1.1 Historical background

Burmese is the most important member of the Burmese-Lolo subgroup of the large Tibeto-Burman family which comprises many hundreds of languages. The Tibeto-Burman family is part of a larger linguistic stock, Sino-Tibetan, which also includes Sinitic or Chinese. Typically Sino-Tibetan languages are tonal. These languages are also largely monosyllabic, but words may consist of one, two, three or more syllables. Phonologically the syllables are characterised by a restricted number of initial consonant clusters, and the disappearance in pronunciation of most syllable-final consonant contrasts although in Burmese final k, s, t, p and final ng, ny, n and m are retained in the spelling.

The earliest dated examples of written Burmese are from the early 12th century, one of them being the famous Rajakumar or Myazedi inscription of AD 1113, from Central Burma. This inscription is in four languages, Pali, Mon, Pyu and Burmese, indicating that from an early date Burmese was coming under the influence of languages from different linguistic families. Mon, from the Mon-Khmer family of languages, is found on inscriptions in Burma from as early as the 7th century. Pali, an Indo-European language, was the language of the Buddhist scriptures; when the Burmese King Anawrahta (1044-1077) sacked the Mon capital in AD 1057 and carried these scriptures back up to Central Burma he also took back with him Mon scholars who not only promoted Pali scholarship among the Burmese but also helped to adapt their own Mon script for the purpose of writing the Burmese language.

The Mon, and hence the Burmese, script derives ultimately from the ancient Brahmi script of Eastern India, probably through a common South-East Asian script in use in the Menam-Mekong area roundabout the 1st century AD; as a consequence the Burmese alphabet now includes a considerable number of redundant symbols devised originally to render Indic vowel and consonant distinctions which do not occur in the Burmese phonological system. For example, Burmese has no aspirated voiced plosives and no retroflex consonants. In the earliest written Burmese the tones are marked only inconsistently because Indic languages had not needed to devise a system for indicating different syllable tones; regular tone marking only becomes fully established by the 18th century.

With the adoption of Theravada Buddhism by King Anawrahta, Pali became the language of high prestige, the language of scholarship, to be used in royal and religious contexts. For example, all reigning monarchs were given elaborate Pali titles, and monks and pagodas were given Pali names. But at the same time as Pali scholarship flourished in the monasteries we find that from the time of the Myazedi inscription onwards Burmese was increasingly used for inscriptions on stone to record the details of economic and social history such as the dedication of lands or the building of a pagoda.

As would be expected Burmese has borrowed heavily from Pali, and loanwords are found even in the earliest inscriptions particularly in the fields of religion, philosophy and ethics (e.g. *merit, nirvana, karma*) but also everyday words such as *vehicle* yana, *wheel* cakka; in the 20th century scholars and administrators have turned to Pali as a source of elements with which to create new vocabulary required by institutional change and technological advance: words for *university, BA degree, professor, lecturer*; rather in the way that English uses Latin and Greek. For example, Pali bhūmi+veda *earth + knowledge* gives Burmese bu-mí bei-dá *geology*. In addition to the major part Pali has played in the development of Burmese vocabulary, it could be argued that Pali has also to a limited extent influenced Burmese syntax, particularly the syntax of the formal, literary style of the language (see 1.3 below). This is the result of generations of Buddhist monks making literal translations (called nissaya in Burmese) from Pali into Burmese, with the aim not only of conveying the meaning but also of teaching the grammar of the original Pali to the Burmese learner. Syntactic patterns foreign to Burmese were introduced into this nissaya-style Burmese in order to parallel certain Pali constructions, after which they came to be used more generally in literary style works.[2]

Loanwords from Mon also date from the earliest period but unlike Pali loans are less often identified by native speakers as being borrowed. This is partly because they have adapted more closely to the phonological patterns of Burmese and partly because they are mostly words of everyday life, including names of foods, flora and fauna, textiles, boats, crafts, architecture and music. There

2.   See Okell 1965 for a more detailed discussion of nissaya Burmese.

is also a small number of early loans from Sanskrit, from Chinese and from Indic languages.

Much later, in the 19th century and overwhelmingly in the 20th century, came the influence of English, both as a source of new vocabulary and also as a competing language of government and administration during the period of colonial rule. Loanwords from English are found predominantly in the technical and scientific fields, also in clothing and fabrics, and above all in the vocabulary of politics and international affairs, as for example in the words for *council, committee, corporation, party, unit, cadre, socialist, communist, democracy* and so on.

Most of the early examples of written Burmese, dating from the 12th century, are from the old capital at Pagan; the majority of them are inscriptions on stone, but there are also fragments written in ink on plastered walls of temples. This phase of the language is known as Old Burmese. Though there are some striking differences between Old Burmese and contemporary Burmese it is remarkable how little the literary form of the language has changed, in structure and basic vocabulary, over the centuries. Some writers refer to a Middle Burmese, covering the period from perhaps 1500 to 1700, and a modern Burmese from about 1700 on. These terms are however more relevant to the orthography of the language, which has undergone considerable changes between Old Burmese and Modern Burmese, and which has only finally been officially standardised in the 1970s.

1.2 Dialects of Burmese

In much of the area that it is spoken, Burmese is remarkably uniform, unlike the languages of some ethnic minorities such as the Karen. There are few major differences between the speech of Upper and Lower Burma; in major towns such as Rangoon, Mandalay, Prome, Toungoo, Moulmein and Bassein essentially the same dialect is spoken. There are some minor lexical differences, especially between Upper Burma as exemplified by Mandalay and Lower Burma as spoken in Rangoon. Writers who use local words or expressions tend to note this fact; in general Rangoon usage is preferred in writing. However some purists regard the Mandalay form of Burmese as more conservative.

There are some regional varieties of Burmese, such as Arakanese, Tavoyan, Intha and so on, which are somewhat different from standard Burmese. In most cases they are phonologically more conservative; for example Arakanese maintains an /r/-/y/ distinction which is still reflected in Burmese writing, but not in pronunciation, and Tavoyan further distinguishes medial /l/ in initial consonant clusters from /r/ and /y/. The Tavoyan medial /l/ was distinguished in Old Burmese inscriptions, but is no longer seen in Middle or Modern Burmese. In general, these dialects are spoken in the more remote parts of Burma: Arakanese in the west, Tavoyan in the south, and Intha in the east. There is a general tendency for dialect speakers to assimilate features of standard Burmese more and more, since Burmese is the national language and the language of education; thus there is considerable stylistic variation, with a more standard pronunciation in more formal situations or in formal vocabulary. Many younger speakers in dialect-speaking regions are more comfortable now in standard Burmese, but the dialects persist in rural areas.
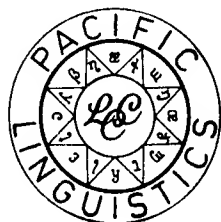
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David Bradley, ed.

Department of Linguistics

Research School of Pacific Studies

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY