

Mon Language and Culture

1st Ye Kyaw Thu

Language and Semantic Technology Research Team (LST)

National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (NECTEC)

PathumThani, Thailand

ka2pluskha2@gmail.com

2nd Htet Htet Yadanar Oo

Faculty of Information Science

University of Technology (Yatanarpon Cyber City)

Pyin Oo Lwin, Myanmar

htetyadana123@gmail.com

Abstract—This article is about Mon language, spoken in southeastern Burma and western Thailand. The Mon language (/mɔn/, Mon: မာသာ မန်; Burmese: မွန်ဘာသာ) is an Austroasiatic language spoken by the Mon people, who live in Myanmar and Thailand. Mon, like the related Khmer language or Vietic languages, but unlike most languages in mainland Southeast Asia, is not tonal. In recent years, usage of Mon has declined rapidly, especially among the younger generation. Many ethnic Mon in Myanmar are monolingual in Burmese, and the language is classified as "vulnerable" by UNESCO. The current number of speakers is approximately 800,000 in 2007. In Myanmar, the majority of speakers live in Mon State, followed by Tanintharyi Region and Kayin State. Mon was first written during the 6th century AD in two different scripts: one derived from the Grantha script, and one derived from the Kadamba or Grantha script. The Mon script first appeared in the Mayzedi inscriptions in 1113

Index Terms—Mon Language and Scripts, Mon people and culture

I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Mon is an Austroasiatic language spoken in parts of Myanmar/Burma and Thailand. In 2004 there were 850,000 speakers, mainly in Mon State, and also in the Tanintharyi Region and Kayin State in southern Myanmar. The language was widely spoken in southern Burma until the middle of the 19th century, when the area was taken over by the British. After then large numbers of people migrated to the area from India and China, and Mon became marginalized. The symbol of the Mon people is the hongsa (Mon: ဟံသာ, [h̥ nsa]), a mythological water bird that is often illustrated as a swan. It is commonly known by its Burmese name, hintha (Burmese: ဟံသာ, IPA: [h̥ à]) or its Thai name: hong. [1] The Mon assimilated to Thai culture long ago, yet the royal women of the Chakri dynasty perform and keep their Mon heritage alive in the Thai court. The western Mon of Myanmar were largely absorbed by Bamar society. They have worked to preserve their language and culture and to regain a greater degree of political autonomy. In the Mon language, the Mon are known as the Mon (spelt မောန or မန် and pronounced /mòn/), based on the Pali term Rāmañña (ရှမဏေ), which refers to the Mon heartland along the Burmese coast. In classical Mon literature, they are known as the Raman (ရာမဏေ). The language was widely spoken

in southern Burma until the middle of the 19th century, when the area was taken over by the British. After then large numbers of people migrated to the area from India and China, and Mon became marginalized.

II. MON PEOPLE AND MON CULTURE

Mon State (Burmese: မွန်ပြည်နယ်, pronounced [m`pjìn`]; Mon: တိုရးချင်မန်၊ ရာမညသော) is an administrative division of Myanmar. It lies between Kayin State to the east, the Andaman Sea to the west, Bago Region to the north and Tanintharyi Region to the south, also having a short border with Thailand's Kanchanaburi Province at its south-eastern tip. The Mon were a major source of influence on the culture of Myanmar and the culture of Thailand.

Mon culture and traditional heritages includes spiritual dances, musical instruments such as the kyam or "crocodile xylophone", the saung harp and a flat stringed instrument. Mon dances are usually played in a formal theater or sometimes in an informal district of any village. The dances are followed by background music using a circular set of tuned drums and claps, crocodile xylophone, gongs, flute, flat guitar, harp, etc. Mon in Burma wear clothes similar to the Bamar. Those living in Thailand have adopted Thai style scarfs and skirts. Mon cuisines and culinary traditions have had significant influences on the Burmese cuisine and Central Thai cuisine today. For example, Htamanè (ထာမဏေ) and Thingyan Htamin (သံကြန်ထာမင်း). A traditional Mon dish (သံကြန်ထာမင်း) served with rice soaked with cool candle-and-jasmine-scented water is consumed by the Mon people during the Thingyan (Songkran) Festival in the summer.

III. HISTORY

The Mon are the earliest known inhabitants of lower Burma. They founded an empire, and introduced both writing and Buddhism into Burma. In the year 573, two Mon brothers, Prince Samala and Prince Wimala, founded the Mon kingdom Hongsavatoi at the present site of modern Pegu. This kingdom flourished in peace and prosperity for several centuries until it was occupied by the Burman dynasty. In 1757, the Burma ruler U Aungzeya invaded and devastated the Mon kingdom,



Fig. 1: Mon Traditional Culture

killing tens of thousands of Mon, including learned Mon priests, pregnant women, and children. Over 3,000 priests were massacred by the victorious Burmans in the capital city alone. Thousands more priests were killed in the countryside. The surviving priests fled to Thailand, and Burman priests took over the monasteries. Most of the Mon literature, written on palm leaves, was destroyed by the Burmans. Use of the Mon language was forbidden, and Burman became the medium of instruction. Mon people were persecuted, oppressed, and enslaved, and countless people were burned in holocausts, like the Jews before the Nazis. Mon properties and possessions were looted and burned throughout Burma. Mons fled further south into Burma's Tenasserim Division and east into Thailand. Unfortunately, the oppression of the Mon people has persisted to the present day. [2]

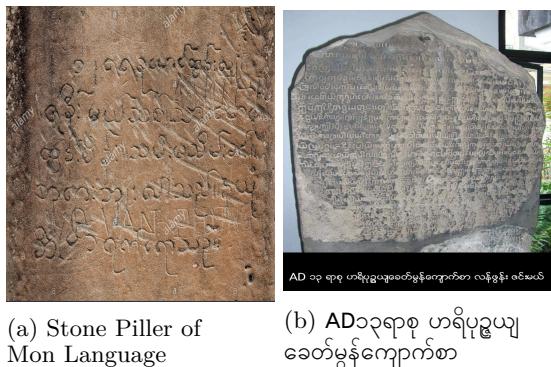


Fig. 2: History of Mon Language

TABLE I: Mon Alphabet (Consonant)

က	ခ	ဗ	ဝ	င
Ka	Kha	Gé	Khé	Ngé
ဂ	ဃ	ဇ	ဃ	ဃ
Ja	Cha	Jé	Ché	Nyé
တ	ဃ	ဒ	ဥ	န
Ta	Tha	Dá	Thé	Na
ဃ	ဃ	ဒ	္	ံ
Ta	Tha	Dé	Thé	Né
ပ	ဃ	ဗ	ဝ	္
Pa	Pha	Bé	Phé	Mé
ယ	ရ	ဗ	ဥ	း
Yé	Ré	Lé	Wé	Sa
ဟ	ဃ	ဗ	ဝ	ဃ
Ha	La	Ba	Aa	Bé

IV. MON LANGUAGE AND SCRIPTS

The Mon language is part of the Monic group of the Austroasiatic languages (also known as Mon–Khmer language family), closely related to the Nyah Kur language and more distantly related to Khmer. The writing system is based on Indic scripts. The Mon language is one of the earliest documented vernacular languages of Indochina. Burmese language also has a lot of words derived from or borrowed from the Mon language, especially related with administration, architecture, cloth, cuisine and flowers.

A. Alphabet

The Mon script is basically a syllabic system. Vowel signs are added to the front, back, bottom or top of the consonant signs. The original values of many letters have changed during the recorded history of the Mon language, while the spelling has hardly been adjusted. The present day situation is therefore similar to the one of English, where there is a great discrepancy between the written and the spoken forms of the language. Although the Mon and Burmese writing systems are basically the same, Mon is more complex, making use of more superscript consonants. [4] The Mon alphabet contains 35 consonants shown in Table 1.

Mon uses the same diacritics and diacritic combinations as in Burmese to represent vowels, with the addition of a few diacritics unique to the Mon script, including ခ (/a/), and စ (/i/), since the diacritic ခ represents /i/. [18] Also, ဃ (/e/) is used instead of ဃ, as in Burmese. There are 31 vowels in Mon Language; 6 independent vowels and 25 vowel diacritics (shown in Table 2). Moreover, there are 9 medials (ဃ, ဃ, ဃ, ဃ, ဃ, ဃ, ဃ, ဃ, ဃ). In Mon script, “၊” is used for a comma, and “၊” is used for a period. [5]

Other diacritic vowels and transcription notes are as in the following:

- ခ → iu
- စ → ām
- ဃ → um

TABLE II: Mon Alphabet (Vowel)

Initial or independent symbol	diacritic	Transcription and notes
၁၁	none, inherent vowel	a or a or e - /a/, / / after some consonants
၁၂	၁၁	ā-spelled as to avoid confusion with certain letters
၁၃၁၃	၁	i
၁၄	၁	ī or oe - /ī/, / e/ after some consonants
၁၅	၁	u
၁၆	၁	ū or ao - /ū/, /ao/ after some consonants
၁၇	၁၁	e
၁၈	၁	ai
၁၉၁၁	၁၁	o - spelled as to avoid confusion with certain consonants.
၁၀	၁	āi/oi
၁၁	၁	ōm
၁၃	၁၁	ah

- ၁ → em
- ၁၁ → om
- ၁၁ → am
- ၁၁ → um
- ၁၁ → āai
- ၁၁ → uai
- ၁၁ → eai
- ၁၁ → oai
- ၁၁ → iuai
- ၁၁ → uew

B. Dialects

Mon has three primary dialects in Burma, coming from the various regions the Mon inhabit. They are the Central (areas surrounding Mottama and Mawlamyine), Bago, and Ye dialects.[10] All are mutually intelligible. Thai Mon has some differences from the Burmese dialects of Mon, but they are mutually intelligible. Ethnologue lists Mon dialects as Martaban-Moulmein (Central Mon, Mon Te), Pegu (Mon Tang, Northern Mon), and Ye (Mon Nya, Southern Mon), with high mutual intelligibility among them. [3]

C. Grammar of Myanmar and Mon Sentence

Both Burmese and Mon make extensive use of (partly) grammaticalized secondary verbs to express a wide range of functions, including aspect, modality, directionality, manner, and others. A number of these secondary verbs are common to Mon and Burmese in some or all their functions, like postverbal ‘get’, yá in Burmese and k’ in Mon, which is used to express general deontic possibility in both languages (as well as many other Southeast Asian

languages, see Enfield 2003). The verb meaning ‘win’, Burmese nain, Mon mān, expresses epistemic possibility in both languages. Besides, the numerous common grammaticalisations, Mon and Burmese go separate ways in many instances. In some cases, southern Burmese differs from standard Burmese in a way that brings it closer to Mon, as illustrated in the following examples.[9] mon: ချေ ၍ စက် အဲ။
my: သာတို့ကြော်ပြောတယ်။
eng: He told me .

mon: မြှုပ်းအောရ။
my: သားမပြောထိတော့ဘူး။
eng: You don’t have to go any more.

mon: လိုက်အဲရဲ အဲချို့ကေတ်။
my: ကျန်တော့ စာကို ကျန်တော် ရေးယူမယ်။
eng: I will write my text myself.

mon: ချေ ဟို အေရဝေသံ ဟွံ့လေပုံး။
my: ငါသာကို စာအုပ်ပေးခဲ့ပါတယ်။
eng: I gave him book.

D. Phonology

In the Mon script, consonants belong to one of two registers: clear and breathy, each of which has different inherent vowels and pronunciations for the same set of diacritics. For instance, ၁, which belongs to the clear register, is pronounced /ka/, while ၁ is pronounced /k̥/, to accommodate the vowel complexity of the Mon phonology. The addition of diacritics makes this obvious. Whereas in Burmese, spellings with the same diacritics are rhyming, in Mon, this depends on the consonant’s inherent register. A few examples are listed below: [7]

- ၁ + ၁ → ၁ , pronounced /k e/
- ၁ + ၁ → ၁ , pronounced /k̥ i/
- ၁ + ၁ → ၁ , pronounced /kao/
- ၁ + ၁ → ၁ , pronounced /kù/

Mon uses the same diacritics and diacritic combinations as in Burmese to represent vowels, with the addition of a few diacritics unique to the Mon script, including ၁ (/a/), and ၁ (/i/), since the diacritic ၁ represents /i/.[11] Also, ၁ (/e/) is used instead of ၁, as in Burmese. The Mon language has 8 medials, as follows: ၁၁ (/ - ɳ - /), ၁၁ (/ - n - /), ၁၁ (/ - m - /), ၁၁ (/ - j - /), ၁၁ (/ - r - /), ၁၁ (/ - l - /), ၁၁ (/ - w - /), and ၁၁ (/ - hn - /). Consonantal finals are indicated with a virama (၁), as in Burmese. Furthermore, consonant stacking is possible in Mon spellings, particularly for Pali and Sanskrit-derived vocabulary. [6]

/ ၁ / is only found in Burmese loans. Unlike the surrounding Burmese and Thai languages, Mon is not a tonal

TABLE III: Phonology consonant

	Bilabial	Dental	Palata	Velar	Glottal
Stops	p p ^h	t t ^h	c c ^h	k k ^h	?
Fricatives		s	ç ¹		h
Nasals	m	n		ŋ	
Sonorants	w	l,r	j		

TABLE IV: Phonology vowels

	Font	Central	Back
Close	i		u
Close-mid	e	ə	o
Open-mid			c
Open		a	ɛ

language. As in many Mon–Khmer languages, Mon uses a vowel-phonation or vowel-register system in which the quality of voice in pronouncing the vowel is phonemic. There are two registers in Mon:

- 1) Clear (modal) voice, analyzed by various linguists as ranging from ordinary to creaky

- 2) Breathy voice, vowels have a distinct breathy quality

One study involving speakers of a Mon dialect in Thailand found that in some syllabic environments, words with a breathy voice vowel are significantly lower in pitch than similar words with a clear vowel counterpart.[23] While difference in pitch in certain environments was found to be significant, there are no minimal pairs that are distinguished solely by pitch. The contrastive mechanism is the vowel phonation. In the examples below, breathy voice is marked with a grave accent. [8]

V. MON AS RECIPIENT LANGUAGE

With the receding political and economic influence of the Mon people, the Mon language has gradually turned from donor to recipient language. In Myanmar this process can be observed in the development from Old Mon to Middle Mon. As there are next to no Mon documents in Thailand from the time after the arrival of Tai speakers in the Chao Phraya plain, not much can be said about the situation in Thailand in pre-modern times.

A. Thai Influence in Mon

With no documents illustrating the development of Mon in Thailand after the Tai/Thai expansion, at least at the present stage of research, I will in this section restrict myself to giving some examples of Thai influence in modern Mon varieties spoken in central Thailand as well as some cases of Thaiisms found in Mon literature in Thailand. While these communities were able to maintain their language and customs as different from the surrounding Thai villages and towns, even in the greater Bangkok area, until well into the 20th century (cf. for example Smithies 1986, Foster 1986), heavy structural influence from Thai can be observed in all Mon dialects in Thailand.

Today, not many children grow up speaking Mon and also the adults still maintaining their language can be classified as semi-speakers. In this socio-politico-cultural context of assimilation, it is inevitable that many Thai features are found in Mon, either as direct lexical loans, semantic calques, or syntactic replications. The corresponding Thai and Myanmar Mon expressions are in the following: [9]

mon: အဲ ကြီအောင် စဲ။

thai: ən mə sà yá è bù.

my: cl ဘုမ္မမတးရွသေးဘူး။

mon: ဂုမိင်္ဇရဲ ကောနှုန့်မဟဲ။

thai: k̥ mò hérù kr̥ p̥ t̥ erəka m̥ h m.

my: သူတို့ကလေးငိုသံကြားကြတယ်။

mon: အာတ်ကိုပိုလုလေးသရဲ စိုင်ချုံ။

thai: at k̥ p̥ lèp̥ h səray co khy h.

my: အျူပ်တို့ကို စစ်သည့်၊ ဆင်းမြင်းလုလုလောက်လောက် ပေးပါ။

B. Burmese Influence in Mon

Mon in Myanmar is much more viable than in Thailand, with probably close to a million active speakers, some 25 percent of whom claim to be literate in Mon. Children in many villages in southern Myanmar still grow up with Mon as their first language, learning Burmese only later when they attend Burmese government schools. There is also a substantive literary activity in Mon State, producing a wide range of publications, both printed and other, in Mon.

Not only are there numerous Burmese loans and loan translations in Mon, also Mon syntax has converged toward Burmese to a large extent. This convergence leads to some interesting results, as the two languages are typologically very different. In many cases it can be shown that Burmese did not actually introduce new patterns into Mon syntax, but rather helped to activate or strengthen minor use patterns pre-existent in the language. Very often these patterns only superficially correspond to Burmese constructions, which was obviously good enough to treat them as parallel. The following examples illustrate some of the syntactic features listed above. Sentences (39) to (42) are taken from Mi Kon Plem, a story written in colloquial Mon and published in Moulmein in 2001.

1) မှုဂု နင်မှေရေကာနဲ့။

mù k̥ n̥ ñ mù rao kon.

what get CAUS.come what Q child

What did you get, my child?

2) ဂု ဂုပ်မွဲနတော် ကင်ဗြာ့သံ ကောင်း။

k̥ ñjūh mùə n̥ a həke teh, s̥ noj.

get price one basket two tical TOP > COND sell ASRT

If I get two tical a basket, I'll sell it.

3) ဗားစောင် နှုန့်သံ ရောင်းသံ ငောက်တဲ့ ကယို င်တဲလမျိုး။

éh a k̥'h n̥ k̥ s̥ rān həne.ke toə,

- person two MEDL INSTR OBL sell buy vegetables
finish
həyən̩ tao pəy̩ m.
CAUS.live stay life
The two of them sustained their lives by selling
vegetables.
- 4) သားမကိုကြော်ကိုပြု၍ ကော်ဘတော်ရာဟု ကလိ ရှုံးရ။
eh a kraoh k' prəe k' h kon.cät müə rao hù kəl e .k' ra .
person two man OBL woman MEDL child one TOP
NEG get FOC
The man and the woman did not have any children.

VI. STATUS OF MON LANGUAGE TODAY

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.[10]

VII. CONCLUSION

The Mon language and people are one of the first to appear in the documented history of Southeast Asia. Being in close contact with peoples speaking languages vastly different from their own, they were both donors and recipients of linguistic features crossing the language boundaries. Mon serves as a good playground for contact linguistics, as it has been the source and goal of contact induced changes under influence from languages of a very different typological profile, such as Burmese, as well as the typologically much more similar Thai and others.

The contact induced changes in Mon, Burmese and Thai are the most accessible as they involve languages with a long recorded history. Much less is known about



(a) မြစ်တော်ကျောက်စာ
(မွန်ကျောက်စာ)



(b) မွန်စာပေသင်တန်းများ
ဖွင့်လှစ်သင်ကြားပုံ



(c) ဆင်ခေါ်ဘေးကျောင်းတိုက်
(d) မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ ရှိ မွန်စာပေ
ရေးထိုးခဲ့သည့်မွန်ကျောက်စာ ထွန်းကားရာနေရာ

Fig. 3: Mon Language of learning (11th-12th century)

convergence with other languages in the area, especially Karen varieties, some of which are known to be heavily influenced by Mon, such as eastern Pwo. Maybe the general SVO constituent order of Karen languages can be attributed to Mon-Khmer or perhaps Mon influence, but much more research is needed in this area. In this paper I only attempted to give a general overview of the contact phenomena found in Mon and the two large neighbouring languages. Future in-depth research in the field with more reliable data from hitherto ill-described languages will certainly add to our understanding of the linguistic (and social) landscape of western Southeast Asia, both past and present.

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