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Burmese

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1 Historical Background

Burmese is the national language of Burma or Myanmar. (Since 1989, the official name of the country has been the Union of Myanmar, and that of the language, Myanmar; in English, the language, at least, is still usually called Burmese.) The nation is situated between the Tibetan plateau and the Malay peninsula, sharing borders with Bangladesh and India to the west, with China to the north-east, with Laos to the east and with Thailand to the south-east. Burmese belongs to the Burmish sub-branch of the Lolo-Burmese (or Burmese-Lolo) branch of the Tibeto-Burman family, and is one of the two languages in that family with an extensive written history (the other being Tibetan).

Standard Burmese has evolved from a 'central' dialect spoken by the Burman population of the lower valleys of the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers. Although it is now spoken over a large part of the country, regional variation within the standard remains relatively minor; apart from a few localisms, the speech of Mandalay in Upper Burma, for example, is indistinguishable from that of Rangoon, 400 miles to the south. However, a number of regional dialects, showing profound differences in pronunciation and vocabulary, are found in peripheral regions. The best known of these are Arakanese in the south-west, Tavoyan in the south-east and Intha in the east. Despite being heavily influenced in formal registers by the national language, the dialects preserve many features attested in the modern orthography but lost in standard speech.

Burma is a multi-national state. About two-thirds of its population are Burmans. The other third is made up of a variety of ethnic groups, including other Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples such as the Chin, Naga and Karen, Mon–Khmer peoples such as the Mon and Padaung, the Shan, whose language is closely related to Thai, and Chinese and Indians, who live mostly in the towns. Most of the population of the country, provisionally put at about 47 million (CIA, 2006), speaks Burmese as either a first or second language.

Linguistic evidence suggests that the ancestor of the Burmese language spread south and southwestwards, diverging from the closely related Loloish group of languages whose

heartland is now in southwest China. In doing so, it passed from the margins of the Chinese cultural sphere to a region profoundly influenced by Indian tradition, and by the time the Burmese emerge on the historical scene, they have already begun to take on the religious and political features of the Indianised kingdoms that flourished in what is now the heart of Burma.

In the dry zone of central Burma, Burmese speaking people would have encountered the literate, urbanised culture of the Pyu, whose language is known only from a few inscriptions, but is thought to be Tibeto-Burman, if not Lolo-Burmese. These linguistic cousins of the Burmese, once dominant in the Irrawaddy basin, gradually lost political power, possibly as a consequence of wars with Nan Chao, a kingdom that flourished in southwest China at that time. By the middle of the ninth century, the Burmese had founded a kingdom at Pagan that eventually absorbed the remnants of the Pyu and came to dominate most of what is now modern Burma. The Burmese were also in close contact with another literate, urbanised culture, the Mon, who spoke a Mon-Khmer language of the same name. The Mon retained considerable political power in Lower Burma, at least, until the middle of the eighteenth century, when the last Mon kingdom was defeated by the Burmese. (To commemorate the end of that war, the town of Dagon in Lower Burma was renamed Yangon – Rangoon in English, meaning 'fighting is over'.) Mon continues to be spoken, mostly as a second language, in parts of Lower Burma and Thailand.

Until recently, the earliest reliable written specimen of Burmese was generally considered to be the Rajakumar (or Myazedi) inscription, dated to 1111 or 1112 AD, which records the offering of a gold Buddha image in four languages, Pyu, Pali, Burmese and Mon. The Pali, Burmese and Mon faces are all written in the same script – the Burmese-Mon script – based ultimately on a south Indian model; the script of the Pyu face, however, is slightly different from the other three in both its form and its features. Because of the near identity of the Mon and Burmese scripts, because Mon inscriptions in central Burma were thought to antedate Burmese, and because the Mon were associated, historically, with earlier coastal cultures known to have been disseminators of Indian tradition, the Mon have usually been regarded as the source of Burmese writing, as well as the inspiration for features of their early art, architecture, religion and government. However, Aung-Thwin (2005: 183 and passim) reveals specimens of Burmese writing from the eleventh century that may significantly pre-date the earliest Mon inscriptions; he also undermines the case for contemporary Mon hegemony in Lower Burma. Instead, he argues for the Pyu as the main substrate (or amalgam) in early Burmese culture, and Pyu writing as the model for Burmese writing, with the latter ultimately being adapted to write Mon rather than the other way round.

While there are probably enough Pyu inscriptions to make a case for or against its script being the progenitor of the Burmese writing system, there is unlikely to be sufficient linguistic evidence for an early nexus between Pyu and Burmese over and beyond the putative common origin in Tibeto-Burman. Mon, however, being much better attested and having a distinctive lexical stock, has left traces on Burmese in the form of loanwords having to do with the natural and man-made environment as well as some Indic loanwords showing the effects of transmission by way of Mon. In addition, it has been suggested that the iambic word structure of minor syllable followed by major, found in Burmese, but otherwise associated with Mon-Khmer languages rather than Tibeto-Burman, may have developed by way of contact with Mon.

Beginning in the thirteenth century, Tai migrations down the major river valleys of the Southeast Asian mainland also brought Tai speaking peoples, particularly the Shan

(close kin of the Thai), into contact, and occasionally, friction, with Burmese. Still later, the Burmese incursions to the east brought them into Thai territory. Twice they conquered the Thai capital of Ayuttaya (once in the mid-sixteenth century, then again in the mid-eighteenth), and Burmese secular drama owes its beginnings to Thai influence following the last of these invasions. But Thai and Shan influence on the Burmese language seems to be limited to a few loanwords for cultural objects (including *hkauʔhswè*, the name of a popular Burmese noodle dish that is borrowed from Shan).

The first notable European presence in Burma was that of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, followed in the next by small numbers of British, Dutch and French. The nineteenth century brought Burma into conflict with the British in India, who eventually annexed the country in three stages between 1826 and 1886; from 1886 until 1937, it was administered as a province of British India. Independence was restored in 1948.

British rule introduced a large number of words of English origin into Burmese. Many of these were later replaced by Burmese or Indic forms, but large numbers remain and new ones continue to appear, particularly in the fields of science, technology, business and politics. Loanwords tend to be fully adapted to Burmese segmental phonology, but in many cases they remain identifiable by their polysyllabic morphemes and their resistance to internal sandhi processes.

Rather than adapting English or other foreign phonetic material, the Burmese often form neologisms from their own lexical stock or from the highly esteemed classical languages of India, which are to Burmese (and many South-East Asian languages) what Latin and Greek are to European languages. Thus the word for 'spaceship', *ʔa+ka+θáyin* (plusses represent phonological boundaries: see pages 729–730) is composed of *ʔa+ka+θá,* a learned term meaning 'space, expanse', originally from Pali ĀKĀSA (transliterations are capitalised) and *yin,* spelled YĀÑ, derived from Pali YĀNA 'vehicle'. *Yin* also appears with *yəhaʔ* 'a reel', originally from Hindi, in the word for 'helicopter', *yəhaʔyin,* a compound coexisting with the English loan, *hɛli+kɔ́+pəta*. Similar competition between a native formation and a loanword is seen in the two words for 'television', the transparent *yoʔmyin+θancà,* 'image-see sound-hear', and the opaque *tɛlibìhyìn*.

Pali has been one of the main sources of new lexical material throughout the attested history of Burmese, with the result that the Burmese lexicon has come to have a two-tiered structure not unlike that of English, with its learned Romance and classical elements side by side with older and more colloquial Germanic forms. In Burmese the most common locutions, including grammatical words and formatives, nouns referring to basic cultural material and almost all verbs, tend to be composed of monosyllabic morphemes of Tibeto-Burman stock. Learned or specialised words (many of which must have entered the spoken language by way of the 'literary' language) often contain Pali material, frequently compounded with native stock. Pali is phonotactically quite compatible with Burmese, having neither initial clusters nor (word-)final consonants. Its morphemes are generally not monosyllabic, however. Disyllabic Pali words ending in a short A are usually rendered as a single syllable in Burmese, e.g.: *kan*, spelled KAM, 'fortune, deeds', from Pali KAMMA; *yoʔ*, spelled RUP, 'image', from Pali RŪPA. But otherwise, Pali loans (like those from English) are set off by the length of their morphemes: cf. *taya* 'constellation (of stars)', from Pali TĀRĀ, versus *cɛ* 'star', a Tibeto-Burman root; *htaná*, spelled ṬHĀNA 'place, department (in a university, etc.)', from Pali ṬHĀNA, versus *neya* 'place', a compound of the native morphemes *ne* 'to live, be at' and *(ʔə)ya* 'place, thing'.

It is not uncommon to find two versions of a Pali word in Burmese, one closer to the Pali prototype than the other, e.g.: *man* and *maná*, both 'pride, arrogance' and both from Pali MĀNA, which occur together in the pleonastic expression *man maná hyí-* 'to be haughty, arrogant'.

Often a Pali prototype will be represented in a number of South-East Asian languages, providing a pan-South-East Asian technical lexicon comparable to the 'international' scientific vocabulary based on Latin and Greek: cf. Burmese *seʔ*, Mon *cɒt*, Khmer *cʏt*, Thai *cìt*, all from Pali CITTA 'mind'.

Despite inconsistent spelling and a restricted subject matter, the early inscriptional records probably render the spoken language of the time – Old Burmese – fairly directly. The inscriptional orthography, which can be interpreted in terms of Indic sound values, reveals a language phonetically very different from the modern spoken standard. It also shows major differences in lexical content, particularly among grammatical words and suffixes. But the grammatical categories and the order of words have remained relatively stable over the intervening 900 years.

The orthography underwent a number of changes after the inscriptional period, apparently reflecting a redistribution of certain vowels and a reduction in the number of medial consonants (see pages 732–733). By the end of the sixteenth century the orthography had assumed more or less its modern form, though there have been modifications in the spelling of individual words since. Pronunciation continued to change, though, so there is now a wide gap between the spoken and literal values of the script, e.g.: *cɛʔ* 'chicken' is spelled KRAK; *-θɛ*, an agentive suffix, is spelled -SAÑ.

The modern orthography (sometimes called 'Written Burmese') is often taken as the reflection of an intermediate stage in the history of the language, i.e. Middle Burmese. The construct is a useful one, though the precise nature of the relationship still needs to be worked out.

Along with the orthography, some grammatical and lexical forms from earlier stages of Burmese live on in the language used for literature and most written communication, Literary Burmese. Particularly in this century, differences between literary and spoken styles have tended to diminish, so that nowadays, although other 'classical' elements may still appear in Literary Burmese, the only feature consistently distinguishing the two is the choice of the textually frequent post-nominal and post-verbal particles and other grammatical words. Literary Burmese retains a set of archaic grammatical morphemes, some reflecting earlier versions of their spoken equivalents, others reflecting forms that have been replaced in the spoken language. For example, instead of the locative postposition *-hma* 'in, at', Literary Burmese uses -NHUIK (read *-hnaiʔ*) or -TWAṄ (read *-twin*); instead of the interrogative particles *-là* and *-lɛ̀*, it has -LO (read *-lɔ́*) and -NAÑ (read *-ní*), respectively; instead of the possessive marker *-yɛ́* (-RAIʔ), it has -ʔI (read *-ʔí*).

Not all the literary particles are functionally homologous with spoken forms. Whereas the spoken language makes use of a single postposition, *-ko* (-KUI), to mark both objects and goals of motion, the literary language makes use of three: -KUI 'object', -ʔĀ: (read *-ʔà*) '(usually) second or indirect object', and -SUIʔ (read *-θó*) 'goal of motion'.

It is possible to write Burmese as it is spoken, i.e. using the standard orthography with the syntax and lexicon of the spoken language. Indeed, in the 1960s an association of writers based in Mandalay advocated the development of such a 'colloquially based' literary style. Despite the appearance of a number of works in the new style, it was not

generally adopted. This was partly because it lacked official sanction, but also because no style evolved which could convey the seriousness of purpose connoted by formal Literary Burmese.

Particularly in the older and more classical styles of Literary Burmese, the influence of Pali grammatical structures can also be seen; for until the nineteenth century, prose writing was mostly translations, adaptations and studies of Pali texts. The extreme case is that of the 'nissaya' texts, which have a history dating from the inscriptional period to the present day (cf. Okell 1965). In these, Burmese forms are inserted after each word or phrase of a Pali text; in many cases the Pali is omitted, resulting in a Burmese 'calque' on the original – Burmese words with Pali grammar. The interesting point is that in addition to mirroring Pali syntax, the nissaya authors developed conventions for representing Pali inflectional categories in Burmese, an uninflected language. For example, the Pali past participle, a category quite alien to Burmese, was represented periphrastically by placing the 'auxiliary' ʔAP 'be right, proper' after the verb: KHYAK ʔAP SO CHWAM: 'the food that was cooked, the cooked food'. In the spoken Burmese equivalent no auxiliary is required.

Not surprisingly, given the exalted position of Pali studies in Burmese culture, nissaya forms spread to other kinds of prose, so that Pali can be considered a significant substratum in many styles of Literary Burmese.

2 Phonology

In presenting the inventory of phonological oppositions in Burmese, it is necessary to distinguish between full, or 'major', syllables and reduced, or 'minor', ones. In reduced syllables the functional load is borne by the initial; no medial or final consonants are possible, and there are no tonal contrasts; the vowel is mid central and lax. Minor syllables occur singly or, occasionally, in pairs, always bound to a following major syllable. They can often be related to full syllables, if not synchronically, then historically: the first syllable of *səpwè* 'table' is shown from the spelling to derive from *sà* 'to eat'; the word arose as a compound of 'eat' and 'communal event'.

In major syllables, phonological oppositions are concentrated at two points, the initial and the vowel. There are two possible medial consonants, only one final consonant and four tonal contrasts, one of which is partially realised as final consonantism. The inventory of phonological oppositions can be discussed in terms of five syntagmatic positions: initial (C_i), medial (C_m), vowel (V), final (C_f) and tone (T). Of these, C_i, V and T are always present (though the glottal initial is represented by 'zero' in some transcriptions).

Table 43.1 lists 34 possible C_i, of which three are marginal: *r-* is found mostly in loanwords from Pali or other languages; *hw-* or ð are very rare. In the table, C_i are arranged in three series, labelled 'aspirate', 'plain' and 'voiced'. The aspirates consist of aspirated stops and fricatives and voiceless nasals and resonants; the plain, of voiceless unaspirated stops and fricatives and voiced nasals and resonants; the voiced of voiced stops and fricatives only. The basis of this classification is morphological. First of all, while the plain and aspirate series may appear in absolute initial position (i.e. after pause) in both major word classes, the voiced series is restricted in that position mainly to nouns. The fact that such nouns can often be matched to verbs with plain or aspirate initials (e.g. *bí* 'a comb', *hpí* 'to comb') suggests that deverbative prefixes or other syllables are responsible for the voiced initials; assimilatory processes such as

voicing are characteristic of word-internal positions in Burmese (see page 730). The incidence of nouns with C_i in the voiced series has been enlarged by loanwords, but the functional yield of the voiced series remains relatively low.

The aspirate series of C_i is not restricted to a particular class of words like the voiced, but it is associated with one member of derivationally related pairs of verbs such as the following: *pyɛʔ* 'be ruined', *hpyɛʔ* 'destroy'; *myín* 'be high', *hmyín* 'raise, make higher'. In these, the stative or intransitive member has a plain C_i, the causative or transitive, an aspirate. The alternation is represented by over 100 pairs of verbs, but it is not productive. The aspirates in these verbs record the effects of a sibilant causativising prefix, reconstructed at the Proto-Tibeto-Burman level as **s-* (see page 701). The original value of this prefix is reflected in 'irregular' pairs such as *ʔeʔ* 'sleep', *θeʔ* 'put to sleep' (the latter spelled SIP). The process has contributed to the incidence of the typologically rare voiceless nasals (*hm-*, *hn-*, *hɲ*, *hŋ-*). As in many of the modern transcriptions of Burmese, the members of the aspirate series are consistently transcribed with a prescript 'h'; *hl-* and *hw-*, the latter found mostly in onomatopoeic words, are voiceless; *hy-* is actually a sibilant, [ʃ] or [ɕ], in pairs such as *yɔ́* as 'be reduced, be slack', *hyɔ́* [ʃɔ́] 'reduce, slacken'.

The medials are *-y-* and *-w-*. The second co-occurs with most C_i, but the first is only found with labials and the lateral.

In terms of our transcription there are two C_fs, *-n* and *-ʔ*, but in phonological terms *-ʔ* can be regarded as a fourth tone; it precludes the possibility of any of the other tones and, though it almost always has some segmental realisation, it is also associated with a very short, high and even pitch contour. The reasons for transcribing it as though it were a C_f are partly historical: *-ʔ* derives from an earlier set of final oral stops and is symbolised in the writing system as such.

To discuss the realisation of *-n* and *-ʔ,* it is necessary to begin with the topic of sandhi. The shape of a syllable in Burmese varies according to the degree of syllable juncture. At least two degrees of juncture need to be recognised: open, representing

Table 43.1 Burmese Phonological Oppositions

		Stops and affricates					*Fricatives*		*Nasals*				*Resonant*				
C_i	Aspirate	hp	ht	hc	hk		hs		hm	hn	hɲ	hŋ	hl	hy	hw		h
	Plain	p	t	c	k		s	θ	m	n	ɲ	ŋ	l	y	w	r	ʔ
	Voiced	b	d	j	g		z	ð									
V	Syllable type																
	Open	(-∅)	i	e	ɛ	a	ɔ			o	u						
		(-n)	ɪ	eɪ		a		aɪ	aʊ	oʊ	ʊ						
	Closed																
		(-ʔ)	ɪ	eɪ	ɛ	a		aɪ	aʊ	oʊ	ʊ						
Transcribed as:			i	e	ɛ	a	ɔ	ai	au	o	u						

C_m -y-, -w- C_f -n, (-ʔ)

T ´ (creaky), ∅ (low), ` (high), -ʔ (checked)

minimal assimilation between syllables, and close, representing maximal. The distinction is realised mainly in terms of the duration, tonal contour and C_f-articulation of the first syllable and the manner of the C_i of the second. Phonetic values vary with tempo but can be generalised as follows: successive major syllables linked in *open* juncture preserve citation values of all variables; for the C_fs *-n* and *-ʔ,* these are nasalisation of the preceding vowel (*θòn,* [θɔ̃ũ]) and (along with pitch and other features) final glottal stop (*hyiʔ*), [ɕɪʔ] respectively. In successive major syllables in *close* juncture, the first is shortened and has a truncated pitch contour, while the C_f of the first and the C_i of the second undergo varying degrees of mutual assimilation, the final tending to adopt the *position* of articulation of the following initial, the initial tending to adopt the *manner* of articulation of the preceding final, e.g.: *lè-hkàn* 'four rooms' is realised [lègə̃], with perseverative voicing on the internal velar stop; *θòn-hkàn* 'three rooms' is realised [θɔ̃ũŋgə̃] with the same voicing but, additionally, anticipation of the velar stop by the nasal final; while *hyiʔ-hkàn* 'eight rooms' is realised [ʃɪkkʰə̃], the aspirate remaining after the checked final, the final taking on the position of the following stop. In this last case, the phonetic final segment associated with *-ʔ* may disappear, leaving only pitch, duration and, in some cases, allophonic vowel quality, to signal the checked tone ([ʃɪkʰə̆]). In the first two cases – those involving smooth (*-∅*, *-n*) syllables – these phonological processes result in the neutralisation of manner distinctions for some C_i in favour of the voiced, e.g.: *hk-*, *k-* and *g-* are all realised [g-].

Sandhi affects combinations of minor and major syllables slightly differently, with interesting results. When the first syllable of two is a minor one, the voicing process does not extend to the aspirates: in *səpwè* 'table', internal *-p-* is voiced, but in *təhkàn* 'one room', the internal *-hk-* remains aspirated. In addition, the initial of a minor syllable often harmonises with the voicing of the following consonant: *səpwè* is most often pronounced [zəbwɛ̀] with voicing throughout; but təhkàn is realised [təkʰə̃] with both stops voiceless. This sporadic process of consonant harmony reduces even further the number of initial oppositions available for minor syllables.

Close juncture is characteristic of certain grammatical environments, e.g.: noun – classifier, illustrated above, and noun – adjectival verb: (*ʔen-θiʔ* 'new-house', is pronounced [ʔɛ̃ĩnðɪʔ]). Most particles are also attached to preceding syllables in close juncture: *θwà–hpó* 'in order to go', is pronounced [θwàbó]. But within compounds the degree of juncture between syllables is unpredictable; the constituents of disyllabic compound nouns (other than recent loanwords) tend to be closely linked, but compound verbs vary, some with open, some with close juncture.

In our transcription, syllabic boundaries are shown as follows: open juncture is represented by a space between syllables and open juncture within a compound by a plus. *hkwè+hkwa* 'to separate, leave' is pronounced [kʰwɛ̀kʰwa]. Close juncture within a compound is indicated by lack of a space between the syllables (*hkúhkan* 'to resist' is pronounced [kʰúgə̃]), while close juncture between phrasal constituents is marked with a hyphen (as in the examples of the previous paragraph).

Moving on to the vowels, we find that the number of vocalic contrasts varies according to the type of syllable (see Table 43.1): in smooth syllables (*-∅*, *-n*), there are seven contrasts, in checked (*-ʔ*), eight. In phonetic terms, however, the line of cleavage is not between smooth and checked but between open and closed: vowels in closed syllables (*-n*, *-ʔ*) tend to be noticeably centralised or diphthongised compared to those in open syllables. For purposes of transcription it is of course possible to identify certain elements of the different systems, as in the chart. And it would be possible to reduce the number

of symbols even further by identifying the *ɔ* of open syllables with either the *ai* or *au* of closed. Historically (and in the writing system) *ɔ* is connected with *au* (and *o* with *ai*). Such an analysis is not motivated synchronically, nor does it have much practical value, so, like most of the transcriptions in use, we indicate nine vowels (plus the *ə* of reduced syllables).

Four tonal distinctions can be recognised, the 'creaky', the 'low' (or 'level'), the 'high' (or 'heavy') and the 'checked', the last symbolised by *-ʔ*. Tone in Burmese has a complex realisation of which pitch is only one feature. In the case of the checked tone, segmental features of vowel quality and final consonantism as well as suprasegmental features of pitch and duration are involved. The relative presence of these features varies with context. It has been observed, for example, that in disyllabic words such as *zaʔpwè* '(a) play', the pitch of the checked tone (high, in citation) may range from high to low. The same kind of variation is characteristic of creaky tone as well.

In citation form, the three tones that appear in smooth syllables have the following features: the 'creaky', (transcribed ˊ): tense or creaky phonation (sometimes with final lax glottal stop), medium duration, high intensity and high, often slightly falling pitch; the 'low' (unmarked): normal phonation, medium duration, low intensity and low, often slightly rising pitch; the 'high' (transcribed ˋ): sometimes slightly breathy, relatively long, high intensity and high pitch, often with a fall before a pause.

In citation form, the creaky tone is much less common than the others, a fact accounted for by its relatively late development from affixal elements. The balance is partially restored, however, by the incidence of morphologically conditioned creaky tone (see pages 735–736).

3 The Writing System

The Burmese–Mon script is derived ultimately from a south Indian antecedent, but shaped by a number of intermediaries. With some adjustments, the same script was later adapted to the writing of Shan and, in colonial times, also to some Karen dialects. The script preserves the main features of its Indian prototype, and retains signs for non-Burmese sounds, such as the Indic retroflex and voiced aspirated series, so that Indic loanwords can be reproduced in Burmese with their original spelling.

The script is alphabetic in principle, with letters representing phonemes, though the sound values of many of these letters have changed considerably since it was first introduced. A few very common literary Burmese grammatical morphemes are represented by logograms – word signs – but these originated as abbreviations of phonographic combinations. Like all Indic scripts, the Burmese differs from European alphabetic scripts in two important respects. First, neither the sequence in which the letters appear nor the order in which they are written reflects the temporal order of phonemes. Vowel signs appear before, after, above or below C_I signs. (Abbreviations such as C_I with capitalised subscripts refer to positions in the written syllable.) Second, a plain consonant sign without any explicit vowel sign represents the vowel A.

Table 43.2 shows the consonant signs together with a Romanised transliteration based on original Indic values and a transcription of their regular modern pronunciation. The transliteration is a capitalised and otherwise slightly modified version of the widely used Duroiselle system (see Okell 1971). Many of the differences between the transliteration and the transcription reflect changes in the spoken language since the writing system was introduced. Some of these are discussed below.

Table 43.2 The Burmese Writing System: Consonants

							Transliteration					*Transcription*				
		i	ii	iii	iv	v	i	ii	iii	iv	v	i	ii	iii	iv	v
C_I	I	က	ခ	ဂ	ဃ	င	K	KH	G	GH	Ṅ	k	hk	g	g	ŋ
	II	စ	ဆ	ဧ	ဈ	ည/ဥ	C	CH	J	JH	Ñ	s	hs	z	z	ɲ
	III	ဋ	ဌ	ဍ	ဎ	ဏ	Ṭ	ṬH	Ḍ	ḌH	Ṇ	t	ht	d	d	n
	IV	တ	ထ	ဒ	ဓ	န	T	TH	D	DH	N	t	ht	d	d	n
	V	ပ	ဖ	ဗ	ဘ	မ	P	PH	B	BH	M	p	hp	b	b	m
	VI	ယ	ရ	လ	ဝ	သ	Y	R	L	W	S	y	y	l	w	θ
	VII		ဟ	ဠ	အ			H	Ḷ	ʔ			h	l	ʔ	
C_M		ျ	ြ	ွ	ှ											
		-Y-	-R-	-W-	-H-											
		-y-	-y-	-w-	h-											

The 33 consonant signs are given in the traditional Burmese (and Indian) order. Almost all the consonant signs can appear initially, but only the plain series (K, C, T, P), their nasal counterparts (Ṅ, Ñ, N, M) and Y occur finally in native words. The boxed row (III) representing the Indian retroflex series, is pronounced like the dental series shown below it. The boxed columns (iii, iv), representing the Indian voiced and voiced aspirated series, are usually pronounced alike. Note that the *spoken* voiced series, discussed earlier, is often written with the plain or aspirate voiceless consonant signs.

There are four medial consonant signs: Y, R, W, H. The last is subscribed to nasal and resonant C_Is to indicate the aspirates of those series, e.g.: LHA, *hlá* 'beautiful'. In Old Burmese writing, a medial -L- was also found (see below).

The writing system reflects a number of consonantal changes. The development of C_Fs will be discussed separately below. As initials, some consonants have undergone phonetic changes, but distinctions have generally been preserved. Row II in Table 43.2 shows a shift from palatal affricate to dental sibilant. From the representation of Burmese words in certain Portuguese and English records of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Burmese scholar Pe Maung Tin ('Phonetics in a Passport', *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, vol. 12 (1922), pp. 129–31) concluded that this change and the shift from *s* > *θ* (VI, v) began in the late eighteenth century and were followed by the palatalisation of velar stops before medial *-y-* (written -Y- and -R-). The three shifts form a 'drag chain', the first clearing the way for the second, the second for the third (*s* > *θ*, *c* > *s*, *ky* > *c*, etc.). Two typologically rare consonants arose as a result of these developments: *θ,* pronounced [t^{θ}] and *hs-*, an aspirated sibilant (< c^{h}). The functional yield of the latter is very low.

Contrasts among medial consonants have been reduced from four in Old Burmese to three in Middle Burmese (reflected in the standard orthography), to two in the modern spoken language. The medial *-l-* attested by the inscriptions merged with either *-y-* or *-r-*, according to whether the initial consonant was velar or labial, respectively, i.e.: OBs. *kl-* > MBs. *ky-*, OBs. *pl-* > MBs. *pr-*. MBs. *r* then merged with y in all positions, initial as well as medial (so that 'Rangoon', for example, is now transcribed as *Yankon*). Some of the dialects attest to the earlier stages. In Tavoyan, the medial *-l-* of Old Burmese usually survives as such, while earlier *-r-* and *-y-* merge as *-y-*: cf. standard *cá* 'to fall', spelled KYA in the orthography and KLA in the inscriptions, pronounced *klá*

in Tavoyan. In Arakanese, on the other hand, earlier *-l-* is distributed between *-r-* and *-y-* with the latter two remaining distinct, e.g. standard *cɛʔ* 'chicken', spelled KRAK, is *kraʔ* in Arakanese, the *-r-* realised as a retroflex continuant.

Whether we are dealing with the script or the spoken language, vowel, final consonant and tone are conveniently treated as a unit, the 'rhyme'. Table 43.3 shows the main (or 'regular') rhymes of Burmese, arranged according to written vowels. (To save space, tonal markings are only indicated where they are incorporated in a vowel sign.) Comparing the transliteration with the transcription reveals both a large reduction in the number of C_Fs and a major restructuring of the vowel system.

Consonant signs are marked as final by the superscript hook, or 'killer' stroke. The orthography shows four positions of final oral and nasal stops, and -Y, which – in native words – represents only the rhyme *-ɛ*. ('Little Ñ', the second of the two signs for Ñ, is a modern variant of the first, used to signal the pronunciation *-in* over the otherwise unpredictable alternatives, *-i*, *e* and *ɛ*.) From the table, it can be seen that many combinations of written final and vowel do not occur. Finals -C and -Ñ, for instance, occur only with the 'intrinsic' vowel A. Comparative evidence shows that the 'extra' A-rhymes derive from earlier **-ik* and **-iŋ*, respectively, the 'missing' velar rhymes of the high front series (row II). Palatal finals are rare in Tibeto-Burman languages, but common in Mon–Khmer; it is likely that the appearance of these finals in Burmese is another result of Mon influence.

Neither the distributional evidence nor the comparative evidence is clear enough to explain the other gaps in the system of orthographic rhymes.

All positions of final stops have been reduced to just one in the modern language, represented by *-ʔ* for oral stops, *-n* for nasal. The association of high pitch with the former can probably be attributed to the well-documented pitch-raising effects of final tense glottal stop. This glottal stop is quite different from the lax glottal stop that sometimes appears in creaky-toned syllables, which would be expected to depress pitch.

From Table 43.3, vowels can be seen to have split according to the type of syllable they were in, open or closed; thus written I is read *i* or *e,* written U, *u* or *o,* written UI, *o* or *ai*, written *O*, *ɔ* or *au*, with the first, higher vowel quality found in reflexes of open syllables. (Written UI and O are both digraphs in the script, but only the first is transliterated according to its parts, U + I; the symbol appears in Mon as well, where it represents a mid front rounded vowel.) Written A attests to a three-way split of *a* into *a*, *i* and *ɛ*, conditioned by the final. To an extent, these developments, coupled with the reduction in the number of final consonants, filled the gaps in the pattern of (written) rhymes, so that the only asymmetries in the modern system are the missing nasal rhyme, *-ɛn*, and the uncertain relationship between open *ɔ* and closed *ai* and *au*, discussed above (see Table 43.1).

Table 43.3 also shows the relationship between V- and C_F-signs and the representation of tones in Burmese. Since Indian languages lacked tone, there were no ready made symbols for representing the Burmese tones. However, the Indic script did have distinct graphs to represent long and short versions of the corner vowels, *a*, *i* and *u*. In the new script, these were apparently matched to phonetic differences in vowel length associated with syllable type and tone. The Indic short vowel symbols were assigned to Burmese creaky toned and closed syllables, while the long vowel symbols were used for (non-creaky) open syllables. So in Table 43.3, the three 'corner' vowels (II, V) have two written forms; in Indian terms – also the basis of our transliteration – the first is short, the second (with the additional stroke) long ($\bar{V}$). The first indicates a creaky-toned

Table 43.3 The Burmese Writing System: Regular Rhymes

	Open		*Closed*							*Open*		*Closed*					
												◌ွင်	◌ွန်	◌ွမ်	◌ွက်	◌ွတ်	◌ွပ်
I												WAṄ (win)	WAN un	WAM un	WAK (weʔ)	WAT uʔ	WAP uʔ
	◌ု	◌ူ	X	◌ုန်	◌ုမ်	X	◌ုတ်	◌ုပ်		◌ိ	◌ီ	X	◌ိန်	◌ိမ်	X	◌ိတ်	◌ိပ်
II	I í	Ī i		IN en	IM en		IT eʔ	IP eʔ		U ú	Ū u		UN on	UM on		UT oʔ	UP oʔ
	◌ေ-									◌ိုံ		◌ိုင်	X	X	◌ိုက်	X	X
III	E e									UI o		UIṄ ain			UIK aiʔ		
	◌ဲ	-ယ်								◌ော	◌ော်	◌ောင်	X	X	◌ောက်	X	X
IV	AI è	AY ɛ								O ɔ̀	OW ɔ	OṄ aun			OK auʔ		
			-	-ာ/ါ			-င်		-ည်/ဉ်	-န်	-မ်	-က်	-စ်	-တ်	-ပ်		
V			A á	Ā a			AṄ in		AÑ i, (e, ɛ)/in	AN an	AM an	AK ɛʔ	AC iʔ	AT aʔ	AP aʔ		

Note: Tones not incorporated in a vowel sign are written as follows: -. (originally -ဘ) for creaky; -: (‘visarga’) for *high*; unmarked for *low*.

syllable, the second a low-toned syllable. With all other finals, creaky tone was indicated by the sign for glottal onset, reduced to just a dot in the modern orthography (but, for clarity, still transcribed as ʔ herein: UIʔ = *ó*).

There was, apparently, no clear analogue in the Indian prototype to the opposition between high and low tones and for some six centuries the two were not consistently distinguished in the orthography. In the modern script, the lower-mid vowel signs (IV) are intrinsically high-toned, with additional strokes ('killed-Y' in one case, the killer alone – originally a superscript killed-W – in the other) changing them to low. Elsewhere, high tone is indicated by two post-scriptal dots ('visarga'): UI: = *ò*. The modern use of visarga (which represents final *-h* in Old Mon) to signal the high tone was occasionally anticipated in the earliest inscriptions, which suggests that breathiness has long been a feature of that tone.

Except in those cases in which the vowel sign is intrinsically creaky or high, the low tone is unmarked: UI = *o*. The checked tone is symbolised by the presence of a final oral stop.

One of the characteristics of Indic alphabets is that vowels are written with special signs when they are in syllable-initial position. Such 'initial-vowel symbols' exist for all but three of the Burmese vowels (Table 43.4). Nowadays, they are found only in a small number of words – most of them loanwords. In the modern orthography, 'initial' vowels – actually vowels with glottal onset – are generally written with a combination of the vowel support sign (which represents *ʔ-*) and ordinary vowel signs.

A few other signs also appear in the script; for these and other irregularities, the reader is referred to Roop (1972) and Wheatley (1996).

4 Morphology

Morphology in Burmese is primarily derivational morphology and compounding; there is little to discuss under the heading of 'inflection'. Grammatical functions that might be realised as inflections in other languages are mostly carried out by word order or by grammatical particles. There is, however, one phenomenon that can be considered inflectional, and that is the 'induced creaky tone' (Okell's term). Under certain conditions,

Table 43.4 The Burmanese Writing System: Additional Symbols

Initial vowel signs									
	ဢ	ဤ				ʔí	ʔi		
	ဥ	ဦ	ဦး			ʔú	ʔu	ʔù	
		ဧ	(ဧ)				ʔe	ʔè	
		ဩော်	ဪ				ʔɔ	ʔɔ̀	

Numerals									
၁	၂	၃	၄	၅	၆	၇	၈	၉	၀
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0

words with otherwise low tones and sometimes those with high shift to the creaky tone. This shift has a number of apparently disparate functions (cf. Allott 1967). Some of them seem to exploit the sound symbolism of the features of creaky phonation and high intensity: with sentence-final 'appellatives' (kin terms, titles, etc., that pick out the audience and convey information about social distance) the induced creaky tone suggests abruptness and urgency. It also appears with the first occurrence of certain repeated words, e.g. *ʔinmətan* 'very', but *ʔinmətán ʔinmətan* 'very, very'.

At other times, the induced creaky tone has a specific grammatical function. Usually only with pronouns and nouns of personal reference, it may signal 'possession' or 'attribution': *θu* 'he, she', *θú ʔəmyò+θəmì* 'his wife'. In such cases, the creaky tone looks like an allomorph of the creaky-toned possessive particle, *-yé́* (*-ké́* after checked syllables); but although the two often alternate, they may also co-occur, so their relationship is now only historical.

The induced creaky tone also tends to appear – again, mainly with personal referents – before the locative postposition, *-hma* 'in, at', and the 'accusative' postposition, *-ko* 'object, goal, extent'. With objects in particular, *-ko* is often omitted, leaving the creaky tone to mark the grammatical role: *θú(-ko) mè-laiʔ-pa* 'ask him!'.

Apart from the regular but non-productive patterns involving aspiration and voicing illustrated earlier, almost all derivational morphology in Burmese involves prefixation of a minor syllable, partial or complete reduplication or a combination of the two. Derivational processes generally act on verbs, turning them into nouns or noun-like expressions that can often function as either nominals or adverbials. Verbs themselves are very rarely derived (just as they are very rarely borrowed). The verbal inventory is expanded through compounding or through the lexicalisation of verb + complement constructions, e.g. *ʔəyè cì-* 'affair-be big = be important'; the latter retain most of the syntactic properties of phrases. In contrast to verbs, adverbials are almost always derived.

The general function of the productive derivational processes in Burmese is to subordinate verbs. Complete reduplication of stative verbs (with close juncture distinguishing them from iterative repetition) forms manner adverbials: *ca* 'be long (time)', *caca* 'for (some) time'; *θehca* 'be sure, exact', *θeθe+hcahca* 'exactly, definitely'. Prefixation of action verbs by the nominalising prefix *ʔə-* creates action nominals: *kai?* 'to bite', but *ʔəkaiʔ hkan-yá-* 'biting-suffer-get = get bitten' (a 'passive of adversity', see page 739); *hcɛʔ* 'to cook', but *ʔəhcɛʔ θin-* 'cooking-learn = learn to cook'. The same process forms adverbials: *myan* 'be fast', but *ʔəmyan θwà-* 'go in haste, go quickly'; or, with a different prefix, *ʔəyè+təcì* 'urgently', from the syntactic compound meaning 'be important', mentioned at the end of the last paragraph. Whether reduplicated or prefixed, the verbs may retain nominal complements: *təlá caca nei-* 'one-month-long-stay = to stay for a month'; *hcin (ʔə)kaiʔ hkan-yá-* 'get bitten by a mosquito'. In the latter type, the prefix is often deleted and the verbal noun appears in close juncture with the preceding complement as a kind of nonce compound.

Prefixation, but not complete reduplication, is also attested in lexicalised form, e.g. *əhkwá* 'fork (of a tree)', from the verb *hkwá* 'to fork in two'. In cases involving a prefixed verb and a complement, the lexicalised version becomes a syntactic compound, e.g. *htəmìnhcɛʔ* 'a cook', derived from the deverbal *ʔəhcɛʔ* with the generic object, *htəmìn* 'rice, food'. In principle, derived forms such as these can be interpreted literally or idiomatically; *htəminhcɛʔ* could also be an action nominal with the meaning of 'cooking'.

Other kinds of compounding are well utilised in Burmese as a means of deriving nouns and verbs. Nominal patterns are more varied and several are recursive; compound

verbs are usually composed of pairs of verbs. Compounding is a favourite way of coining new technical vocabulary, e.g. *kon+tin+kon+hcá+maùn,* lit. 'an arm (that) loads (and) unloads goods', i.e. 'a crane'; *mainhnòn+pyá+dain-hkwɛʔ* 'a dial (that) shows mile-rate', i.e. 'a speedometer'. *Mainhnòn* and *dainhkwɛʔ* are themselves compounds that combine loanwords from English (*main* from 'mile', *dain* from 'dial') with words from Burmese, a practice that is quite common.

Burmese vocabulary also attests to a variety of processes that straddle the line between derivation and compounding. They apparently satisfy an urge, most noticeable in formal and literary styles, to add weight and colour to the monosyllabic root. Nouns and verbs often have pleonastic versions formed by the addition of a near synonym: *yè* and *yè+θà*, both 'write', the latter containing the verb *θà* 'inscribe'; *cí* and *cí+hyú* both 'look at', with *hyú*, a less common verb than *cí*, meaning 'to behold'. The enlarged version may be phonologically as well as semantically matched: *po* and *pomo*, both meaning 'more', the latter with the rhyming and nearly synonymous *mo*. Or it may be phonologically matched but semantically empty: *hkɔ* and *hkɔwɔ* 'call', the latter containing the otherwise meaningless rhyming syllable *-wɔ*; *ɲi* and *ɲiɲa* 'be even', with the meaningless 'chiming' syllable *-ɲa*. In the 'elaborate' adverbial *wòdò+wàdà* 'blurred, unclear', rhyme and chime are intermeshed.

The pattern of four rhythmically or euphonically balanced syllables is prolific. Elaborate nouns are frequently formed by the addition of *ʔə-* to both parts of a compound verb: *hnáun+hyɛʔ* 'annoy', *ʔəhnáun+ʔəhyɛʔ* 'annoyance'. Elaborate adverbs may contain any of a variety of minor syllables: *bəyòn+bəyìn* 'tumultuously'; *kəbyàun +kəbyan* 'in an illogical, backwards way'; *təsì+təlòn* 'in unity'. As these examples show, the language has vast resources for expressing fine nuances through the adverbial position. Many adverbials are onomatopoeic or ideophonic, e.g. the pattern *tə-* plus reduplication, as in *təzizi* 'buzzing with noise'; or the pattern of an imitative syllable plus the suffix *-hkənɛ̀* the latter associated with sudden movement: *hyuʔhkənɛ̀* 'whoosh'; *htwihkənɛ̀* 'ptui' (spitting sound, expressing disgust).

5 Syntax

In Burmese the verb and its modifiers occupy the final position in the clause, with nominals and other complements 'freely' ordered before it. There is neither agreement between constituents nor concord within them. The grammatical apparatus consists mainly of postpositional particles – many of them deriving from nouns or verbs – whose relative ordering, though often fixed, tends to accord with their semantic scope: *yu-la-se-hcin-tɛ* 'carry-come-cause-want-realis = (he) wanted to make (him) bring (it)'; *cènaun hsəya-ká-lɛ́-hpɛ́ (cènaun tì-tɛ)* 'gong-master-contrastive subject-additive-restrictive = and the gong-master, for his part, just (plays the gong)'. The only obligatory grammatical categories involve the verb; with some exceptions, final verb phrases are followed by one of a small set of functionally disparate particles that signal, simultaneously, features of polarity and mood, or polarity, mood and aspect. Thus, *-tɛ*, *-mɛ* and *-pi* carry, in addition to the meanings 'positive' and 'non-imperative', the aspectual distinctions of realis, irrealis and punctative, respectively. The punctative expresses the realisation of a state (*tɔ-pi* '(that)'s enough') or the initiation of an action (*sà-pi* '(I)'m eating (now)'), different manifestations of the notion 'change of state'. Grammatical categories of voice, tense and definiteness are not found at all. Nor is 'number' truly grammaticalised.

Though there are suffixes associated with plurality, they do not co-occur with number-classifier expressions. In fact, they reveal themselves to be 'collectives' rather than plural markers. The suffix *tó* that seems to mark number in pronouns (*θu* 'he; she', *θu-tó* 'they; them'), has collective meaning when combined with nouns: *Ko Nandá-tó* 'Ko Nanda and his family'. Similarly *te* (or more formally, *twe*), a plural suffix for countable nouns (*lu-te* 'people') signifies 'a large amount of' with mass nouns: *sɛʔku-te-né* 'paper PLUR with = with a lot of paper'.

The verbal phrase itself, as we saw in the earlier example, often consists of a string of verbs, verb-like morphemes and particles. These exhibit a variety of syntactic and semantic properties. In the phrase *htɛ́ θwà* 'put in-go = to take (it) in (it)', two verbs combine in open juncture and retain their lexical meanings; in *htɛ́ pè*, 'put (something) in for (someone)', open juncture is still usual, but the second morpheme, *pè,* has its benefactive meaning of 'for the sake of' rather than its literal meaning of 'give'; in *htɛ́-laiʔ* 'just put (it) in', *htɛ́* is followed in close juncture by a morpheme whose lexical meaning is 'to follow' but which, as a verbal modifier, signals an 'increase in transitivity', and is often translated as 'effective or abrupt action'. The functions of the verbal modifiers are surprisingly diverse: *-hya,* the 'commiserating' particle (with no verbal prototype) conveys 'pity or compassion, usually towards a third person': *la-yá-pyan-hya-tɛ* 'come-had to-again-pity-realis = [she] had to come back, unfortunately'. The directional particle, *-hkɛ́* (again, with no obvious lexical prototype), signifies 'displacement in space or time', as in *Pagan myó-ká wɛ-hkɛ́-tɛ* 'Pagan-town-from-buy-there-realis = (we) bought (it) back in Pagan'.

Within the noun phrase, the order of constituents is primarily modifier before modified, with the main exception being stative verb modifiers which follow their head nouns either in close juncture or with the nominalising prefix *ʔə-*. Demonstratives precede their head: *di mìpon* 'this/these lantern(s)'. So do genitive phrases and other nominal modifiers: *ʔəpyó ʔen* 'the young woman's house' (with induced creaky tone on *ʔəpyo* marking possession). So, too, do most relative clauses: *baθasəkà léla-tɛ́ lu-te* 'language-study-realis (with induced creaky tone showing subordination)-person-plural = people that study language'. Unlike English, the original semantic role of the relativised noun is not indicated: *θu gàun səpwè-né taiʔ mí-tɛ* 'he-head-table-with-hit-inadvertently-realis = he hit (his) head on the table', but *θu gàun taiʔ-mí-tɛ́ səpwè* 'the table that he hit (his) head (on)'.

Burmese, like many of the languages spoken on the mainland of South-East Asia, requires classifiers (or 'measures') for the quantification of what in English would be called count nouns. Numeral and classifier follow the quantified noun in an appositional relationship: *θwà lè-hcàun* 'tooth-four-peg = four teeth'; *θəhcìn lè-poʔ* 'song-four-stanza = four songs'. Some nouns can be self-classifying: *ʔen lè-ʔen* 'four houses'. Classifiers often reflect the shape or some other salient feature of a nominal referent. In many cases, nouns may be classified in several ways, according to the particular aspect of an object the speaker chooses to emphasise; in the case of animate nouns the choice usually reflects status: *lu təyauʔ* 'one (ordinary) person', *lu təʔù* 'one (esteemed) person'. But probably as a result of material and cultural change, the semantic or conceptual basis of classification in Burmese is now often obscure, so possible classifiers must be listed with nouns in the dictionary as lexical facts.

Although certain orders of clause elements are much more common than others – agent–beneficiary–patient, for example – order of elements before the verb is, in principle, free. As a result, a sentence such as *Maun Hlá Maun Ṇɛ yaiʔ-tɛ* is ambiguous, each nominal capable of being interpreted as agent or patient: 'Maung Hla struck Maung

Nge' or 'Maung Hla was struck by Maung Nge'. Where context is insufficient to ensure the intended interpretation, semantic relations can be marked by postpositional particles. In this case, the agent can be signalled by *-ká,* the patient by *-ko: Maun Hlá-ko Maun Ŋɛ-ká yaiʔ-tɛ* 'Maung Hla was struck by Maung Nge'. These, like many of the other postpositional particles, have several different senses. With locations they mark 'source' and 'goal', respectively: *Yankon-ká Mandəlè-ko θwà-tɛ* 'S(he) went from Rangoon to Mandalay'. Other functions of *-ko,* such as the marking of beneficiary and extent or degree can be subsumed under the notion of 'goal'. But *-ká* has one other very common function that is not obviously related to the notion of source: where *-ká* does not serve a disambiguating function – in intransitive clauses, for example – it signals 'contrastive topic'; *di-ká təcaʔ*, *da-ká caʔ-hkwè* 'this-ká (costs) one kyat, that-ká, one and a half'. *-ká* in this sense may appear with nominals already marked for semantic roles: *ʔəhtè-htè-hma-ká* 'inside-in-at-ká', as in **'inside** it's crowded (but outside it's not').

The last example illustrates the origin of many of the more specific relational markers. *ʔəhtè* is a noun meaning 'the inside', which can function as head to a genitive phrase with the meaning 'the inside of': *yehkwɛʔ ʔəhtè* 'the inside of the cup'. Without its prefix, and closely bound to the preceding syllable, the morpheme occurs in locative phrases that may be explicitly marked as such by the particle *-hma*: *yehkwɛʔ-htè-hma* 'in the cup'.

Although word order is 'free' in the sense that it does not indicate the grammatical or semantic roles of constituents, it is not without significance. It is conditioned by the pragmatic notions of topic, which establishes a point of departure from previous discourse or from context, and 'comment', which contains the communicative focus of the utterance. It is this pragmatic organisation that leads us to translate the sentence *Maun Hlá-ko Maun Ŋɛ ká yaiʔ-tɛ* with the English passive, i.e. 'Maung Hla was struck by Maung Nge', rather than the active 'Maung Nge struck Maung Hla'. For, by mentioning Maung Hla first, we take the patient's point of view, just as we do when using the passive in English. But unlike the English, topicalising the patient changes neither the grammatical relations of the nominals (the agent is not demoted) nor the valence of the verb (which keeps the same form), so the term 'passive' does not apply. The closest Burmese gets to a passive construction is a 'passive of adversity', which; as the name suggests, is associated primarily with events that affect a person (or patient) unpleasantly. Thus the unlikely perspective of the sentence, *kà θú-ko taiʔ-tɛ* 'car-he-obj.-hit-realis = the car hit him', can be reversed by making *taiʔ* a nominal complement of a verb phrase containing the verbs *hkan* 'suffer; endure', and *yá* 'get, manage to': *θu kàtaiʔ hkan-yá-tɛ* 'he-car-hitting-suffer-get-realis = he got hit by a car'. But this construction is not nearly as frequent as the passive is in English.

A topic, once established, may remain activated over several sentences. Its pragmatic role, in other words, may be 'given'. English typically leaves a pronominal trace in such cases; Burmese generally does not. Nominals, topical or otherwise, whose reference can be recovered from previous discourse or context can be omitted, a process sometimes known as 'zero-pronominalisation'; *pyin pè-mɛ* 'fix-(give)-irrealis = (I)'ll fix (it) for (you)'. Such sentences are grammatically complete like their English counterparts. Pronouns, which almost always have human referents in Burmese, are used either as a hedge against misinterpretation or as a means of making the relative status of the participants explicit.

The primacy of the topic–comment organisation of the sentence in Burmese is also illustrated by sentences of the following type: *di hkəlè θwà cò-θwà-tɛ* 'this-child-teeth-

break (intransitive)-(go)-realis = this child has broken (his) teeth'. The verb is intransitive (its corresponding transitive is aspirated) and the two noun phrases are not in a possessive relationship but are clausal constituents; a more literal translation would read 'the child, teeth have been broken'. In such cases, the first topic, *hkəlè*, is a locus for the second topic, *θwà*, and only the second is matched to the selectional requirements of the verb.

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Okell (1969) is the most thorough and useful grammatical description of Burmese; Part 1 is a structural analysis, Part 2 a conspectus of grammatical morphemes. For those who can read the examples in Burmese script, Okell and Allott (2001) expands coverage of the colloquial forms given in Part 2 of Okell (1969) and includes literary forms as well. Allott (1985) is an important sociolinguistic study. Watkins (2005) is a recent collection of articles on grammatical and other issues. Aung-Thwin (2005), particularly Chapters 7 and 8, questions critical assumptions about the early influences on the Burmese language.

For the writing system, reference may be made to Roop (1972), a programmed course, and Wheatley (1996), a short description. Okell (1971) deals with issues of transliteration and transcription of Burmese, and includes descriptions of the most important systems of Romanisation.

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