Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area
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Notes and Reviews


Denise Bernot's *Dictionnaire birman-français* (DBF) is undoubtedly one of the most ambitious Burmese dictionary projects ever undertaken. In respect of number of entries it takes second place only to the great dictionary of Stewart et al, and that is far from complete and is unlikely to be continued beyond the letter 'a'.

This first volume runs from ka to kussinarum - the claim on the title page that it covers ka to kya is either an error or must be interpreted as ka (inclusive) to kya (exclusive). To indicate how the completed DBF would compare in size with other major Burmese dictionaries so far published in whole or in part, I list below the approximate total numbers of their entries, either as stated by the compiler, or envisaged (if the dictionary is not yet completed), or estimated by a calculation based on a rough average of the number of entries per page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>number of entries</th>
<th>reference</th>
<th>languages</th>
<th>published to date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>70,000</td>
<td>est-env* Stewart 1941-</td>
<td>B-English</td>
<td>'a to 'a-sā:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>env</td>
<td>B-French</td>
<td>ka to kya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60,000</td>
<td>est-env</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-45,000</td>
<td>env</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>stated Chen Yi-Sein 1962; 1969 B-Chinese</td>
<td>all</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29,000</td>
<td>stated Minina 1976</td>
<td>B-Russian</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28,000</td>
<td>stated-env Mran-mā-cā 1978-</td>
<td>B-Burmese</td>
<td>ka to end ya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>est Judson 1893+</td>
<td>B-English</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>stated Esche 1976</td>
<td>B-German</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>est Curnyn 1958</td>
<td>B-English</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>stated Ignatenko 1961</td>
<td>B-Russian</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>est Nwe Don: Phrū 1969</td>
<td>B-Burmese</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*est = estimated; env = envisaged; stated = stated. See above text for discussion.

I give two figures for total entries against the DBF since although Bernot herself states that the number is around 40,000 (p. 7)
my rough calculations comparing what she has done so far with the same stretch of the alphabet in completed dictionaries suggest that the final total will be rather higher. The table shows that the DBF is likely to contain more entries than even the comprehensive Takka-suui Mran-ma a-bhi-dhān (Wan et al 1952-) which had to suspend progress in the early 1970s. It is a mighty undertaking for anyone, and the more so for someone working with little assistance and with many other duties besides lexicography. It looks as if the DBF when completed will fill about 20 or 25 volumes of the size of this first one.

The introduction modestly claims that the DBF is designed to meet the needs of French-speaking students learning Burmese, but in view of its comprehensive coverage it will surely be consulted by a far wider range of users than that, and by users well beyond the learning stage.

Entries for the DBF have been collected from existing dictionaries and from contemporary writing and speech. Entry-words are listed in the same type of alphabetical order as that of the two Burmese-Burmese dictionaries, and each entry contains an indication of the word's pronunciation, a grammatical classification, and a short set of French equivalents - e.g.

ku /ku/-/ v. soigner, prescrire des médicaments (p. 97)

Many entries also give an example sentence - sometimes several - with a translation into French. Where appropriate there is a restrictive label (e.g. mathématique, en désuétude, argot), and in some cases an illustration. Source language is noted for loanwords, and - an innovation in Burmese lexicography - entries for nouns give the appropriate 'classificateur' (i.e. numerative).

The text has been typed for reproduction on separate Burmese and roman typewriters, a feat of heroic endurance and application, but also a cause of erratic spacing. Misprints are surprisingly few, except in the phonological transcription.

So much for the overview. There are comments to be made on all these features.

1. Sources. The principal sources from which material for the DBF is gathered are listed on pp. 16 and 17. Besides the standard dictionaries and reference books they include a selection of short stories published in magazines in the 1950s and 1960s, a couple of novels, collections of folktales, some newspapers, and passages from a school reader. These texts have evidently been ransacked for entries and examples: example sentences taken from them are given references to work and page. The other interesting group of sources is made up of Bernot's own notes on Burmese crafts, agriculture and flora, and on her recordings of stories and other material, all collected on her visits to Burma. To have the information available in previous publications brought together in one work and presented in one language would have been immensely helpful in itself; but the additional material contributed from Bernot's own researches increases the coverage and helpfulness of the DBF very considerably.
One puzzling point in the introduction is the emphasis laid on the distinction between 'classical' or 'written' Burmese on the one hand, and 'modern' or 'spoken' Burmese on the other. The suggestion is that the dictionaries consulted for the DBF are strong on the former and weak on the latter, and that the DBF aims at righting the balance (see for example p. 10). Since the written/spoken distinction in Burmese is almost wholly confined to grammar words (markers, postpositions etc), which form only a minute fraction of the lexicon, it is hard to see why this should be given such prominence. The mystery deepens when one sees that the allegedly 'classical' dictionaries give quite adequate coverage to words that are restricted to modern colloquial: see for example ko, kui:, and ka-ne. in the Burmese-Burmese dictionaries.

I suspect that what Bernot may have had in mind is her example sentences. It is certainly true that the majority of the Burmese-Burmese dictionaries' examples are from older literature and in the literary style, while the DBF gives most examples in modern colloquial. There are signs however that some of these are of suspect authenticity. The examples given under ku (p. 98), kai-lā: (p. 113) and kan-to.chwam:lon: (p. 186), contain an uneasy mixture of literary and colloquial grammar words, suggesting that sentences from literary sources have been hastily and incompletely colloquialized in order to bolster the colloquial content claimed for the dictionary.

2. Coverage. Given that the DBF has more entries than the large Takka-suîl Mran-mā 'a-bhi-dhān (Wan et al 1952-, (TMA)), what kind of entries does it add to the TMA's? To get some idea of the answer I selected at random that part of the two dictionaries that begins with kuiy and ends with kuiy-thū:kuiy-khywau - a stretch that is probably no more misleading than any other. Allowing for a small difference in alphabetical order, the DBF has 69 entries against the TMA's 50. Since the TMA has four entries that are omitted from the DBF, the DBF has in effect 23 additional entries.

Some of these additional entries are those awkward phrases and compounds well known to lexicographers because they fall in the large grey area between items like, say, lose heart, which have a clear claim to inclusion in the dictionary and items like lose umbrellas, which no dictionary would attempt to include. An example is kuiy-kyui: cwan. 'sacrifice one's own advantage': the DBF already has kuiy-kyui: 'one's own interest', and in a later volume will no doubt have cwan. 'discard, disregard', so users will have been well enough served without a separate entry for the phrase. On the other hand kuiy-kyui: cwan, is a fairly common collocation, and making an entry for it may ease some user's labour.

The remainder of the additional entries, about a third of the total, are genuinely useful additions to the TMA list. Some are compounds that for some reason were missed by TMA, e.g. kuiy-tō: pwa: 'statue de Bouddha', and kuiy-khwa:i-lak-lha:ni. 'aide, personne qui partage le travail'; and others are semi-specialized technical terms, like kuiy-chak-'a-mrwā 'frère(s) siamois', kuiy-ta-khrwm: se 'devenir ... hémiplégique', kuiy-twa:n:ka:nn:ka-ri-ya 'speculum'.
A high coverage of terms from science and technology, both traditional and modern, is noticeable elsewhere in the volume. There are for example numerous names of flora and fauna, of parts of oil presses, bullock carts and fish traps, terms from medicine and engineering, and an impressive bunch of compounds beginning with kin: meaning 'real number', 'integer', 'constant', 'binomial' etc. Some of this richness is no doubt the result of a judicious use of the excellent Paññā-rap wo-hā-ra-myā: (Paññā-re: 1971) but for much of it we must thank Bernot's own researches in the crafts and flora of Burma.

The entries include more English loanwords than I would have judged necessary for a Burmese-English dictionary e.g. the Burmese forms of 'catholic' p. 138, 'collodion' p. 133, and 'kangaroo' p. 154; but in a dictionary for French speakers generosity in this area is clearly justified. The inclusion of kak-chak 'cassette de magnétoscope' p. 138 is an index of how up-to-date the coverage is.

One other source of additional entries is Bernot's practice - not always followed - of giving the full treatment to both forms of a word with alternative spellings. Whether this is deliberate or inadvertent is hard to tell, but surely

kut-khyoï:khyoï: 'à l'affût sous une apparence tranquille, indifférente' p. 179

and

kup-khyoï:khyoï: 'avec une reserve feinte, ou apparente, avec une modestie apparente, une bonne tenue apparente' p. 211

are the same word? And likewise for

kat-kat-sat-sat 'de manière contradictoire, provocante, en cherchant la difficulté' p. 173

and

kap-kap-sap 'de façon pointilleuse et avec acharnement, dans les moindres détails' p. 204

3. Alphabetical order. This is an essentially trivial problem, but one that inflicts on the user a disproportionate degree of frustration and irritation. The system currently favoured in Burma is the one that lists all open syllables under one consonant before the closed syllables, and order the latter by final consonant. This system has several disadvantages (see Okell 1968), the worst of them being the undecided status of final -y and -m, and its inability to cope with non-standard finals. The two Burmese-Burmese dictionaries, though compiled by what is essentially the same body of lexicographers, use two different versions of the system.

Given the current predominance of this system in Burma, Bernot no doubt felt obliged to use it herself. She adopts an order close to that of the ear: - dictionary (Wan 1952-) but incorporates a few modifications of her own. Unfortunately these do little to remedy the inherent