

Little Tricky Things in “မြန်မာစာ/မြန်မာစကား” the Burmese Language

May Nyane, Burmese Author and Language Instructor, Maryland, USA

December 14, 2015

I think of sharing a few tricky things of the Burmese language, which I experience in teaching Burmese to American learners – American diplomats who take a Burmese course before their diplomatic terms in Myanmar.

To begin with, what is always puzzling to my American students is the additional consonants in the Burmese Alphabet (the alphabet of 33 letters altogether). They would question why there are such pairs of consonant letters as ဂ and ဃ, ဇ and ဈ, ဒ and င, ဖ and ဖဲ, ဖဲ and ဖဲ, ဖဲ and ဖဲ, ဖဲ and ဖဲ, ဖဲ and ဖဲ etc. while both letters in each pair have exactly the same pronunciation! My students are usually not very satisfied with the explanation I give them – “different consonants, despite their identical pronunciation, convey different meanings in context”. It does not seem to be a good logical justification to my American learners. Maybe one could tell them “these extra letters are particularly used in the words derived from the Pali language”. Still they would argue that more simplified spelling rules could be set, that is, replacing the special letters in Pali words with their simpler counterparts. Perhaps the Pali derivative သာဓု *Well done!* could be written as သာဒု where ဓ is replaced with the more commonly used ဒ. This kind of simplification could work as long as the word is clearly defined in the dictionary. The advantage of the use of those special additional letters may be just to make one see the origin of the words as Pali.

My poor American students also have to deal with the complicated Burmese symbols – vowel symbols, symbols with the killer, consonant clusters with specific diacritics and so on. For those who have been used to the spellings of a ‘flat form’ where a word is simply made of alphabet letters put together, a Burmese word, a mixture of a letter with all kinds of diacritics above or below or around the letter, would drive them crazy!

Now comes the biggest problem - the issue of what the Burmese usually say: ရေးတော့အမှန် ဖတ်တော့အသံ "what you write is the right form, what you read is the right sound". Such things exist in English but they abundantly occur in Burmese! A few examples in English are 'put' and 'but' where the vowel 'u' sounds differently; 'flood' and 'stood' which contain the same 'ood' but read with different vowel sounds. In Burmese, the problem is to do with the change between the voiced and the voiceless or the aspirated and the non-aspirated consonants. One interesting case is ကလေး *child* which reads ခလေး where the non-aspirated /က/ is changed to the aspirated /ခ/. There are also cases like ကစားစရာ *toy* which reads /ကစားဇရာ/, ကကန် *crab* which reads /ကကန်/, စပါး *rice* pronounced /ဇပါး/, ကတိ *promise* pronounced /ကဒိ/ etc. all with the change from the voiceless to the voiced consonants. Are these voiceless consonants က, စ က etc. always changed to the voiced ဂ, ဇ, ဒ .in pronunciation?. We can't say 'yes' as there is a case like ကမာရွတ် *Kamayut* (the name of a place in Yangon, Myanmar) where we don't pronounce /က/ as /ဂ/! One justification is that such a sound shift (between the voiced and the voiceless) does not occur in borrowed words (from Pali and Mon). However, since learning a language is not studying 'Linguistics', I don't think we have to go that far – referring to the origins of the words in use. In my opinion, we just need to create the learning environment where we give our learners sufficient exposure and practice till they become familiar with the unusual vocabulary.

Another nuisance in learning Burmese is a series of 'consonant clusters'. My Westerner students usually find it almost impossible to pronounce ကျ or ကြ (/k/ and /y/ together). Their frustration would even grow with the nasal clusters: ငှ, နှ, မှ and ညှ since the simple nasal consonants င and ည are already challenging for them to pronounce!

Then the issue of ကျ or ချ pronounced as ဂျ in some cases. Again it is about when to change from the voiceless to the voiced. At least I could give my students the rule of keeping the voiceless consonants unchanged when they are next to the glottal stop. For instance, ချင် *want* just reads /ချင်/ in အိပ်ချင် *want to sleep* although it is shifted to /ဂျင်/ in စားချင် *want to eat* because အိပ် contains a glottal stop while စား does not.

This rule makes the life of our Western learners a bit less difficult. After this stage of acquiring Burmese words with clusters, we could say the learners have already been through quite a lot in the basic Burmese.

One more baffling riddle in Burmese pronunciation: an alphabet letter like က or ဝ pronounced with the half vowel, not with the full vowel sound, in some cases. My learners cannot easily digest the use of the half vowel on the first syllable of the words like စကား, သမီး, ကလေး, ဆရာ, ဆရာမ, ပထမ, အဖေ, အမေ etc. Why can't စ, သ, အ etc. be pronounced as they are written? Why is the vowel /a/ reduced to the half vowel in such words? A mystery for them! To make the matter more complicated, Burmese words like ပုလဲပုတီး and သေနတ် also take the same formula of the first syllables reduced to the half vowel. ပုလဲပုတီး reads /ပလဲဘဒီး/ and သေနတ် reads /သနတ်/. Thus the first syllables with ့ and ္ in such words are supposed to take the half vowel. But it is not always the case. Consider the word လေယာဉ် where လေ is not reduced to the half vowel unlike သေ in သေနတ်!

Once our learners have overcome basic pronunciation norms and tricky spellings of Burmese words, they are introduced to the sentence formation. This is when they have to face the challenge of formal and informal usages. They sweat a lot in dealing with formal-informal pairs like တယ် and သည်; မယ် and မည်; တဲ့ and သော; ရင် and လျှင်; တကယ်လို့ and အကယ်၍; ဒါပေမယ့် and သို့သော်; ဘာကြောင့်လဲဆိုတော့ and အဘယ်ကြောင့်ဆိုသော် etc. etc. Reading authentic texts of Burmese is a weary activity for my learners who are at the intermediate level.

The key to mastering a language is in fact a good deal of practice as all of us know and agree. In my view, a learner of Burmese should practise enough to acquire correct pronunciation and usage even at the basic levels and then revise every stage while gradually moving towards more advanced levels. This is in general the best way to train oneself to master a foreign language, I believe.



May Nyane: (M.A. Burmese) is a Burmese author of more than a hundred short stories in Myanmar magazines and 12 Burmese novels published between 1986 and 2013. She worked in University of Yangon as a Burmese lecturer from 1986 to 2005. She is currently teaching Burmese to both Myanmar and American learners in Maryland, USA.