THREE BURMESE DIALECTS

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1. FOREWORD

Arakanese, Intha and Tavoyan are three regional dialects of Burmese. Speakers of Standard Burmese find them hard to follow at first, but after living in a dialect region for a week or two they find they are adjusting to the alternative phonology and the regional vocabulary, and after that spoken communication presents few problems.

Although the dialects are so close to the standard language, there are insights to be gained from the study both of their relationship to it, and of the relationship of the dialects and the standard to Written Burmese, the spelling of which (developed in the twelfth century and standardised in the eighteenth) offers clues to the nature of the language in earlier times. These various manifestations, taken together, throw light on problems of phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary in both Written Burmese and Standard Burmese, and all contribute to the reconstruction of Proto Burmish.

Most studies of the dialects (see bibliography) have focussed on differences in phonology, with some observations on vocabulary. The foundation of each of the present papers is a set of recordings of natural unscripted speech, transcribed extracts from which are included in the papers. These recordings not only were the starting point for the further investigation of phonology and vocabulary, but also provided numerous examples of the way syntactic markers in the dialects differ from those of standard Burmese. The transcribed extracts also convey the flavour of each dialect, revealing the frequency of deviations from standard spoken Burmese, in a way which does not emerge from lists of sounds and words.

The three sets of notes which follow, on Arakanese, Intha and Tavoyan, have essentially the same format as my notes on the Yaw dialect (Okell 1989). Each has a section on the dialect region, a section on phonology, grammar and vocabulary, comparing features of the dialect with Written Burmese and Standard (spoken) Burmese, and a section containing the extracts from the recordings. For a description of Spoken Burmese see Okell (1969), and for Written Burmese forms see any standard dictionary, for example Myanma-za əphwé (1978-80), Myanma-za əphwé (1991), Judson (1921 and later editions), and Hoke Sein (1981).

1.1 SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A. Abbreviations for dialects

AR	Arakanese dialect	TV	Tavoyan dialect
IT	Intha dialect	WB	Written Burmese
SB	Standard Burmese (spoken language)	YW	Yaw dialect

B. Abbreviations for references

BSOAS	Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
Census	1911 (see also Webb 1912, Grantham 1923 and Bennison 1933).
Gaz.B	Gazetteer of Burma (see Lowis 1908)
Gaz.LB	Gazetteer of Lower Burma (see Spearman 1879 & 1880)
Gaz.UB	Gazetteer of Upper Burma (see Spearman 1879 & 1880)
JBRS	Journal of the Burma Research Society
LSB	Linguistic Survey of Burma (see Webb 1917)
LSI	Linguistic Survey of India (see Grierson 1903-1928)
MSTK	*Myan-ma sa-lòun-bàun θa'-poun càn* [Burmese spelling book]

All references are collected and listed at the end of the paper.

C. Abbreviations for form classes and syntactic functions

ACC	accusative marker	POL	polite suffix
ADV	adverb formative	PT	past time
CLF	classifier	Q	question marker
EMP	emphatic postposition	QUO	quoted
EUPH	euphonic suffix	REL	relative clause marker
EXCL	exclamatory suffix	SUBJ	subject marker
OB	Old Burmese	VSMK	verb-sentence marker
PL	plural marker		

Entries in the lists of grammatical markers in §2.33, §3.3.3 and §4.3.3 are listed alphabetically, and each entry includes a grammatical classification, one or more SB equivalents, some examples, and occasionally a note on other points of interest. Most examples are taken from the texts in §2.4, §3.4 and §4.4. These examples are given references: for example 2.13 = text 2, sentence 13 of the appropriate language text. Other examples are from transcriptions of recordings not reproduced here, referred to as 'rec'; or from examples offered by informants or encountered in conversation, referred to as 'inf'.

In the transcriptions of texts in §2.4, §3.4 and §4.4, where the speakers correct themselves, false starts are transcribed within [–].

2. ARAKANESE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

'/Pín-yi' mənain, Yəkhain mè/' goes the saying: 'If you don't know whether to spell it with a *y* or an *r*, ask an Arakanese'. The dialect enjoys some renown among speakers of Standard Burmese (SB), if only because it preserves the /r/, which, though still distinguished in Burmese spelling, is merged in speech with /y/.

2.1.1 LOCATION AND NUMBERS

Arakan (AR /Rɔ'-khain/, SB /Yəkhain/; the English romanisation was officially altered to 'Rakhine' in 1989) is a narrow coastal strip on the west of Burma, some 300 miles long and 50 to 20 miles wide. It is much intersected by steep and thickly wooded mountain spurs, and by rivers, which provide the best means of communication; and it is separated from the

central plains by a range of mountains, the Arakan Yò-má, along which the administrative boundary runs today.

It is hardly surprising that in this sort of terrain there should be variations in the dialect. Most informants recognise three main varieties, corresponding to the three administrative Districts of the Arakan Division: 'Arakanese proper' in Sit-twe (Akyab) District in the north; the dialect of Kyauk-hpyu and Yàn-byè (Ramree) in the centre; and the Than-dwè (Sandoway) in the south. The further south one goes, they say, the closer to Standard Burmese the dialect becomes. This observation is in fact borne out by some published notes on the Kyauk-hpyu variety (Ono 1969a): though in other respects the same as the Sit-twe dialect, it has the SB rhymes for Written Burmese (WB) *ak*, *aŋ*, and for *at*, *an* and *ap*, *am*.

There are also said to be three minor varieties: that of Man-aung (Cheduba) Island, opposite the boundary between Kyauk-hpyu and Than-dwè Districts; that of the northern part of Sit-twe District, also spoken beyond the border of Bangladesh; and Marma, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. These varieties are here called 'minor' because the scraps of information I was given indicated that each one differs very little from one or other of the 'main' varieties. Marma, for example, the only one that has been documented (D. Bernot 1957), seems to be phonologically identical with Sit-twe Arakanese except for the use of /gy, ky, khy/ for Sit-twe /j, c, ch/. They are worth mentioning separately, however, as informants recognise them as distinct groups.

One of the Arakanese returns for the *Linguistic survey of Burma* (LSB) went so far as to distinguish different dialects in Sit-twe and nearby Yathéi-daung and Pon-nagyùn (Webb 1917:32). I have no information on these distinctions, which, if they exist at all, are probably very fine.

'Chàung-thà' is a term of various applications. The LSB (Webb 1917:55) lists it as a separate dialect, not a sub-dialect of Arakanese. L. Bernot (1967b:71) inclines to regard it as applying originally to valley dwellers, whether linguistically Arakanese or not, who were some distance from the political and administrative centre; but other authors (quoted by L.Bernot 1967b:73) agree with my informants in treating Chàung-thà as the minor variety of Arakanese spoken north of Sit-twe.

The 'Mugs' have on occasion been listed as a separate race or tribe (Mason, quoted in Forbes 1878:211) but in fact the term is only a name used in former times for the Arakanese by their neighbours to the west and by Europeans (see e.g. Buchanan 1798:223, Leyden 1808:222, Forbes 1878:212, LSI (Grierson 1904:379), L. Bernot 1960b:19).

The available early population figures are as follows:

	LSB (1917:55)	Census 1921 (1933:198)	Census 1931 (1933:198)	L.Bernot (1960:19)
Arakanese	50,163	247,691	221,945	-
Yàn-byè	59,024	250,018	326,642	-
Chàung-thà	64,531	9,052	34,625	-
unspecified	149,547	-	-	-
Kaman [?]	1,211	-	-	-
Marma	-	-	-	c.100,000
total	324,386	506,761	583,212	

The divergences indicate the unreliability of the early figures, but when these are compared with those for other dialects of Burmese, one point that does emerge clearly is that, next to SB, AR has the largest number of speakers in the group. The 1983 Census of Burma enumerated 1,536,725 'Rakhine'; a current estimate would be over two million speakers including the 'Mogh' in India and Bangladesh and the Marma in Bangladesh.

2.1.2 BACKGROUND

The first Arakanese are said to have entered their present area in the mid tenth century (San Shwe Bu 1960:488). In the fifteenth century they let the mountains cut their connections with their Burmese relatives in the central plains, and turned to the west. They used the support of the Sultan of Bengal, accessible up the coast, and of the Portuguese, who came by sea, to establish a great empire. With its capital at Myauk-ù (now Myó-hàung), this flourished for 200 years. After a period of decline in Arakan the Burmese finally conquered it (in 1784) and made it part of their dominion. It was one of the first regions of Burma to be annexed by the British (in 1826), who subsequently administered it as a Division within Burma, a status which it retained in independent Burma until 1974, when it was made a separate state within the Union. For a more detailed survey see Bradley (1985).

In spite of their early ties with central Burma, including the Buddhist religion, and nearly two centuries of administration as part of Burma, the Arakanese, assisted by their geography, have preserved a strong sense of separateness. They point with pride to the differences between the lettering of their early inscriptions and that of the inscriptions of central Burma, to their different way of reciting the alphabet and to their musical instruments, song forms, and separate calendar; and they send a separate cultural mission to perform their own regional songs and dances at the festivities of Union Day.

2.1.3 THE 'PURITY' OF ARAKANESE

Throughout the literature there runs a recurrent theme that Arakanese is a 'more ancient' or 'purer' form of the language than Standard Burmese (e.g. Leyden 1808:233, Forbes 1881:57, Houghton 1897:455, Taylor 1921:91, L. Bernot 1967b:36ff.). This claim generally means that Arakanese pronunciation corresponds more closely to Written Burmese than does that of Standard Burmese.

In fact, both forms of speech have developed since the language achieved its present written form, each one further in some directions than the other. AR certainly maintains its well-known distinction between WB *r* and *y*, and between *aŋ* and *añ*, which SB has merged; it rhymes *at, an* with *wat, wan*, which SB has split; and its use of voicing is less widespread. On the other hand SB distinguishes *ac, añ* from *uik, uiŋ; wa* from *o; e* from *i*; and *i,u* from *in,un* – which are wholly or partly merged in AR; and it uses weakening much less freely. It is not easy to quantify these points (AR has three mergers, one part-merger, and more weakening; SB has two mergers, one split, and more voicing), but it is clear that the AR claim to be 'more ancient' or 'purer' than SB is by no means so obvious as has been assumed.