The phonological systems of three Pwo Karen dialects

Atsuhiko Kato

Tokyo University

0. Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to describe the phonological systems of three of the dialects of Pwo Karen: the Kyonbyaw, Hpa-an and Tavoy dialects. The phonemic correspondences of these three dialects and texts of the Kyonbyaw and Hpa-an dialects are also presented.

Karenic languages are spoken in large areas of Burma and Thailand. In Burma, there are well over ten Karenic languages, of which the largest subgroups (in terms of population) are Sgaw Karen and Pwo Karen. The Burmese word /kayin_/ (Karen) is usually used in reference to these two subgroups. According to estimated population statistics published by the Burmese government in 1993, there are 2.86 million Karen in Burma, but this figure might be an underestimation, since many Karen live in areas which are not directly controlled by the government.

There are many Pwo Karen dialects, but they can be divided into two groups based on intelligibility: the Western dialects (spoken in the Irrawaddy Delta) and the Eastern dialects (spoken in the Karen State, the Mon State, the Tenasserim Division and western Thailand). The Western and Eastern dialects differ in many aspects, especially at the phonological and lexical levels. The author has had the opportunity to observe speakers of the two dialect groups attempt to understand each other's language, but it was hardly possible for them to converse except in speaking about extremely simple subjects.

Several writing systems have been created for the Pwo Karen dialects. Of those, the Mission script and the Monastic script (cf. Stern 1968) are used more widely than the others in Burma. The Mission script was originally invented for one of the Eastern dialects, but is not in vogue in the eastern areas where Buddhists overwhelmingly outnumber Christians. It is, however, presently popular in the delta, where there are relatively more Christians. But the Mission script does not distinguish all of the phonemic distinctions of the Western dialects on the one hand; conversely it contains characters which make distinctions that they do not have. The Monastic script was also created for one of the Eastern dialects (perhaps Hpa-an dialect) and is mainly based on the Mon script. Its history is poorly understood, but its oldest surviving records date back to the middle of the 19th century. It is now coming into widespread use throughout the Karen State.

The dialects described in this paper are Kyonbyaw (one of the Western dialects), which is spoken in a small town of the delta, Kyonbyaw (/coun_byo_/ in Burmese); Hpa-an (one of the Eastern dialects), which is spoken in the

capital of the Karen State, Hpa-an (/pha'an_/ in Burmese), and the Tavoy dialect (also an Eastern dialect), spoken in Tavoy (/dawe_/ in Burmese), the capital of the Tenasserim Division of southern Burma (see map below). Since Pwo Karen (like other languages of the area) is a monosyllabic language, analysis of syllables has been the principal concern of works dealing with its phonological description.

Studies on the phonological system of Pwo Karen include Jones (1961) and Cooke, Hudspith and Morris (1976). Jones (1961) is a brief description of the Bassein and Moulmein dialects. Since his main purpose is to produce a diachronic study of Karen, the phonological analysis is arranged in such a way as to be readily usable as a basis for comparison. It does not reflect all the aspects of the synchronic state. Therefore the Bassein dialect described in Jones (1961) might appear to be more different from the Kyonbyaw dialect described in this paper than it really is. Cooke et al. (1976) describes the dialect of Hot District in northwest Thailand. This dialect belongs to the group of Eastern dialects, and therefore it shares many characteristics with Hpa-an and Tavoy. There are, however, several important differences.

The author worked consecutively on both the Kyonbyaw and Hpa-an dialects from the latter half of 1993 to the first half of 1995. The work was carried out chiefly in Rangoon with some short-term fieldtrips to Kyonbyaw, Bassein and Hpa-an. The research on the Tavoy dialect was done sporadically whenever the informant visited Rangoon. Burmese was used as the language of elicitation in the surveys for all three dialects.
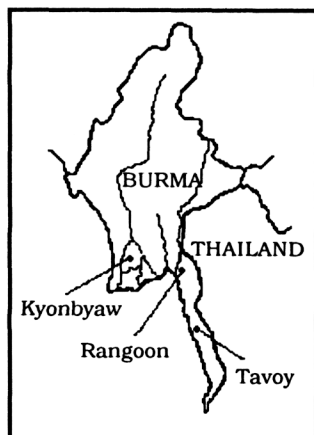
1. The Kyonbyaw Dialect

The Kyonbyaw dialect is one of the Western dialects of Pwo Karen and is very similar to the dialect of Bassein (/batxein_/ in Burmese). The main informant was Ms. Dahlia Win, a native speaker of the Kyonbyaw dialect, who was in her thirties.

1.1. Syllable Structure

The structure of Kyonbyaw syllables can be represented as follows: $C_1(C_2)V_1(V_2)(C_3)/T$, where C is a consonant, V is a vowel, and T is a tone. C_1 is the initial consonant, C_2 the medial and C_3 the final. The combination of $V_1(V_2)(C_3)$ is further referred to as the rhyme. (The elements in parentheses are not always present.)

1.2. Consonants

The Kyonbyaw dialect has 27 consonants as follows:

Stops	p	θ	t	c	k	ʔ
	ph		th		kh	
	ɓ		ɗ			
	b	ð				
Nasals	m	n		ɲ	ŋ	
Fricatives			s	ç	x	
			sh			
			z		ɣ	
Resonants	w		l r	j		

Note that /ph th kh sh/ represent aspirated consonants, not clusters. (This applies to all dialects described in this paper.) Below is a phonetic description of these consonants.

/p/ is a voiceless unaspirated bilabial stop [p].

/pɣnâ/ 'buffalo', /pɣçá/ 'person', /θèinpà/ 'plank'

/θ/ is a voiceless unaspirated interdental stop [ṯ]. It is released more slowly than in Burmese /θ/, so it is often pronounced as an affricate [ṯθ].[1]

/θì/ 'to die', /θôʔ/ 'friend', /θè/ 'be capable of'

/t/ is a voiceless unaspirated alveolar stop [t].

/táin/ 'to create', /tîʔ/ 'building; to hit', /tɣwàn/ 'village'

/c/ is phonetically a voiceless unaspirated alveopalatal affricate [tç].

/cà/ 'a numeral classifier denoting number of times an action is undertaken', /cɣ/ 'to be lazy', /côuʔ/ 'to pull'

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[1] Since there is no appropriate IPA symbol, I use [ṯ] which is often used as a phonetic representation of Burmese /θ/. In the same way, I use [ḏ] for /ð/.

This phoneme is sometimes pronounced as [dʑ] in the augmentative /cí/, but not elsewhere. Since this morpheme is perhaps a borrowing from Burmese (cf. Burmese /ci:/) and is of limited use, I do not propose a separate phoneme for [dʑ]:

/phâʔ ɗò cí/ [phâʔ ɗò tɕí ~ phâʔ ɗò dʑí] 'very big',
/phâʔ/='(pure Karen) augmentative', /ɗò/='big'

/k/ is a voiceless unaspirated velar stop.

/kàin/ 'to be crooked', /kà/ 'to be difficult', /kôʔ/ 'to call'

/k/ is pronounced as [g] only in the three words below:

/mànkánèin/ [mànkánèin ~ màngánèin] 'last year',
/mànkúnèin/ [mànkúnèin ~ màngúnèin] 'the year before last',
/kánká/ [kánká~ kángá] 'to discuss'

Since [g] occurs only in rough (and never in polite) speech, I do not propose a separate phoneme for it.

/ʔ/ is a glottal stop [ʔ].

/méʔáin/ 'glutinous rice', /ʔàin/ 'to be narrow', /ʔà/ 'many'

/ph/ is a voiceless aspirated bilabial stop [ph].

/phɔ́/ 'to read', /phôʔ/ 'to break off (as the edge of something)',
/phò/ 'child'

/th/ is a voiceless aspirated alveolar stop [th].

/thì/ 'water', /thêʔ/ 'to break off (as of strings)', /thâu/ 'be capable of containing'

/kh/ is a voiceless aspirated velar stop [kh].

/khâ/ 'to break (as of sticks)', /khàn/ 'leg, foot', /khêiʔ/ 'to be dark'

/ɓ/ is a bilabial implosive [ɓ]. It is a distinct phoneme vis-à-vis the voiced bilabial egressive stop /b/. (Hpa-an and Tavoy dialects do not have such an opposition.)[2]

/ɓá/ 'to worship', /ɓɤ́/ 'quicklime', /ɓà/ 'to be right'

/ɗ/ is an alveolar implosive [ɗ]. In contrast to /ɓ/, there is no equivalent egressive stop phoneme /d/. But /ɗ/ is never pronounced as an egressive stop.

/ɗà/ 'to see', /ɗèin/ 'sesame', /ɗôʔ/ 'to store (water)'

/b/ is a voiced bilabial egressive stop [b].

/bê/ 'sentence final particle: "you see", "you know" ',
/bɤ̌jɔ́/ 'like this',
/bɤ̌nɔ̂/ 'like that',
/bɤ́/ 'the inside' (combined form of /ʔɤ̌phɤ́/),
/bá ~ báθì/ '1st pl. objective form'

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2 It is worthy of note that implosives are well preserved in the Western dialect which have much contact with Burmese (a language without implosives), but in Eastern dialects the implosives are quite weak or sometimes replaced with egressive stops, though they have much contact with Mon (which has implosives).