Burmese is the official language of Burma. (In English, ‘Burmese’ and ‘Burma’ are also known as ‘Myanmar’, and ‘Rangoon’ as ‘Yangon’.) It is the major language of the Burmic branch of Tibeto-Burman, and is spoken natively by upwards of 30 million people in the lower valleys of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers, the central plain of Burma and the Irrawaddy Delta, and non-natively by up to another 10 million speakers of other languages in Burma.

The consultant on whose speech this study is based is a 30-year-old man from Rangoon. He read the passage in a somewhat slow and deliberate style. The Burmese translation of the fable of the North Wind and the Sun is taken from Armstrong & Pe Maung Tin (1925: 36–37).

Consonants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Dental</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Postalveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Glottal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plosive/Affricate</td>
<td>p pʰ b</td>
<td>t tʰ d</td>
<td>ʧ ʧʰ dʒ</td>
<td>k kʰ ɡ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasal</td>
<td>m m</td>
<td>n n</td>
<td>p œ pʰ œ</td>
<td>n ŋ n ŋ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricative</td>
<td>ʔ ð s sʰ z ʃ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>h</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximant</td>
<td>m w</td>
<td>ɾ j</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lateral Approximant</td>
<td>ɬ l</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
/θ, ð/ are commonly realised as dental affricates [θ, ð]. /ʃ/ is an optional variant of /j/ in some loanwords, usually of Pali origin. The voiceless sonorants /m, n, ɲ, l, ŋ/ are typically partly voiced [mm, nn, ŋn, ll, ŋl] (see also Ladefoged & Maddieson 1996: 111–113). Consonant clusters with /j/ or /w/ in second position may be realised as secondary labialisation or palatalisation of the first position consonant respectively, thus /θwã/ ‘go’ > [θwã] and /mjã/ > ‘many’ [mjã], although the cluster /jw/ remains [jw] and not [qw].

Juncture in Burmese may bring about the voicing of compound-internal voiceless obstruents, unaspirated and aspirated alike. Close juncture in which the first syllable is reduced may additionally entail the voicing of the initial stop of the first syllable in a compound if it is reduced (for further details see Sprigg 1957). The following compound involves reduction and voicing of both kinds (example from Okell 1969):

/pa/ + /saʔ/ > /basaʔ/
[pã:]/ + [saʔ]/ > [bš’aʔ]/
‘cheek’ + ‘join’ > ‘mouth’

Vowels

Subset 1 vowels

i mi ‘to be in time’
e me (term of endearment)
ɛ me ‘mother’
a ma ‘hard’
ɔ mɔ ‘to be tired’
o mo ‘heaped’
u mu ‘principle’
ɛ ʔama ‘wound’

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It is possible to account for the entire vowel system using only nine vocalic contrasts (Wheatley 1987), though such an analysis entails a diachronic perspective and omits much phonetic detail, attributing it instead to tonally or prosodically conditioned allophony. The present treatment divides the Burmese vowel system into two complementarily distributed subsets. Broadly speaking, the first occurs non-nasalised and in open syllables only. The second occurs either nasalised or in syllables closed by a glottal stop, both of which are syllable types derived from syllables with final stops or nasals in Proto Lolo-Burmese (Thurgood 1981: 3). The two subsets overlap slightly, however (see Watkins 2000: 146). Note that /a/ occurs in both subsets, the subset 2 variant being slightly more fronted and centralised. The vowel /E/ appears in both subsets also, though not in nasalised syllables.

Tones

Burmese syllables which are not reduced have one of four tones, each of which has a complex of phonetic correlates, including pitch, phonation type and length (see Bradley 1982 for a fuller description). Three of the tones, low, high and creaky, may be described in terms of modifications of vowel features alone. Canonical pronunciations of the four tones in isolation are as follows:

LOW /ma/ [ma:] ‘hard’
HIGH /má/ [ma:] ‘towering’
CREAKY /mA/ [m[a]] ‘female’
KILLED /maʔ/ [maʔgings] ‘March’

The KILLED tone includes a syllable-final glottal stop in isolation form. In connected speech or within compounds, an assimilatory process akin to the RADDOPPIAMENTO SINTATTICO observed in Italian (Kenstowicz 1994: 303) may replace the glottal stop with a lengthened variant of the following consonant.

/lEʔ/ + /[h]au/ > /lEʔ[au]/
[lEʔ[+] > [lEʔ[au] –]
‘hand’ + ‘carry along’ > ‘gift’

Reduced syllables, the product of juncture processes (see Sprigg 1957), are unstressed and tonally non-contrastive, and may contain only the vowel /a/, which is always short [a]. All the tones are subject to complex sandhi effects described in part by Sprigg (1977). One such effect is the lowering of the creaky and killed tones before a high tone.

Stress

Stress is subordinate to tone in Burmese, though it seems that function words are less stressed than non-function words.
Conventions

It will be seen from the above notes that vowel quality, tone and stress are closely and inextricably connected in Burmese. A transcription which attempted to represent all contrastive features in detail would be impossibly convoluted, and so the passage which follows is transcribed broadly. Relative pitch, phonation type and length may all be inferred from the single diacritic (or the absence of one) used to indicate each tone. Diacritics augmenting the second element of the digraph representing a diphthong apply to the whole of the diphthong, not just the second element. Consonants voiced through juncture are transcribed voiced. Since /ʔ/ is the only consonant which may appear in a syllable coda, and all other syllables have the shape /CV/, syllabification is predictable and so left unmarked. Spaces separate intonational phrases.

Transcription of recorded passage

nebu pja | khaîdê | tîtîlo | ðawu? tfîhûu jadê | lemfîga nemîha ðyde? 0abapede | wôkhaîjaledı | ||

Orthographic version

eímak\elmc\;n . enmc\; q¤ . Tk\cå Aa; ´k^;ty\liu . ícc\;KuMen´ktun\; Ak˙¥T¤T¤wt\lat'.
Kr^;qv\ ts\eyak\kui ímc\eta.ka q¤ . kiu Ak˙¥KW"t\eAac\ tt\Nuiuc\q¤k qaAa; ´k^;ty\lui .
mHt\y¤rn\ ktiTa;´kty\'' elmc\;k tt\ŒNiuc\liu .rp\rty''
d^eta. enmc\;k enpí¤pra K%kel;n' . Kr^;qv\Aiuk\liu . Awt\KW"t\reta. elmc\;k
enmc\ha q¤ . Tk\ qapåepty\liu . wn\KMrelty''
Acknowledgements

Thanks to John Okell for scrutinising the transcription and to Lwin Ohn Soe for enthusiastic reading of the passage. I take responsibility for any errors which remain.

References


