

NOTES ON THE PRONUNCIATION OF AN EASTERN VARIETY OF BURMESE

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0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

As part of a linguistic research project at the Thailand-Myanmar border I have for some time been looking into the phonetics of Burmese and Shan as spoken in the Shan State of northeastern Myanmar. The remarks below are based on some Burmese data that I collected in 1999.

Burmese is generally assumed to be a remarkably uniform language in spite of the size of the country. There are some dialects which are recognized as differing markedly from standard Burmese, such as Arakanese and Intha, but these are not at issue if we stick to the notion of "Burmese proper" as something which is felt by the Burmese themselves as being one norm used all over the country. In spite of these claims about the uniformity of Burmese in this narrower sense, it is legitimate to ask whether there is perhaps after all significant regional variation. This question is interesting in itself, and it is mandatory to formulate it and to seek an answer if one is interested in the use of Burmese as a second language by other ethnic groups, such as the Shans.

As for the question of how Burmese is spoken in peripheral parts of the country, there seems to be some tendency among scholars to make the following sweeping generalization: if one comes across a variety of the language which deviates significantly from standard usage, that must be a matter of non-Burmese ethnic groups speaking Burmese with an accent (broken Burmese). Minority people, however, typically pick up Burmese as a spoken language used in everyday life, rather than learning the language at school or through the media. Thus the relevant frame of reference is *not* the norm prescribed in textbooks or the language used at school but rather the local, colloquial way of speaking Burmese. The notion of "Burmese spoken with an accent" or (pejoratively) "broken Burmese" presupposes adequate information as to how the language is spoken locally by ethnic Burmese who live there, since they constitute the only group against whose linguistic usage the second-language use of Burmese by ethnic Shans or by other minorities in that part of the country can be adequately calibrated.

The present *Notes* represent a first attempt to provide such a frame of reference for Burmese as spoken in the Shan State.

Being a phonetician and unfortunately not a specialist on the Burmese language, I found it most rewarding to focus on pronunciation. The most tricky issues are tones and vowel qualities, and the interrelationships between these two categories. These are issues which invite instrumental study, although the point of the present paper is not to contribute to the acoustic specification of tones in Burmese. I here outline a language variety which is so different that the acoustical specifications of prosodic phenomena will predictably diverge markedly from those currently discussed with reference to Standard Burmese. I hope to supplement (and in some sense corroborate) my findings later with instrumental data on some of the crucial points. It must be strongly emphasized that my present tone labels are meant to be entirely impressionistic (whether a tone is "high" or "rising" or "falling" is a very different issue depending on whether one is listening or measuring, as anyone who has ever done extensive pitch studies knows). Both levels of specification are important. I wish to add that in my view the challenge we face when working on a deviating system, as in the case of this language variety, is not overcome by rushing to fundamental frequency or vowel formant measurements. The nature of the sound pattern must be cleared up first, and that is very much an auditory issue.

According to my observations, one encounters striking deviations from the standard type of Colloquial Burmese as it is described in textbooks, deviations which are not just a matter of minority groups speaking "with an accent". Though the people I gathered my data from were to some extent of mixed ethnic lineage (as many people there are) they all definitely belonged to the Burmese community, and were in this sense totally distinct from the locally predominant Shan population, as well as from the hilltribe minorities and the local Chinese. In fact they could not speak Shan (or any local minority language) except for some everyday expressions.

Speakers consulted:

The following remarks, which are necessarily very tentative, are based primarily on observations and recordings of the speech of a couple of Burmese teenagers (of both genders), townspeople who had been raised in Taunggyi and later in Tachileik, and who were either still attending school or had just left school. As said already, they were considered - and considered themselves - as ethnic Burmese, and were in fact essentially monolingual speakers of Burmese. In encounters with people speaking Tai languages they could engage only in basic communication, using words picked up from Shan, Northern and

Central Thai (languages which are all widely spoken in the area) and even from English, but with strictly Burmese syntax (verb last; possessor before possessum). I was told that at school they spoke only Burmese, although their Shan friends spoke Shan among themselves.

It is my assumption that the speaking habits as reported here represent the current trend among young literate Burmese of the area. In the generation of their parents one mother was raised speaking the Burmese dialect Danu', but that is not imitated by her children who on the contrary consider her pronunciation to be deviant; on their fathers' side the grandmother is reported to have come from a small and "remote" village, but that village is situated in Central Burma, not in Eastern Burma. Thus I think that if these young speakers of Burmese exhibit features deviating from Central Burmese it makes sense to say that they reflect the local variety of Burmese as spoken in the Shan State. At the same time, there is a significant absence of any trace of Shan ethnicity in the lineages of the persons on whom the present observations are based. This certainly does not exclude the presence of a certain Shan-based stratum, but it is then an adstratum provoked by the regional speaking-habits even of ethnic Burmese who have not mastered the Shan language themselves. As thus it is a phenomenon which is sociolinguistically interesting in itself.

Whenever the speakers exhibit variation, e.g. when reading words aloud, it seems to be a matter of vacillating between local pronunciation and *spelling pronunciation*. Except for expectable differences on this point, I have not so far observed major differences between these youngsters and their elder, literate or (mostly illiterate) relatives or friends. I had occasion later to check several of the recorded Burmese forms with one of their grown-up Burmese neighbours, and that confirmed the validity of my initial observations.

The present study speaks of an "Eastern" pronunciation, but that certainly does not exclude the possibility that characteristics of the spoken usage described here might occur to a greater or lesser extent in colloquial Burmese as spoken elsewhere in the country. It is my auditory impression that this is in fact true of some of the features of pronunciation described below. Such features, then, are perhaps a matter of speaking-style rather than regional variation, although they are not mentioned explicitly in the rather normative presentations of the Burmese language which one would normally consult.

The observations below were first meant to be confined to the most striking discrepancies between the pronunciation which I have observed and the standard pronunciation as prescribed in textbooks on Burmese, the latter being taken for granted as a frame of reference. The main focus was meant to be on differences which have direct implications for the sound system, i.e., which are phonological rather than just phonetic. It turned out, however, that it

was difficult to give an adequate characterization of the local speech without presenting a somewhat broader picture including general statements about Burmese phonetics and phonology which may seem rather redundant to those already familiar with Burmese. Even so, my statements below are selective; an overall presentation of the sound pattern is not attempted.

It will be noted that there are in particular three major points of divergence between Burmese as codified in textbooks, and the language variety under consideration here. The first is the phonology and phonetics of the non-low tones. The second is the phonation type in sequences of **b**, **d**, **g** plus vowel. The third is the merger of dental fricatives with dental stops. Also the vowel pattern presents interesting points of detail. It is very likely that the information presented here must be revised eventually when a more complete picture of the phonology has emerged, on such issues as the influence of sentence intonation on word tones, or the greater or lesser regularity of voicing of "voiceable" consonants.

Notational conventions:

In the comparison of "Eastern" Burmese (henceforth E. Burm.) with Standard Burmese (St. Burm.), my main frame of reference for the latter is John Okell's *A Reference Grammar of Colloquial Burmese* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), see Chapter One, "Sounds", p. 4-22. However, I am forced to deviate from his practice of using **ei** for a higher and **e** for a lower vowel. That convention is extremely awkward especially because the digraph **ei** then becomes ambiguous in E. Burm. Thus, in discussing E. Burm. it is confusing to have the same segmental representation of the rhymes in **pei'** 'close' and **mei** 'forget', as one should according to Okell's transcription conventions, with **ei'** marking the "stopped" tone, and **ei** marking the "creaky" tone. In E. Burm. such words are quite different segmentally: the former has a genuine diphthong and the latter an almost steady vowel (in between Cardinal Vowels 1 and 2); this difference between diphthong and monophthong carries the whole distinctive load since the prosodic contrast between the syllable-types is neutralized in final position (see Section 1 below). To make things even more complicated, there are instances of diphthongal pronunciation of creaky **ei'**, namely in the presence of nasalization, as illustrated by **@meiN** 'order' with a true diphthong (cf. the section on Vowels below). The resulting notational ambiguity would be rather detrimental to a contrastive presentation of E. Burm. in a Standard Burmese framework.

As for the lower set of vowels, Okell's **e**, **o**, some transcription conventions instead use **eh**, **aw**, but I here choose a set of more unambiguous though clumsy symbols: **E**, **O**, e.g. **hyE'-tE** 'shy', **hpÈ** 'cards (for playing)';