

# BURMESE

ဗမာစကား

A Gateway to an Intriguing Language

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*The photo on the cover page shows the remains of the Yadana Hsimi Pagodas in Inwa အင်္ဂု (also known as Ava) which was the capital of the Burmese Empire between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when Burmese literature greatly flourished and reached its so-called 'Golden Age'.*

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# Introduction

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For most adults learning a foreign language seems like climbing a mountain. You need strength, stamina and commitment to reach the summit. Despite the challenges it poses to a Western learner, Burmese is in fact a fun language to learn: it is different and full of unique features. This is a book to help you access the world of this fascinating language.

With this book we intend to facilitate both the learning and the teaching of Burmese. We have not designed it as a language coursebook although it could be used as such. Our approach is on the one hand to familiarise Western learners with distinctive characteristics of Burmese and on the other to raise the awareness of Burmese teachers of the typical challenges that learners, in particular Westerners, encounter with Burmese.

Let us have a quick look at the two most important challenges.

## A TONAL LANGUAGE

Burmese is a tonal language, which means that a Burmese syllable with a particular rhyme or vowel sound can have different tones and hence can convey different meanings. This is especially challenging for Western learners and represents a significant obstacle to getting a grip on the language. Most language coursebooks structure lessons in terms of language functions and real life situations, and consequently build up vocabulary pretty quickly. In the case of Burmese, this method can easily make the learner overwhelmed with a great deal of unusual sounds manifested in a totally different script. We have tried a different approach by starting from a limited number of words to demonstrate how Burmese tones and other important pronunciation elements work. From there we have built up the vocabulary around the context of those key words or phrases. Our key words have been selected in terms of the complexity of the script because the Burmese/Myanmar script is the second major challenge.

## A DISTINCTIVE SCRIPT

The Burmese script is not based on the Roman alphabet or any alphabet with similar concepts such as Cyrillic or Greek. As such this would not be too unusual but the way the Burmese alphabet works, how letters are combined to make words, is different. The alphabet only consists of consonants whilst vowel sounds are added through the symbols which indicate different tones as well.

One important thing: there are Romanized spellings of Myanmar words which are necessary to communicate Myanmar names such as Aung San Suu Kyi, Yangon, Irrawaddy River, Kyat and so on. These help visitors in the country with directions and orientation. They are also very commonly used to help the learners of Burmese to read and speak. Almost all the course books, teaching materials and phrase books for tourists apply this method. While it may sound counter intuitive, we believe that using Romanization can actually act as a barrier in getting your head around the language. To obtain a real feeling of Myanmar and to learn its correct pronunciation, studying the Myanmar script is essential from the beginning.

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## HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS BOOK

When following the chapters in this book you will be invited to analyse the script and to study step by step the way the script and pronunciation work together. As said above we have not used Romanized characters but have applied standard phonetic symbols to give you an impression of how to pronounce Burmese words. **Unless you are familiar with phonetic symbols you should study them in Appendix 1 before starting the main chapters.** To help you get started we have also prepared some audio and video material which is available on our Website:

[www.embracemyanmar.com](http://www.embracemyanmar.com).

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*As with every language to make progress you will need to practise with native speakers and get exposure to real-life contexts. You can also find teachers or conversation partners online.*

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We started by saying that learning Burmese is like mountain climbing. But there is an easy part, namely its grammar. Whilst mastering tones and script characters requires substantial efforts, learning the grammar is surprisingly easy. This is why we have introduced a variety of grammar concepts right from the beginning and not added

special grammar sessions.

One more thing: as we are building up vocabulary taking into account the complexity of the script we consider the first ten chapters as building blocks. This means it will take some prior efforts before the result of your study materialises in a more complete conversational capability.

## OUR READERS

You are a **Burmese Language Teacher** and wonder how best to explain the specifics of your language to foreigners who seem to have no clue about how Burmese works. Exploit the methodology and simplified language notes in this book. You may observe a 'Now I get it' effect amongst your learners.

If you are a **Diplomat**, staying in Myanmar for some time, you may want to learn at least some basic Burmese. You want to pronounce names correctly and know some key terms. But you are busy and most of your counterparts speak English. Time passes by and your language skills remain limited. Try this book.

If you have to do **Business** with or in the country or if you work for an **Organisation** dealing with Myanmar, you will be in a similar situation as our busy diplomat. It will impress your Myanmar colleagues if you can not only say the usual polite phrases but show a deeper understanding of what the language represents.

Do you intend to visit the country as a **Tourist**? Visiting a country like Myanmar is a journey into a world of mystic culture and wonderful nature; it is also a visit to a country in an interesting period of transition, developing socially, politically and economically. Assuming that you are planning your visit months in advance, you may also want to learn (about) the language of another world.

Maybe you intend to become a language student, a **Student** of the Myanmar language. Soon this book may well be too basic for you. But when starting your language classes or university lectures it could help you to advance faster.

Last but not least, you have a **Personal Relationship** with Myanmar? You have a Myanmar spouse or friends? They may want to teach you their language, yet you are missing an introduction as your spouse or friend is a native speaker but not a language teacher, so where to start? Well, start here.

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# 1 To Come ဝ

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This is our first word for you.

Look at the writing. It consists of two parts. The first part is a consonant or more precisely, a consonant letter, ဝ, with the sound /l/; the second part is a vowel symbol, ဝ /à/. The phonetic symbols between the two slashes indicate respectively, the sounds of the consonant and the vowel.

You have to distinguish the sound of a consonant – in our case /l/ - from the way to pronounce it as part of the alphabet, which is /l̥à/. This is not uncommon in other languages. Compare how the letters b, k, and h sound in the English alphabet with how they sound as consonants, /b/, /k/ and /h/ in the words 'book', 'kid' and 'hat'.

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*The interplay between consonant and vowel symbols is key to understand Burmese. Having a consonant at the initial position is a predominant characteristic of Myanmar words.*

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The Myanmar alphabet has special characteristics:

First, all the letters in the alphabet end with a short and creaky tone /à/ – no variations like the letters in the English alphabet. This vowel sound /à/ is quite similar to the vowel sound in the English word 'ark'.

Second, most of the letters themselves represent words. They are not only letters that are to be

combined to make a word, like in Western alphabets, but they can also carry meanings in themselves. In the above case, the consonant letter ဝ /l̥à/ (as a word) means 'moon' or 'month'.

We are not introducing the full alphabet at this stage. We are going to present the consonant letters stepwise. In fact you will already see five of them in this chapter. After Chapter 10, a lexical overview will cover a more elaborated explanation of the Myanmar alphabet.

What you should notice for the time being, however, is that the Myanmar alphabet only consists of consonant letters with one exception (the last letter with a vowel sound). In other words, the Burmese vowels are introduced by symbols – and there are quite a lot of them - that are not part of the alphabet as such.

In the following chapters we will introduce step by step the script of the Myanmar language which is usually composed of alphabet letters and vowel symbols. Again, only after Chapter 10 – in the first lexical overview - will we bring the pieces together to complete the puzzle.

## The Tones

When you listen to the sound of the consonant letter ဝ /l̥à/ you will notice that the tone of ဝ is short and sharp. It sounds a bit like the word 'lac', but without final consonant sound. It is usually termed 'the **creaky** tone' because your throat is supposed to be tightened when saying it. We will describe this tone as 'the short creaky tone'.

Adding the vowel symbol ဝ changes it to a little longer tone which is rather low. It can be termed 'the **low** tone', which occurs in our key word: ဝဝ /l̥à/ *to come*. ဝဝ sounds very similar to the sixth musical note 'lah'.

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## 2 To Eat စား

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Our second key word is စား which means 'to eat'. The new alphabet letter စ with the sound /s/ is combined with the vowel symbol ဝဲ:

### The Tones

We will begin with the three tones of the /a/ tone group that are to be combined with the consonant စ. The first one is စ /sǎ/, with the short creaky tone /ǎ/. You can compare it to င /lǎ/. It is the same rhyme, isn't it? စ on its own (without the vowel symbol) also carries a meaning, which is 'to start'.

When စ is put together with the vowel symbol ဝဲ /à/, it becomes a new word စဝဲ /sà/, which has the low tone and the same rhyme as ငဝဲ. Just like the case of င and ငဝဲ, the change in the tone gives the word a different meaning: စဝဲ means 'letter' or 'lesson' or 'language'.

Our key word of this chapter, စား /sá/ *to eat*, has the high tone.

Try to practice the three tones: စ (to start), စဝဲ (letter, language etc.) and စား (to eat). A reminder: speakers of non-tonal languages tend to memorise only the general pronunciation /sa/, and forget to be conscious of the tones. At the beginning you need to force yourself to always remember the right tone, best to recall the Burmese script in your mind.

### The Usage

Now let's see how our key word စား *to eat* works in context. As it is also a verb like ငဝဲ, *to come*, it will be commonly seen with appropriate verb suffixes. Look at the following:

စား တယ် /sá dè/	<i>I eat or someone eats. (not: 'be eating')</i>
စား မယ် /sá mè/	<i>I will or someone will eat.</i>
စား သ လား /sá ðə lá/	<i>Do you or does someone eat?</i>
စား မ လား /sá mə lá/	<i>Will you or will someone eat?</i>

### Imperative

Let us explore a further usage: the addition of the suffix ဝါ to the verb, as in စား ဝါ, can form an imperative - *please eat*. The suffix ဝါ contains a new consonant ဝ /pǎ/. This consonant is followed by the vowel symbol - ဝါ, which in fact sounds exactly the same as the symbol ဝဲ /à/. So now you have come across the two symbols ဝဲ and ဝါ which carry the same sound /à/ which is the tone in the middle of the group /ǎ/, /à/, /á/.

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# 4 Don't Know မသိဘူး

## The Tones

မ သိ ဘူး (*I don't know*) is arguably a useful survival phrase. Let's explore the script. The key word in this sentence is သိ /θi/ *to know*. The letter သ carries the consonant /θ/ (already introduced in Chapter 1), a non-aspirated consonant sound, which is comparable to the sound produced by 'th' in the English words thick, thin, thought etc. although the English /θ/ is aspirated. When သ is combined with the vowel symbol ဝိ /i/, the two together form the one-syllable verb သိ *to know*.

The tone involved in သိ is the short creaky tone or the first tone of the group ဝိ, ဝီ, ဝီး or /i/, /i/, /i/. Here you can imagine how သ can sound with the two other tones: သီ /θi/ with the middle low tone, which means *arrange flowers in a string*; and သီး /θi/ with the high tone, meaning *fruit(s)* or *to fruit*.

## Negation in Burmese

How to say 'I don't know'? Look at the structure of the sentence မ သိ ဘူး: this is how you form a negative. It involves the prefix မ and the suffix ဘူး around the verb သိ. This is the basic structure of a negative statement in Myanmar.

You have already come across the letter မ in မယ် and မလား. Recall the short vowel sound, which means that မ is pronounced /mə/, not /ma/, the same pronunciation rule as in သလား and အစား. You now have an idea how this rule works: when a consonant letter from the alphabet like မ, သ, အ etc. is added to a key word, it tends to have a sound reduction, from the original /a/ to the shorter /ə/.

The suffix ဘူး is a word with a new consonant and a new tone group. First, the consonant letter: ဘ carries the sound /b/, and the vowel symbol ဝိ: /u/ sounds like the vowel in the English words zoo, two etc. The tone in ဘူး is the high tone of the group /u/, /ù/, /ú/ or ဝု, ဝူ, ဝူး.

Thus, you have the words in the three tones as ဘု /bu/, ဘူ /bù/, ဘူး /bú/. The diacritics are quite clear and all subscript: the first one, ဝု, with one stick underneath; the second, ဝူ, having two sticks; and the third one with the addition of ဝး, the usual marker of the last tone. The word ဘု means 'knob' or 'lump' while ဘူ is a term used in a card game, which are not so relevant to our contexts in this book.

You can also put the suffix ပါ /bà/ next to the verb and form a polite expression မ သိ ပါ ဘူး. Study the following negative statements:

- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| မ လာ (ပါ) ဘူး  | <i>I don't/didn't come. or someone doesn't/didn't come.</i> |
| မ စား (ပါ) ဘူး | <i>I don't/didn't eat or someone doesn't/didn't eat.</i>    |