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BOOKS ON BURMESE ORTHOGRAPHY

U Tin Hla

Burmese orthography has a long history dating as far back as Pagan period, i.e. 11th century A.D. when Burmese was reduced to writing. The Burmans in upper Burma after coming in contact with the Môn of lower Burma borrowed alphabets from them. These alphabets, no doubt, are of Indian origin, but a modified form I presume, containing 33 consonants and 8 vowels. The presence of long vowels before final consonants in Pagan inscriptions clearly indicates that Burmans also borrowed many Môn vowel sounds. (e.g. ကာနံ၊ ကျာနံ). At present there are more than fifty vowel sounds in Burmese.

Burmese language is monosyllabic, isolating and total and it comprises only verbs, nouns or verbal nouns and many particles. Pure Burmese words are not spelt with the following eight letters of the alphabet viz. ga, gha; ja, jha; da, dha; ba and bha (ဂ၊ ဘ၊ ဇ၊ ဈ၊ ဒ၊ ဓ၊ ဝ၊ ဘ၊ ည) Linguals ṭa, ṭha, ḍa, ḍha, ṇa and ḷa (ဇာ၊ ဇာ၊ ဇာ၊ ဇာ၊ ဇာ and ḷa (ဇာ၊ ဇာ၊ ဇာ၊ ဇာ၊ ဇာ) are incorporated into Burmese merely to represent loan-words, mostly Pāli and Sanskrit origin. And pure Burmese words have as their final consonants only ten letters k, ṅ, c, ṇ, t, n, p, m, y and w (က၊ င၊ ဇ၊ ဇ၊ ဇ၊ ဇ၊ ဇ၊ ဇ၊ ဇ၊ ဇ) A final consonant after a long vowel အာ၊ အီ၊ အူ၊ အေ၊ အော် is not recognized, nor are double letters (ဝိဇ္ဇာ၊ ဝိဇ္ဇာ) treated as Burmese. But there are some pure Burmese words written as if they are Pāli loanwords (e.g. မိတ္တ၊ သေက္ခ)

After a comparative study of the pre-standard and standard old Burmese we come to the conclusion that Burmans of olden days wrote as they spoke and vice versa. I am very much convinced to say that there had been very little or no trouble in writing Burmese words. As an Englishman of today pronounces [cut] with final -t sound quite distinctly and [cut] with final -t sound quite clearly so were the Burmans of Pagan days. During my college years I came across many rubbings of stone inscriptions as well as copies of ink writings. To my great wonder I very seldom found a word with final -t which was usually written with final -p (e.g. ကနံပိတ်). In the same way I very seldom noticed a word with final -n which was always written with final -m (e.g. ဂ္ဂိတ်). But they could not make clear cut decision regarding the use of medials -y-, -r- and sub-script -l-. Sometimes they wrote medial -y- and sub-script -l- together (e.g. ဂ္ဂိတ်). At times they wrote medials -y- and -r- together (e.g. ဂ္ဂိတ်). Although Tavoyans of Tenasserim Division and Taungros of Southern Shan States still retain sub-script -l- sound almost all the Burmans no longer pronounce it.

The Pagan dynasty succumbed to the Tartar's attack in 1278 A.D. After almost a century of disorder and violence it was succeeded by Ava which Thadominbya founded in 1364 A.D. In this period peace and stability prevailed. In this new centre there appeared a new stream of 'book literature' on palm-leaf scratched with a stylus. Six major genres were evolved in this period. Five of these are four syllable lines with regular climbing rhymes. They are (1) historical ballads (ဇာတ်အင်း), (2) penegeric poems (ဓမ္မစိတ္တနိဂါး), (3) poems on Buddha's Birth Stories (ဇာတ်အင်း), (4) lyrical odes on nature and love (ဂုဏ်), and (5) non-generic verses (လင်္ကာ).

Most of the poets of this period seemed to notice that Burmese pronunciation as well as spellings, especially finals, were gradually changing with the passage of time. The use of sub-script -l- was fading away. Sub-script -l- under palatal consonants ka, kha, ga (က၊ ခ၊ ဂ) changed to medial -y- (e.g. က္လ > က္လ့). Likewise sub-script -l- under labial consonants pa, pha, ma (ပ၊ ဖ၊ မ) changed to medial -r- (e.g. ပ္လ > ပ္လ့။ မ္လ > မ္လ့။ မ္လ့ > မ္လ့့). So we can say that this period, roughly between 1450-1550 A.D. was the transitional period for Burmese orthography. By carefully examining the lithic inscriptions of this period we can guess that learned people of this time were in a state of dilemma regarding Burmese spelling. On the one hand they did have some hesitation in discarding the old form of spelling. On the other hand they could not deny accepting the new form of spelling which was motivated by linguistic change. Therefore poets like Shin Mahāratthasāra (သွင်မဟာဝရဋ္ဌသဘာဝ), Shin Aggasamādhī (သွင်အဂ္ဂသမာဓိ), Shin Tejosāra (သွင်တေဇဝသဘာဝ) etc. etc. started laying down concrete foundation for standard spelling in their literary works written in four syllable lines with 4, 3, 2 beat system thus:-

- — — A
- — A —
- A — B
- — B —
- B — C

By using this 4, 3, 2 beat system the authors were able to include final -t and -p, finals -n and -m etc. whenever and wherever occasion arose. A few examples will suffice:-

Final -i (တသတ်)

- § (1) ပေါင်မြေဝင်လျှံတံ၊ ရေဝက်လာလတ်သော်၊ ချောမွတ်စင်လှ။ ။ သံဝရ* ဝဇာ။
- (2) ခွဲလေသပိတ်၊ အစိတ်စိတ်လျှင်၊ ပေါက်ဆိတ်ဖဲ့ခြမ်း။ ။ ။ ပြာဒီ* ဝဇာ။
- (3) အကြောင်းထဲကုတ်၊ ဂှာဖွေထုတ်သော်၊ ချက်ပြုတ်သွားလာ။ ။ မြားပစ်* ဇာ။

Final -p (ပသတ်)

- (4) ခနောင်းဝဲစပ်၊ တံပိုးကပ်စွဲ၊ ကူးခပ်မသာ။ ။ ဂါထာ* ဂ။
- (5) ကောင်းကင်အထိပ်၊ မွမ်းမွမ်းချိပ်မျှ၊ ဘုန်းရိပ်ရောင်ဖြူ။ ။ ပြည်စုန* ဝာ။

§ Please see full titles at the end of the paper.

(6) မုန်တိုင်း ကတုတ်၊ ဝဲကတုတ်သော်၊ မွှေကတုတ်သံပတ်။ ။ ဇယျံ * ၂၃။

Final -n (နသတ်)

(7) စီလျော်သင့်တန်၊ ကမ္ဘည်း ကန်၍၊ ကာရန်မပျက်။ ။ ပုံတောင် * ၄၇။

(8) အဝန်ပုဆိန်၊ အလေး ချိန်သို့၊ အရှိန်အစော်။ ။ ဘူလင် * ၃၀၄။

(9) ပုပြင်း ကဆုန်၊ ဝေါဟာကုန်၍၊ နယုန်ဆန်း တက်။ ။ တန်တား * ၁၀။

Final -m/-n (မသတ်/ သေး သေး တင်)

(10) စပိုင်မြဲမြဲ၊ မကောင်း ကံကို၊ ခွာခြံပယ်ဖျက်။ ။ ဝေဗျံ * ၃၃၉။

(11) ကြီး ကြီး ပမ်း ပမ်း၊ သင်သောကုမ်း၊ ခွဲ၊ ငြိမ်း ချမ်း မဂ်ဖိုလ်။ ။ ဘူပေါင်း * ၅၉။

(12) တောခြေလုံး ထိမ်၊ ကိုယ်ကိုနှိမ်၍၊ ဆိတ်ငြိမ်ရတော်။ ။ ဆုတောင်း * ၉၃။

(13) ညီလတုံတုံ၊ ဆင်ဆွား၊ ရှံလည်း၊ ရပ်ပုံရေး ခြယ်။ ။ ဘုံခန်း * ၁၅။

Besides these, learned authors in their four syllable lines intentionally included words written with medial-y- in first line and medial -r- in the second or third line using the same consonant and not disrupting the 4, 3, 2 beat system. We called this ခွဲထား or ဂစ်ပင်ခွဲထား. Here are few examples.

(1) ဆိင်ဂာဖက်ချည်၊ ဝေး စား မည်ဟု၊ နှုတ်ခြည်ချီလှ။ ။ သူဇာ * ၃၀၉။

(2) ဝှံ့ချောင်းတူင်၊ ဌာအဂင်ထွင်၊ ကြီး ကြွယ်လိမ်လစ်။ ။ မနော် * ၁၉။

(3) မထိဘေး ဘုန်း၊ ရေနှယ်ချမ်း ချို၊ ဆံခြမ်း ဆယ်စိတ်။ ။ ကိုး ခန်း * ၁၆၇။

After 1700 A.D. literary enthusiasts began to collect excerpts from the famous literary works and compiled spelling books. Firstly we have သတ်ပုံ၊ သတ်ဗျန်း and သတ်အင်း-spelling books containing words with final killing strokes such as finals -t and -p; finals -n and -m. Secondly we have ခွဲထား or ဂစ်ပင်ခွဲထား: showing which word we are to use medial -y- (ယပင်) and which with medial -r- (ရဂစ်).

By studying the records of Hluttaw (King's Supreme Court), we are given to understand that Burmese kings, especially King Bodawpaya, had from time to time, issued royal orders regarding the use of correct spelling. Copyists on Buddhist literature were not required to serve in the army. They were also exempted from paying any kind of tax to the government. But those who did not write according to the traditional form of spelling were severely punished by the Hluttaw.

In 1879 A.D., i.e. during the reign of the last Burmese king Thibaw, a consultative meeting was held in Mandalay, the then capital of Burma, within the precinct of the Southern Royal Gardens, to scrutinize the books on Burmese orthography prevailing at that time. Twenty eight learned men who were well versed in Burmese language and literature, among them ministers, secretaries, judges and poets, were invited to the meeting. At this meeting the following works totalling thirty six in number were submitted and carefully scrutinized. These are (I) ဝင်ရစ် ရေး

နည်း သတ်ပုံ (2)မြန်မာသံ ယောဂဒီပနီ (3)အပင်းအရစ်သံ ပေါက် (4)ကဝိမဏ္ဍနိသတ်ပုံလင်္ကာ (5)ဧကသုဂ္ဂပ
ကောသနိသတ်အင်း (6)ရက္ခိယ ငယ်ခွဲထား လင်္ကာ (7)လောကဓမ္မ ရေး နည်း ခွဲထား (8)ရေး နည်း သတ်
နည်း ဆုံး မတမ်း စာ (9) ပြည်ဆရာ တော်သတ်ညွှန်း (10) အပင်းအရစ်လင်္ကာ (11) ဝစနာလင်္ကာ ဂုဏ်ပုံ
(12)ပင်းရစ်အသတ်လင်္ကာ (13)လိခ ဂုဏ်သတ်ပုံ (14)ဝဏ္ဏ ဗေဒဓမ္မသတ်အင်း (15)သီရိမင်္ဂလာသတ်ပုံ
(16)ကဝိလက္ခဏာသတ်ပုံသံ ပေါက် (17)ကဝိလက္ခဏာသတ်ညွှန်း (18)သပ္ပဉာဏ်ချီသတ်ပုံ ဟောင်း (19)ရွှေ
နန်း ထွင်း သတ်ပုံ (20)စွယ်စုံ ကျော်ထင်သတ်ပုံ (21)အက္ခရာသ မြေခမသတ်ပုံ (22)ဂဗဇလသတ်ညွှန်း (23)ဝိ
ဘဇ္ဇာဋီပတိခွဲထား (24)သတ်ညွှန်း သစ် (25)အသတ်ပေါင်း အစပ်ပေါင်း ပယ်ပုံစာတမ်း နှင့်မူလကောရန်ဝါဒ
စပ်နည်း ကာရန်ဝါဒဇယား ပုံ (26)ကဗျာသဘာဝတ္ထသင်္ဂဟသတ်ပုံ (27)ကဗျာသဘာဝတ္ထသင်္ဂဟသတ်ညွှန်း (28)
ဆကောရန္တနယသတ်ပုံ (29)သဒ္ဒါသင်္ဂဟသတ်ပုံ (30)ပါဠိသင်္ဂဟသတ်ပုံ (31)ပင်းရစ်ဂဏ္ဍီ (32)ဂတနာ
ဏ္ဍိး ပုံသတ်ပုံနှင့်သတ်ညွှန်း (33)သတ်ထူး (34)မြန်မာလော (35)ပန်း ဖြူသတ်ပုံ and (36)ခွဲထား ကျော်.

After a thorough and painstaking scrutinization the meeting handed down a decision. Out of the thirty six works scrutinized numbers 14, 16, 17, 23, 26, 33 and 36 were recommended to be learnt by heart. Numbers 6, 7, 8, 20, 24, 25, 27, 29 and 30 were recommended for reference. Numbers 28 and 32 were recommended only for finals. The rest were rejected as incomplete or biased.

During the British colonial days a man of erudition named U Kyaw Tun, a Deputy Commissioner, compiled a spelling book (ကဝိ မုက်မှန်သတ်ပုံကျမ်း) in 1929. This book was approved by the Text-book Committee as a suitable book for school libraries.

After the Second World War Burma regained her independence in January 1948. From that time on Burmese was proclaimed official language. As such Burmese is written not only by the Buddhist monks and office workers but also by working people of all the national races. Under this circumstance an up-to-date and complete spelling book was badly needed. U Tha Myat, a Deputy Director of Agriculture, compiled a book on Burmese orthography (မြန်မာစာ ရေး နည်း ကျမ်း) in 1948 with a new outlook. The author was able to include spellings of many loanwords. This book, approved by the Text-book Committee, even went to the seventh reprint.

A few years later, Government of the Union of Burma, requested U Wun, Chief Editor of the University Translation and Publications Department, to compile a Burmese Spelling book. U Wun, with his trained staff, collected excerpts from available classical works, especially verses, and consulted almost all the existing spelling books on hand not excepting palm leaf manuscripts. He was able to look through the rubbings of lithic inscriptions of Pagan, Pinya and Ava. In the year 1952 (မြန်မာသတ်ညွှန်း ကျမ်း) -A Guide to Burmese Finals - was published. A revised and enlarged edition appeared in 1963 with a new name တက္ကသိုလ်မြန်မာသတ်ညွှန်း ကျမ်း: Unfortunately, this book is good and reliable only for the finals.

U Ohn Shwe, a Pali scholar, in the year 1956 took the opportunity of publishing a large spelling book (သတ်ပုံအဘိဓာန် - မိတ်လင်စုံ) - A Complete Dictionary of Burmese Spelling. It is indeed a large book, good and complete. But alphabetical arrangement of words is not familiar to the ordinary eyes which even amount to confusion.

The Revolutionary Council of the Union of Burma instituted 'The Burmese Literary and Translation Commission' in December 1963. One of the main tasks of the commission was to compile a standard spelling book for use in schools and offices. A Sub-committee namely 'The Dictionary and Orthography Sub-committee' was formed with fifteen members headed by U Wun as Chairman.

For the smooth performance of its duties the sub-committee consulted (1) inscriptions of Pagan, Pinya and Ava, (2) classical literature in verse where finals and medials are adhered to, (3) Mōn as well as dialects of Arakan and Tavoy, (4) all spelling books available including a book on Burmese Philology (ဝေါဟာရဗေဒပညာစာအုပ်), (5) Pāli and Sanskrit Dictionaries and (6) related papers consequentially submitted by the members of the sub-committee.

Considering the changing nature of language and in conformity with the current usage and modern style of writing the sub-committee, after many deliberations, laid down the following guidelines to tackle the problems of initials, medials and finals.

Previous authors on Burmese spelling had tried, time and again, to solve only the initials pha (ဖ) and bha (ဘ) without success. The matter of initials in Burmese is very wide and therefore very complicating. The word for Buddha is written ပုဂ္ဂ (purhā), ပုဂ္ဂ (phurhā), ဗုဂ္ဂ (burhā), and ဘုဂ္ဂ (bhurhā) with four different labial consonants in the inscription of Pagan. Second Kyaw Aung San Hta Sayadaw, the author of Burmese Philology mentioned above, had said 'Purely Burmese words are written with twelve group consonants namely ka, kha, ṅa; ca, cha, ṅa; ta, tha, na; pa, pha, ma' (က၊ ခ၊ င၊ စ၊ ဇ၊ ဘ၊ ဃ၊ ဝ၊ ဝ၊ ဖ၊ ဝ၊ ဝ၊ ဝ). This sub-committee agreed to comply with the word of the Sayadaw. Failing this the sub-committee accepted the current spelling. With regard to initial ya- and ra- the sub-committee relied on the lithic inscriptions and ယေဝး as well as dialects of Arakan and Tavoy.

With the exception of Taungros of Southern Shan States and Tavoyans of Tenasserim Division sub-script -l- sound is totally absent among the entire Burmese speaking public. So there is no need to worry about it. But although the majority of the Burmese speaking people no longer pronounce initial r- and medial -r- sound, loan-words excepted, our brothers in Arakan Division still do. There is a Burmese saying (ပုဇွန်ရစ်မနီဇ် ရခိုင်နဲ့ဇွန်) - meaning 'If you are not sure with medials -y- and -r- better consult with the Arakanese'. For this reason the sub-committee first and foremost consulted the inscriptions of Pagan, Pinya and Ava as well as

reliable spellings from နွေဝ ဘဝ ကျမ်း. It never overlooked the dialects of Arakan and Tavoy.

Proto-Burmans such as Maru, Letsi and Tsaiwa of Kachin State who formed the tail-end of the Burmese migration into Burma and who retain archaic phonetic features still pronounce final sounds. When the entire Burmese speaking public cease to pronounce final sounds it becomes a perennial problem in writing Burmese words. Undaunted by this, the sub-committee first of all checked the finals in the inscriptions of Pagan, Pinya and Ava. Failing to find out a favourable solution the sub-committee looked through various ဗျူ မေတ်ကွန်း၊ ဇချင်း and ရတု. It also consulted many reliable manuscripts such as ကဝိလက္ခဏာသတ်ညွှန်း ကျမ်း၊ တွင်း သင်း သတ်ညွှန်း သစ် and ရတနာ ခြေစုံသတ်ညွှန်း. Sometimes the sub-committee had to use its own judgements.

With regard to Pāli loan-words the sub-committee agreed to accept the Burmanised form of spelling but loan-words on Buddhism are to be retained as far as possible.

The sub-committee after 218 sittings submitted the work မြန်မာရေး ထုံးကျမ်း to the Burmese Literary and Translation Commission in July 1967.

Now in accordance with the wish of the President of the Union of Burma, U Ne Win, for bringing into being a book of Burmese spelling which the majority could accept 'The Burmese Orthography Revising Sub-committee' was formed under the Burmese Language Commission (a new name for Burmese Literary and Translation Commission) to scrutinize and revise the မြန်မာရေး ထုံးကျမ်း since January 1975. After 126 sittings, the sub-committee submitted the work to the Burmese Language Commission on 15th January 1977 and was approved. The work which was re-named မြန်မာစာလုံး ပေါင်း သတ်ပုံကျမ်း was published in January 1979. It is not a prescribed text-book but considered a book for reference. It would be revised every five or six years on the basis of the advice given and suggestions made by the public.

List of books cited

	Abbreviation	Full Title
(1)	ကျိး ခန်း	ကျိး ခန်း ဗျူ
(2)	ဂိယာ	ဂိယာ ခြေစုံသတ်ညွှန်း
(3)	ဆုတောင်း	ဆုတောင်း ခန်း ဗျူ
(4)	ဇ ဗျူ	မဟာဇနကဗျူ
(5)	တန်တား	တန်တား ဦး တည် မေတ်ကွန်း
(6)	ပုံတောင်	ပုံတောင် နိုင် မေတ်ကွန်း
(7)	ပြာဋီ	ပြာဋီတခန်း ဗျူ
(8)	ပြည်စုန်	ပြည်စုန် မေတ်ကွန်း
(9)	ဘူပေါင်း	ဘူဒီဒတ်ဘတ် ပေါင်း ဗျူ
(10)	ဘူလင်	ဘူဒီဒတ်လင်ဘူကြီး

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| (11) | ဘုံခန်း | နေဗိဘုံခန်း ဝျို့ |
| (12) | မနေဘိ | မနေဘိတရီဝျို့တောင်း |
| (13) | မြားပစ် | သုဝဏ္ဏသုံမြားပစ်ခန်း ဝျို့ |
| (14) | ဝေဝျို့ | ဝေယာ နှံ့ဂျာ ဝျို့ |
| (15) | သုဇာ | သုဇာ ဝျို့ |
| (16) | သံဝရ | သံဝရ ဝျို့ |