Certification course for Myanmar Language Studies:

"Language and society in Myanmar and beyond"

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Lesson 7: language use and language change - Myanmar

PD Dr. Mathias Jenny, University of Zurich, Switzerland

www.mathiasjenny.ch

mj@mathiasjenny.ch

How do we know that a language has changed?

How can we know what changes happened, and when they happened?

If there are no written documents (e.g. inscriptions), we can compare the language to related languages.

Comparing different related languages or varieties allows us to reconstruct what the original language (common ancestor language) was probably like.

Languages related to Burmese are for example Tibetan ("Tibeto-Burman" language family), Lahu, Jinghpaw, Karen, etc.

The history and relationship of a language is not connected with its script (if it has one)! - Burmese is not related to Sanskrit or Pali (though the writing derives from Indian scripts).

The history of Burmese

all dates and places are very uncertain!

8,000 - 9,000 years ago	proto-Sino-Tibetan somewhere in China?
6, 000 years ago	proto-Tibeto-Burman in the Himalayas
3,000 years ago	proto-Lolo-Burmese in the eastern Himalayas
1,500 years ago	proto-Burmese migration to the Irrawaddy plains
1,000 years ago	first written document in Burmese

Some examples of sound changes before Burmese

Proto-Tibeto-Burman	Burmese	B written	Gloss
*səy	ϑe	သေ	'die'
*zəy	ϑè	သေး	'little'
*d-ŋul	ŋwe	ငွေ	'silver'
*gla	cà	ကြား	'hear'
*ka	kʰà	ခါး	'bitter'
*na	na	နာ	'hurt'
*s-bal	pʰà	ဖား	'frog'
*duːŋ	taiɴ	တိုင်	'post, pillar'

[voiced] > [voiceless]; [voiceless] > [aspirated]; [gl-] > [kl-] > [kr-] > [kj-] > [c]

[əy] > [e], [-ul] > [-we], [-uːŋ] > [-aiɴ]

→ **no tones can be reconstructed for proto-Tibeto-Burman**

Grammatical change before Burmese

proto-Tibeto-Burman had a prefix *s- that was used to mark CAUSATIVE verbs.

Tibetan	*mnam-pa* 'have an odor'	*snam-pa* 'sniff'
	riŋ-ba 'be long'	*sriŋ-ba* 'make long'

Jinghpaw	*lòt* 'be free'	*ʃəlòt* 'set free'
	dám 'go astray'	*sədám* 'lead astray'
	prùt 'come to a boil'	*ʃəprùt* 'bring to a boil'

In **Burmese**, this prefix appears as aspiration:

	pjouʔ 'fall off'	*pʰjouʔ* 'cut off'
	mjíɴ 'be high'	*hmjíɴ* 'make high'

But the original s- is found in *ϑeiʔ* 'put to bed' and *ϑwìɴ* 'insert'.
The prefix is not productive, that means, no new words can be formed with it.

Myazedi inscription (Bagan, 11th century)

ကၠုယ် ရှုယ် ပုရှာ ကာ အဖိအ် အတေိအ် ကျောန် ပွေါအ် သု တေဟ်॥

သုံ ရွှေဟ် အတုိအ် ကျောန် င သွင် ပိယ် သု သည် ကာ

ကၠုယ် ရှုယ် ပုရှာ အာ အတုိအ် ကျောန် ပိယ် ယေအ်॥

ထိုဝ် ရွှေဝ် မင် နှစ် ကၠိုအ် ရကာ ကောင် လှေ့ဌ္ဌ တေဟ် ကောင် လှေ့ဌ္ဌ တေဟ်...

iy rhuy purhā kā ʔəphieʔ ʔatieʔ kyon ploʔ su teh.
suṁ rwoh ʔatieʔ kyon ŋa skhaŋ piy su saŋŋ kā
iy rhuy purhā ʔā ʔatieʔklon piy yeʔ.
ʔathiuw rwow maŋ hnac kliuʔ rakā koŋ leŋʔ teh koŋ leŋʔ teh ...

'This golden Buddha, I, your slave, made for [you, my Lord].
Three villages of slaves which you gave me
to this golden Buddha I give.
Seeing this, the King was pleased [and said] "it will be good, it will be good".'
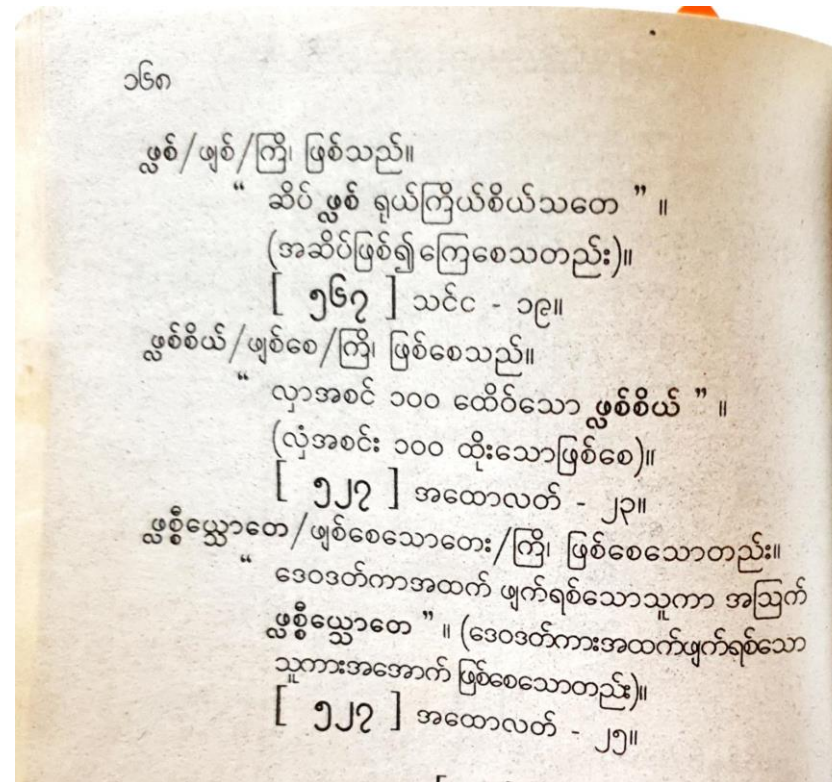
Some words in Old Burmese

Bagan era		**Modern Burmese**	
ကျောက်	/klok/	ကျောက်	/cauʔ/
ပုရှာ	/purhaː/	ဘုရား	/pʰəjà/
ရာ	/rjaː/	ရာ	/ja/
ရှုယ်၊ ရှွယ်	/hruj, hrwəj/	ရွှေ	/ɕwe/
ကျောန်	/kjon/	ကျွန်	/cuɴ/
ကျောင်	/kloŋ/	ကျောင်း	/càuɴ/
ခ္လိုင်	/kʰloŋ/	ချောင်း	/cʰàuɴ/
ပ္လိုအ်	/ploʔ/	ပြု	/pjú/
သ္မီဟ်	/smiːh/	သမီး	/θəmì/

How can we know how earlier Burmese was pronounced?

This is certainly **not** how it was pronounced!

1. From the way words are spelled:

Mon orthography is based on the Pali model, so we can guess how Old Mon was pronounced.

When the Burmese of Bagan started writing their language using the Mon writing system, it is likely that they tried to use letters in a way to match the sounds of their words as closely as possible.

Presumably, the Burmese took the Mon symbols with the sounds they had in Mon of the time.

For example, we know that in Pali 'religion' was pronounced /saːsənaː/. The same pronunciation is found in Modern Mon (and likely Old Mon).

The Burmese at Bagan used the spelling သာသနာ,

so we can figure out that သ was pronounced as [s] at that time.

If it were pronounced in the way it is in Modern Burmese, the word would probably have been written as စာစနာ.

→ **This suggests that at some time between the Bagan era and the present, the pronunciation of [s] changed to [θ] in Burmese.**

Similarly, [r] changed to [j], [pl-] and [pr-] to [pj-].

2. From information in foreign sources

Chinese, Arab, Indian, European reports
Burmese loanwords in archaic local languages

e.g. Burmese grammar of 1845 (Thomas Latter, *Grammar of the Language of Burmah)*

Burm. ဝ.   Deva Nagri व.   Square Pali ဩ .

ဝ *tsă*, has the power of "*ts*," in "*hats ;*" as ဝကာ: *tsăgas*, "a word." ဒ *tsă*
thăt-ts, when preceded by an inherent အ *ă,* has its power permuted to
"*t ;*" as ဝဒ *tseet,* not *tseets,* "war."

Burm. ရ.   **Deva Nagri र.**   **Square Pali ** .

ရ *ră*, has the power of "*r*," in "*run*."   The Burmese proper cannot pronounce an "*r*," but as a "*y;*" hence, ရ *ră* and ယ *yă*, are frequently interchangeably written.   The Arracanese can pronounce the "*r;*" thus ရယ် "to laugh," would be pronounced "*ray*" by the Arracanese, and "*yay*" by

Burm. သ.   **Deva Nagri स.**   **Square Pali ** .

သ *thă*, is the only sibilant in the Burmese language approaching to an "*s*," combining the sound of a soft "*th*," as in "*thin*," with an "*s*," as in "*sin;*" as သူကြီး *thōōgyee*, or *sōōgyee*, "a chief;" သတိ *thădie*, "care, caution."   When combined with ၂ the symbols of the consonants သ,

Why did these changes happen?

Speakers are lazy …

The sound [r] takes a lot of energy to pronounce.

Some lazy speakers started pronouncing it less strong.

This resulted in many speakers copying the weak pronunciation.

The pronunciation as [j] became accepted as standard (maybe some 200 to 300 years ago).

The original /r/ is still pronounced as [r] in some Burmese varieties (Arakanese, sometimes in Intha and Taungyoe).
The sound /r/ is also lost in other languages (Shan, Karenic, Thai).

Similarly, the old /s/ came to be pronounced more weakly and became /θ/ in some communities.

This fashion spread to most Burmese varieties probably some 200 to 300 years ago.

It did not happen in Intha and Taungyoe.

The same change occurred in almost all Karenic languages (except Pa-O).

→ **The lazy pronunciations of some people may become standard, especially if they are taken up by influential people in the society.**

When did these changes happen - and how can we know?

1. Scenario

kj → c   ကျား   → *cà*

   c → s   စိတ်   → *sit/seit/sei?*

      s → θ   သာသနာ → *ϑaϑəna*

2. Scenario

s → θ   သာသနာ → *ϑaϑəna*

   c → s   စိတ်   → *sit/seit/sei?*

      kj → c   ကျား   → *cà*

Which scenario is more likely?

In Intha, /s/ did not change to /θ/ but is /sʰ/. **What does this tell us?**
In northern Pa-O, /s/ is still /s/, in southern Pa-O it's /θ/.
   Burmese ဆရာ *sʰəja* in northern pa-O is *səra*, in southern Pa-O *ϑəra.*

The orthography usually is much slower than the spoken language in representing these changes.

Final consonants were pronounced in Old Burmese, but not in the modern language.

This leads to words originally having different pronunciations becoming the same in the spoken language, but not in the written form:

Spelling		**Old Burmese**		**Modern Burmese**
ထုတ်	ထုပ်	t^hut	t^hup	$t^hou\textipa{P}$
ဆတ်	ဆပ်	c^hat	c^hap	$s^ha\textipa{P}$
စိန်	စိမ်	cin	cim	$sei\textsc{n}$
ကန်	ကံ	kan	kam	$ka\textsc{n}$

The history of tones in Burmese

Old and modern Burmese orthography may help us understand how tones arose:

လွှောအ်   ပြု

အဖေအ်   အဖို့

သှီုဟ်   သမီး

့   was written as အ် in older texts, later shortened to ့

            in Mon it both အ် and ့ are still pronounced as [-ʔ]

 း   was written as ဟ် in older texts, latter both forms occur

            in Mon, both ဟ် and း are pronounced as [-h]

→

   The creaky tone was originally a final glottal stop [-ʔ]:   /kaʔ/ > /ká/.
   The heavy tone was originally a final aspirate [-h]:   /kah/ > /kà/

Shortening of words

Apart from changing the pronunciation of single sounds, whole words may change, especially if they are used frequently. In this case, words are often shortened. Again, this shortening is not always shown in the written language.

Full form	**Reduced form**
ကျွန်တော်	ကျနော်
ကျွန်မ	ကျမ
ဘီလူး	ဘလူး
မန္တလေး	မန်းလေး
မော်လမြိုင်	မော်မြိုင်

In some cases, parts of words are cut:

မီးရထား	→	ရထား
သတင်းစာ ဂျာနယ် မဂ္ဂဇင်း	→	စာနယ်ဇင်း
တယ်လီဖုန်း	→	ဖုန်း
ဘောလုံးပွဲ	→	ဘောပွဲ
ယောက်ျား	→	ကျား
မိန်းမ	→	မ

In some cases, syllables or words are merged into one:

မရဘူး → မြဘူး

မုန့်ဟင်းခါး → မွင့်ခါး

အကိုကြီး → ကွီး

These forms are not accepted in standard spelling, but they may be at some time in the future, as is the case with ကျွန်နုပ် ~ ကျွန်ုပ် becoming ကျုပ်.

Changes in the meaning of words

As words are used over time, they may change their meaning. Old meanings may be lost, or new meanings may be added.

Same word, new meaning(s)

ကျွန်နုပ် *cuɴ-nouʔ* originally 'little slave/servant'

later it becomes 'I': ကျွန်နုပ် cənouʔ/ ကျုပ် couʔ

(Similar in Lao: *kʰâː-nɔ̂j* becomes *kʰɔ̂j* 'I')

မင်း mìɴ originally means 'king, ruler',

later it becomes 'you' (polite), then 'you' (familiar)

Also: မိုက်တယ်၊   သတိ၊   ပစ္စည်း၊

Same meaning, new word:

The original word for 'mouth', နှုတ် *hnouʔ* was replaced by the compound ပါးစပ် *bəzaʔ* 'joint of the cheeks'.

Also: သိပ်   →   အရမ်း, ...

            မိန်းမ   →   အမျိုးသမီး

            ယောက်ျား   →   အမျိုးသား

Semantic reanalysis

သပိတ် *ðəbeiʔ* 'alms bowl' from Pali *saṅgha-patta* 'monk's bowl'

သပိတ်မှောက် *ðəbeiʔ hmauʔ* 'turn over the alms bowl'

      → specific meaning: 'monks don't accept food donations'

      → broadened meaning 'to boycott'

→   reanalyzed (new) meaning of သပိတ် *ðəbeiʔ*: **'protest, boycott'**

Changes in the grammar - syntax and morphology

စေ *se* 'to command, order' became a CAUSATIVE suffix

ဖူး *pʰù* 'to look, see' became an EXPERIENTIAL suffix

ချင် *cʰiN* 'to wish' became a DESIDERATIVE suffix

Negation in Burmese

Old Burmese	**Early Burmese**	**Modern Burmese**	**Colloquial**
ma-V, *ʔa*-V	*ma*-V	*mə*-V-*pʰù/bù*	V-*pʰù/bù*
မ-၊ အ-	မ-	မ--သား IL	-သား IL

pʰù 'to look, see' > 'EXPERIENTIAL (have ever)'

ဖူး
IL

mə-V-*pʰù*   'never V'   >   'not V'

မ--ဖူး   >   မ--သား
IL   IL

The spelling and cooccurrence of 'ever' and 'not' suggest that they are perceived as different words now.

In the next lesson, we will look at people and societies using more than one language.