔ</i> ပလောံ | <i>sûa</i> | <i>blouse</i>  |
| <i>ʔèinʃi</i> အင်္ကျီ | <i>pəlpʔ</i> ပလောံ | <i>sûa</i> | <i>sweater</i> |
| <i>ʔèinʃi</i> အင်္ကျီ | <i>pəlpʔ</i> ပလောံ | <i>sûa</i> | <i>jacket</i>  |

|                             |                    |                    |                      |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| <i>zəbà</i> စပါး            | <i>səʔ</i> ပြေ     | <i>kʰâ:w</i>       | <i>rice</i>          |
| <i>sʰaŋ</i> ဆန်             | <i>haoʔ</i> သု     | <i>kʰâ:w</i>       | <i>rice</i>          |
| <i>tʰəmìn</i> ထမင်း         | <i>pɤŋ</i> ပုင်    | <i>kʰâ:w</i>       | <i>rice</i>          |
| <i>kauʔ-hjìn</i> ကောက်ညှင်း | <i>pəɔŋ</i> ပလောင် | <i>kʰâ:w (nǎw)</i> | <i>(sticky) rice</i> |

## Similarly:

| Burmese                   |           | Mon           |       | Thai                    | English               |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------------|-------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>p<sup>h</sup>əjà</i>   | ဘုရား     | <i>kjac</i>   | ကျပ်  | <i>p<sup>h</sup>ráʔ</i> | <i>Buddha</i>         |
| <i>p<sup>h</sup>əjà</i>   | ဘုရား     | <i>kjac</i>   | ကျပ်  | <i>p<sup>h</sup>ráʔ</i> | <i>Buddha (image)</i> |
| <i>p<sup>h</sup>əjà</i>   | ဘုရား     | <i>kjac</i>   | ကျပ်  | <i>ce:di:</i>           | <i>pagoda</i>         |
| <i>p<sup>h</sup>òunʃi</i> | ဘုန်းကြီး | <i>ləkjac</i> | လကျပ် | <i>p<sup>h</sup>ráʔ</i> | <i>monk</i>           |

Translating any language into any other language always encounters difficulties of culturally specific vocabulary and polysemy (= one word with several different meanings).

## Cultural expressions impossible to translate:

|         |                 |          |
|---------|-----------------|----------|
| Burmese | <i>ʔà-na dε</i> | အားနာတယ် |
|---------|-----------------|----------|

|     |                |         |
|-----|----------------|---------|
| Mon | <i>hɲa cɔt</i> | ညာစိုတ် |
|-----|----------------|---------|

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| English | ? |
|---------|---|

|         |                                  |
|---------|----------------------------------|
| English | <i>look forward to something</i> |
|---------|----------------------------------|

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| Burmese | ? |
|---------|---|

|     |   |
|-----|---|
| Mon | ? |
|-----|---|

## So, what is the role of Burmese and other languages in Myanmar?

**Burmese** as the national language of the Union is important as a shared means of communication among the different communities (*lingua franca*).

It is important as the language of education, administration, and commerce on the Union level.

It plays an important role in safeguarding the literature, culture, and history of the Burmese (Bama) people.

### **But:**

This does not mean that Burmese should be the only language used in the Union (especially in a Federal Union of Myanmar) or that it is superior to other languages.

One single language is not necessary to define a country (remember the case of Switzerland and India).

**Other languages** used in Myanmar are important cultural tools of their respective communities.

They keep the knowledge of the literature, culture, and history of their groups, which make up the whole of the Union.

They can be used in local administration and commerce, and in parts of the education.

They are important in international trade and communication:

- **Mon, Shan,** Lahu, Lisu, and Karen are also spoken in Thailand
- **Jinghpaw, Wa, Shan,** and Palaung are also spoken in China
- **Chin,** Khamti, Jinghpaw, and Naga are also spoken in India
- **Rohingya** and Arakanese are also spoken in Bangladesh
- **Gorakha** is also spoken in Nepal

## **Another point to keep in mind:**

During the 11th century, Mon was the high prestige language of the Burmese kingdom of Bagan.

Mon was used as language of literature besides Pali, before Burmese was written.

Only later did the Burmese majority of Bagan give high prestige status to the Burmese language.

→ **The status of a language in a society can change at any time!**



## The role of standard written Burmese

*Is it better to stick to the official spelling (“prescriptive”) or can everyone write as they like?*

Like in other languages, fixed spelling in Burmese makes communication easier by levelling local differences and retaining familiar appearance of words (for fast word-reading).

If colloquial spelling is used, people from other places may not understand the words:

ဖုံးဆတ်မယ်၊    အိမ်မာနေတယ်၊    ဇွင်းနဲ့စား၊    ဖေ့ဘုတ်အကောက္ခံ၊

In some cases, colloquial spellings become accepted in broader use:

ကျနော်၊    ကျမ၊    ပြေးပြေးမောင်း၊    လာအုံး၊

## **Points for reflection - the power of language:**

- The military junta in Myanmar wants newspapers to use “SAC”, or more recently “caretaker government”, not “military junta” or “regime”. Why?
- Similarly, the English pronunciation of “Covid-19” in Burmese contexts must be avoided? Why?

## More points for reflection:

- Do you think all languages in Myanmar have the status they deserve?
- How do you think Burmese and other languages in Myanmar can be given adequate importance?

**We will come back to these points in Lesson 11.**

**In the next lesson, we look at how languages change over time by being used by speakers.**