



RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE

M.Ed. In TESL Program Language Group Specific Informational Reports

Produced by Graduate Students in the M.Ed. In TESL Program
In the Feinstein School of Education and Human Development

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THE BURMESE LANGUAGE

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TESL 539

Summer 2011

BACKGROUND

- ❑ The Burmese or Myanmar script came from the Mon script, which derived from a southern Indian script during the 8th century. The earliest known inscriptions in the Burmese script date from the 11th century.
- ❑ c. 1058–present
- ❑ Burmese is spoken by 32 million as a first language and as a second language by 10 million, particularly ethnic minorities in Burma and those in neighboring countries.



CLASSIFICATIONS AND FEATURES:

- ❑ The language is classified into two categories: Formal and Colloquial.
 - ❑ Formal is used in literary works, official publications, radio broadcasts, and formal speeches.
 - ❑ Colloquial is used in daily conversation and spoken.
- ❑ Diglossia occurs in Burmese, it is quite evident in speech and writing.
- ❑ The language type is called Abugida. The language system is based on consonants. Vowel use is secondary in this language.
- ❑ Type of writing system: syllabic alphabet - each letter has an inherent vowel [a]. Other vowels sounds are indicated using separate letters or diacritics which appear above, below, in front of, after or around the consonant.



FEATURES CONTINUED:

- ❑ Script Features:
 - ❑ The rounded appearance of letters is a result of the use of palm leaves as the traditional writing material. Straight lines would have torn the leaves. The Burmese name for the script is *ca-lonh* 'round script'.
- ❑ Tone Burmese Symbol: Letter a
 - ❑ [ɲà] Normal phonation, medium duration, low intensity, low (often slightly rising) pitch.
 - ❑ [ɲá] Sometimes slightly breathy, relatively long, high intensity, high pitch; often with a fall before a pause.
 - ❑ [ɲa] Tense or creaky phonation (sometimes with lax glottal stop), medium duration, high intensity, high (often slightly falling) pitch.



CONSONANTS:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| က | ခ | ဂ | ဃ | င |
| စ | ဆ | ဇ | ဈ | ည |
| ဋ | ဌ | ဍ | ဎ | ဏ |
| တ | ထ | ဒ | ဓ | န |
| ပ | ဖ | ဗ | ဘ | မ |
| ယ | ရ | လ | ဝ | သ |
| | ဟ | ဣ | အ | |

- ❑ The Burmese alphabet consists of 33 consonants.
- ❑ The first 25 consonants are distributed into five classes: gutturals, palatals, cerebrals, dentals and labials.
- ❑ The rest are called liquids, sibilant and aspirate.

Judson

[\(http://www.worldtranslationcenter.com/\)](http://www.worldtranslationcenter.com/)



LANGUAGE USE TODAY:

- ❑ Diglossia occurs to a large extent in the Burmese language and is fairly noticeable in writing and speech.
- ❑ The written/literary form of Burmese has undergone only a few changes and tends not to accommodate the spoken/colloquial phonology of standard Burmese language today.
- ❑ Due to innate pronunciation rules, literate Burmese speakers are able to intuitively interpret ancient Burmese despite the potentially ancient nature of the inscriptions.
- ❑ Demonstrating that the modern method of expression makes the language clearer and more comprehensible.

Source: Omniglot



PHONOLOGY ISSUES:

- ❑ Vowels cause many problems for Burmese learners of English.
- ❑ The language consists of 10 vowels (a, i, u, ou, o, [O], ei, e, [E]).
 - ❑ The tone of each vowel is expressed in either a high pitch or low pitch tone.
 - ❑ Example: Low /k^hà/ "shake"
 - ❑ High /k^há/ "be bitter"
 - ❑ Creaky /k^ha/ "fee"
 - ❑ Checked /k^haʔ/ "draw off"
 - ❑ The least marked high vowels take the creaky tone (a special kind of phonation in which the arytenoid cartilages in the larynx are drawn together, as a result, the vocal folds are compressed rather tightly, becoming relatively slack and compact) the mid vowels take the level tone and the low vowels take the heavy tone.
- ❑ The rules in English are much different and confuse learners.



PHONOLOGY CONTINUED:

- ❑ The Burmese language is pronounced by the placement of the tongue and this can be an issue when learning English:
 - ❑ Ex: “k” is used in the English language one way, the letter can be translated to mean something by the way it’s pronounced.
- ❑ Regional varieties that could pose a problem to Burmese English language learners:
 - ❑ Ex: people in New England pronounce the English language much different from someone in Texas. Learners may get confused with the different accents.
- ❑ Letter issues:
 - ❑ Ex: few Burmese people can pronounce the letter “r” and in their language substitute the letter “y” instead.



GRAMMAR: SYNTAX

- ❑ The basic word order of the Burmese language is subject-object-verb.
- ❑ Burmese is monosyllabic (i.e., every word is a root to which a particle but not another word may be prefixed).
- ❑ Sentence structure determines syntactical relations and verbs are not conjugated. Instead they have particles suffixed to them. For example, the verb "to eat," (ca: [sà]) is itself unchanged when modified.
- ❑ Burmese is not a tense-marking language.

LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES:

- ❑ Errors learners make in translations from the Burmese language to English:
 - ❑ Myint Su (1971) outlined many errors in her study that exhibit non-discrimination by the learner between items which have fewer meaning equivalents in Burmese:
 - Ex: Pyo can mean: ask, talk, speak and say
 - ❑ This results in the following errors:
 - Ex: Listen what the teacher speaks.
They talk that they get a new car.
My mother talks me to try for an examination.
 - ❑ These language issues can lead to miscommunications when words are used in this manner.



LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES CONTINUED:

- ❑ The lexical set of lend, borrow, hire, rent and let pose translation issues. There are two Burmese equivalents:
 - ❑ Hoi means either lend or borrow.
 - ❑ Hgna can mean any of the five (lend, borrow, hire, rent, or let)
 - ❑ This non-isomorphism explains the following errors that are commonly made:
Ex: He lends the book from his friend.
I will borrow my bicycle to your father.
Landowners hire their wide lands to the poor.
- ❑ Their inabilities to use the vocabulary properly can be confusing to the person they are communicating with.

BURMESE COMMUNICATION STYLES

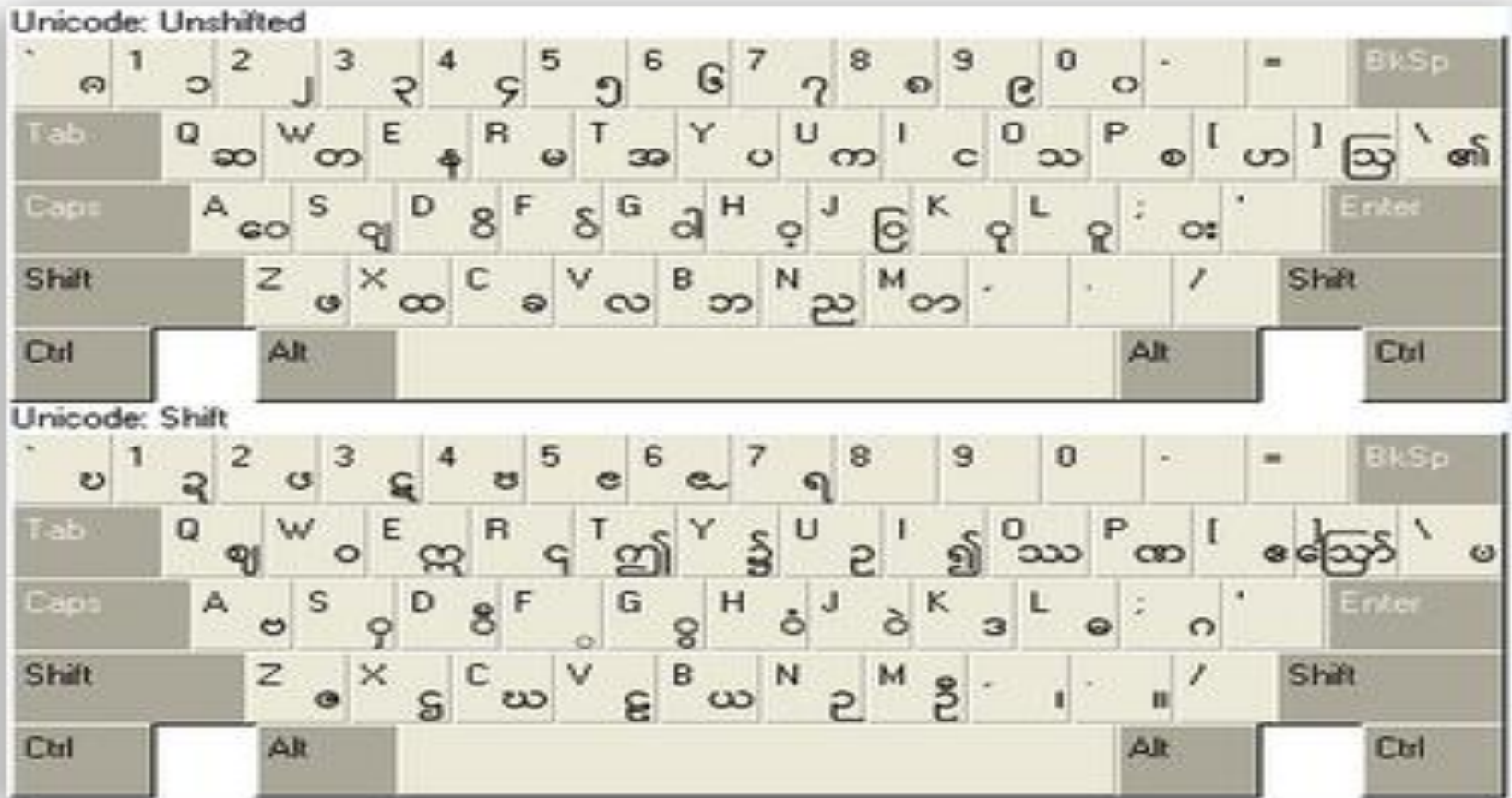
- ❑ Never touch a person's hair, head or cheek, even if you consider it as a friendly gesture. Myanmar people would not consider it friendly, and will think you are rude.
- ❑ Don't touch any part of a lady's body. You might end up in a police station.
- ❑ Never raise your underwear above your head. This is considered very rude.

<http://www.myanmar2day.com/myanmar-culture-custom/2008/12/myanmar-etiquette-general-rules>

- ❑ Patting a child on the head not only is improper but is thought to be dangerous to the child's well-being.
- ❑ It is considered improper to lose one's temper or show much emotion in public
- ❑ A person should not point the feet at anyone

<http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Burma.html#ixzz1OV511Z37>

STANDARD BURMESE KEYBOARD



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burmese_language

- If you notice, the capitalized symbols are much different from the lower case symbols in the Burmese language.

HELPFUL ONLINE SITES:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3McoyGA4SI>
- <http://viss.wordpress.com/2009/01/04/10-things-i-hate-about-the-burmese-language/>
- <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/burmese/language.htm>
- http://www.sil.org/~hoppelp/dissertation/chapters/Chapter_2_Burmese_Grammar.pdf



RESOURCES:

Books

- Judson, A. (1866). *Grammar of the Burmese language*. Rangoon: American Mission Press.
- Laufer-Dvorkin, B. (1991). *Similar Lexical forms in interlanguage*, x + 250, DM 124. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.

Internet Sites

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- Center for Southeast Asian Studies. Northern Illinois University. (2008). Burmese language. Retrieved May 18, 2011, from: <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/burmese/language.htm>



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Maps

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Images

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