

What Teaching Burmese Taught Me

Kenneth Wong, Burmese Instructor, UC Berkeley, USA

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One evening, I ransacked the public photos on Flickr and Picasa for shots of Burmese teashops. I was looking specifically for shop signs featuring the word *Letphet yay*, or tea, to share with the students in my Burmese language class. The ubiquitous sweet tea—that brick-colored drink thickened with condensed milk—is a close cousin of the Indian Chai, but it might as well be Burma’s national drink. Every morning in downtown Rangoon, the umbrella-clutching civil servants, the satchel-slinging students, and the betel-chewing taxi drivers huddle around low tables along the city sidewalks, sipping tea before they face their grueling day and the scorching sun. *Letphet yay*, I figured, should be the first word I introduce to my Latte-drinking American students in the lesson on food-related words and phrases.

I thought I knew how to spell *tea* in Burmese. Alas, I was wrong. Scrutinizing the shop signs in those sun-washed, color-saturated streetscapes captured by globetrotters and backpackers, I noticed the many different ways the same word is written.

Lephet yay is a compound word, formed by joining the word for tealeaf လက်ဖက် (lephet) and liquid ရည် (yay). In some signs, Lephet is spelled with the letter ဖ Pha. In others, it’s spelled with ဘ Ba. In some, the writer uses the stacked consonants, the conventional way to spell Pali-derived words. Even *yay* is spelled in a couple of ways. In some, it’s spelled with the diacritic mark ြ called Thway htoe preceding the letter ရ Ya; in others, ရ is followed by ည်, the bannered Nya ည်. The dictionary points to a preferred spelling, but a few Google searches reveal that all the variations I spotted in the photos are in use, some more than others. This is the first hint I got of my mother tongue’s idiosyncrasies that I’d never noticed before.

I was born and raised in Rangoon, a few blocks away from the bustling Yay Gyaw Market. I grew up in a Chinese household, with people around me speaking Toisan (a Cantonese dialect). But I was also a voracious reader even in my boyhood. I regularly visited the book rental place in my neighborhood to check out Burmese comics and magazines. Quite often, I borrowed literary titles many in my age group would consider a punishment to read. By the time I reached high school, I was prolific at composing love poems in the classic four-syllable rhyme scheme (a useful skill in romantic pursuits). Despite my Chinese ancestry, I peppered my speech with quintessential Burmese expressions like တစ်ခါသေဖူး ပျဉ်ဖိုးနားလည် *ta khah thay boo pyin bo nar leh* (you have to die at least once to truly appreciate the price of coffin wood).

Like any native speaker, I construct my Burmese sentences by instinct, not by thinking. To speak it, I rely on my linguistic reflexes, not a set of formulas. But to teach it to those who have not yet developed these instincts and reflexes, I needed to better understand the rules that govern the language. And the rules in Burmese, I soon discovered, are more often violated than they're followed.

Many Burmese words are spelled one way, but pronounced another way. For a start, the word for "word" is spelled စကား *sa-kar*, but pronounced *za-gar*. The word "to play" is written ကစား *ka-sar*, but pronounced *ga-zar*. The word for "pagoda" is written ဘုရား *bu-yar* but pronounced *pha-yar*. "One kyat" is written တစ်ကျပ် *tit kyat* but pronounced *da gyat*. The color black is written မည်း *mee* but pronounced *meh*. The verb "to laugh," however, is the opposite. It's written ရယ် *yeh*, but pronounced *yee*. The word for liquid is spelled ရည် *yee* but pronounced *yay*. By the way, the word ရည် "liquid" or "juice," which is part of compound words like "lemonade" သံပရာရည် (*than maya yay*) or "sugarcane juice" ကြံရည် (*kyan yay*), and the word ရေ "water," which is part of words like "lake" ရေကန် (*yay kan*) or "to swim" ရေကူး (*yay koo*), are spelled differently—even though both are pronounced *yay*.

The lesson on counting from one to ten seemed fairly straightforward, until I had to explain the dizzying array of unit classifiers. The same classifiers exist in English too: a *bunch* of bananas, a *cup* of coffee, a *loaf* of bread, a *block* of cheese, and so on. But in Burmese, the list is several times longer, and the logic is not always clear. The classifier for measuring long, thin objects (like pencil) is ချောင်း *chaung*. To count humans, you use the classifier ယောက် *yauk*. To count animals, you use ကောင် *kaung*. If you mix up those two, you risk inadvertently insulting someone. (If you say မင်းတို့ သုံးကောင် instead of မင်းတို့ သုံးယောက် you're effectively saying "You **three animals**" instead of "You three.") The classifier စီး *si* is for counting cars, but trains and airplanes require စင်း *sin*, a different classifier.

My students' headache grew worse when the verb "to ride" was introduced to the mix. It happens to be identical to the vehicle classifier စီး *si* in both spelling and pronunciation. Incidentally, the verb "to ride" and the noun "urine" sound almost identical. The only distinction is, "to ride" is spelled with the unaspirated *sa 'o'* and "urine" with the aspirated *sa 'so'*. In theory, the aspirated *sa* is pronounced with a sharper sibilant, but in practice, native speakers don't always make an effort to aspirate the *sa* where it's called for. Therefore, when someone shouts, "si thwar," you might need to probe further to understand if he means "go take a ride" or "go take a piss."

Since Burmese is tonal, two words that sound identical to untrained ears could mean drastically different things. Pronouncing *may* with an abrupt stop gives you the verb "to forget" (မေ့). Pronouncing it with an emphatic raised voice gives you the verb "to ask" (မေး). *Sa* pronounced with an abrupt end means "to begin" (စ). If you sustain the vowel sound a little bit, it means "word" or "letter" (စာ). And if you raise your voice and pronounce it with an open-throated vowel, it means "to eat" (စား).

In the classroom, I'm the one scribbling on the blackboard and leading the exercises; yet, I can't help thinking my students are the ones teaching me about courage and perseverance. They accept the daunting challenge of a new language without

complaints. (OK, maybe with a few grunts now and then.) Despite the risk of making embarrassing mistakes, they make heroic efforts to say the simplest things in a foreign tongue full of irregularities. Their curious questions lead me to rediscover my own language in a whole new light.

In Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, the protagonist Henry Higgins admonishes a sulking flower girl: "Remember that you're a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and the Bible."

I'm proud to be fluent in the language that the courtier Ananda Thuriya used to compose a poem on the eve of his execution; that the minister Letwae Thonara used in his verses to lament his exile at the foot of Meh Zar Hills; that Aung San Suu Kyi used to address her supporters when she emerged from decades of house arrest. Perhaps more important, I'm proud of my students, who do not have the benefit of my upbringing but choose to come to class every day to do battle with the complexities of my mother tongue.



Kenneth Wong is a Burmese-American author, translator and blogger. His writings have appeared in *The Irrawaddy*, *Myanmar Times*, *AGNI*, *Grain*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* magazines. He teaches a course on Introductory Burmese at UC Berkeley, California, USA.