We think of Burma as a country of great linguistic and ethnic diversity. The government today classifies the population into 135 ‘national races’, most of which they place under eight larger overarching categories. The Ethnologue website (www.ethnologue.com), which provides information about languages across the globe, says that there are 117 living languages in the country. This discrepancy points to both differences in classification schemes, but also perhaps highlights an expectation – common at least in the English-speaking world – that language and ethnicity should be nearly co-equal. Since the colonial era, indigenous ways of making sense of identity and community, which may or may not have been based on language, have been overtaken by a practice that the British introduced: equating language first with race, and later, as the idea of race evolved, with ethnic group.

Patrick McCormick

Above: Marma Nuns, Yangon, 2016.
Below left: Tavoyan Speaker, July 2016.
Photos courtesy of the author.
teenth century, and is the origin of such forms as ‘Rangoon’, which in current pronunciation is Yangon. On the other hand, the word for temple or school, written [KYON˙H˙], is (kaŋ) in Standard Burmese and Rakhaing, but [ki[ŋ] in Tavoyan. The presence of the ‘y’ sound in Tavoyan suggests that it preserves a sound that existed in the oldest stages of Burmese, which was first written in the eleventh century AD.

Imagine this kind of change throughout the sound systems, together with differences in vocabulary and a few in syntax (or ‘grammar’). Differences in vocabulary can reflect borrowings from other languages. The Standard Burmese word lungyi [laɪŋ] comes from Bengali lungi, while the Rakhaing word râŋg is râng, itself from Malay rasing. Other words are simply made up of different native components: ‘boy’ in Standard Burmese is lâs[ŋ]ɡ, literally ‘animal + little’, compared with Tavoyan pâ:n. Similarly, literally ‘male + little’. Tavoyan sâ:n now only occurs as an element in girl’s names in Standard Burmese. The calque is another mode of more subtle borrowing in which native elements replicate a model from another language. ‘Chili’ in Burmese is ša:ni, literally ‘pepper + fruit’, but Intha ssâ:ni, literally ‘spicy + fruit’, replicates Shan mûk pâ:n, ‘fruit + spicy’.

Differences in syntax are less numerous. They may include the example of how questions are asked in Intha. For example, pê kâ: dâ pê? for ‘what are you doing?’ In Burmese, this would be bô la? kâ: dâ, literally ‘have you done?’. The final [l] here indicates a relative question (that is, involving who, what, where, when, who, and may be dropped off in very casual speech in some circumstances. In Intha, however, it appears to be normal to leave it off or even replace it with the [l], apparently from Shan. The other dialects follow Standard Burmese in this regard.

Changing names, changing identifications?

Dealing with the names of languages, peoples, and what we call ‘ethnicity’ today is in general highly problematic. The exact content of a term, or the people and situations in which a term is used, can change radically over time. People themselves change names and reinterpret them. One such in which a term is used, can change radically over time. People themselves change names and reinterpret them. One such example in English is the term ‘Dutch’, which refers to the language of the Netherlands but is cognate with the name Germans have for themselves and their language, Deutsch.

When dealing with Burmese dialect speakers, we see similar shifts and changes. In Burmese English, today the official name of the country, language and people is Myanma, written MÅNMA. The form BAASA, the origin of such terms as Burme and Burmese in English and Bamar or Bama in Burmese English, is from the same word, through a particular sound change. According to interviews I conducted in 2016, Rakhaings call themselves ci:pâ:n and their language râ:npâ:n, literally ‘Rakhaing’ + ‘language’. Marmas call themselves mrmâ:n and their language mrmâ:n. We have already seen how the sound change from t to y has affected Standard Burmese, so the connection between Marmas and Myanmare is immediate and intriguing. In the nineteenth century, British officials such as Hamilton found that terms like Rakhaing and Wogyee referred only to local parts of Arakan, and that the people of Arakan used Morom to refer to themselves. They also used the terms Marmâ:n-ɡ and Marmâ:n-ɡid. Today, however, the term refers only to the Baraus, the Burmese-speaking Buddhist population of what is now Bangladesh.

Tavoyans tend to call themselves Bi:nd, the same as the Standard Burmese name of the ethnic majority, and their language bi:ndâ, although sometimes (particularly for ideological reasons), some call themselves dau: and their language dau:ng. Intha call themselves Xnâ: and their language Xnâ:ba. British sources also use ‘Daw’ for Intha. Whether this was a local appellation or some kind of classificatory confusion remains to be investigated. British scholars tried to draw connections between the various dialect speakers.

Such variation in names seems to index as much emerging categories as historical and political developments (the rise of nationalism, the political benefits of being an ethnic group), and emerging schemes of knowledge. These last include developing linguistic classifications, and government technologies of governance, starting with British practices and evolving over time, through to the most recent government census of 2014. A final element is no doubt people’s own lived experiences, in which earlier pre-colonial practices, such as having multiple or shifting identities, was possible and normal. One way to understand the shift in the meaning of Marmâ:n-ɡ is to note that, in what is now Bangladesh, Rakhaings are a Buddhist community with close ties to the highly institutionalized and prestigious Burmese Buddhism. If Buddhist practices were less organized or institutionalized among the Baraus, they would seek training and ordination in Rakhaing institutions, where they would be exposed to the language and thus in a sense ‘become’ a kind of Rakhaing.

Positioning Burmese and Its Dialects Hierarchically

In whatever way the speakers of these Burmese dialects evaluate themselves, they appear to be at or near the top of the local language hierarchy. Whatever the names for themselves and their languages, dialect speakers tend to have the same status as Burmans in the language ecology. My observation comes out of a body of scholarship on multi-lingualism and language contact. In situations where there is multilingualism – people regularly speaking many languages – the overall trend is that who speaks what language, or who does and does not learn a specific language, reflects where speech communities fall on a hierarchy.

A corollary of ‘learning up’ is that speakers of lower-placed languages can replicate both matter (usually thought of as ‘borrowings’) and patterns (or ‘syntact’) by reanalyzing native words or forms and using them in the same way as the model language. Said another way, people tend to learn the languages higher up on the hierarchy and not the other way. Inside Burma, the general trend is that one speaks, the lower one is on the hierarchy. Slightly confusingly, higher status languages live in lower altitudes – the lowlands and in mountain villages – whereas lower status languages live in higher altitudes – the uplands, highlands, and mountains. An example from the Kachin world would be a Maru or Uhuvo speaker, who can also speak Burmese and possibly Shan or Chinese. Jinghpaw and Shan speakers would not learn Uhuvo unless they had family connections. But much rarely learning instead.

Changing names, changing identifications? There is much more work to do in English and such economically useful languages as Korean or Japanese. Parallels outside of Burma are many, such as eastern Europeans who learn many western European languages for work and education, or Japanese who learn Burmese.

Looking ahead, this trend of speaking and replicating up is a general pattern, and there are important exceptions. The kind of multilingualism found here is long-term and stable, not a rapid language shift. Certain populations will learn languages lower on the hierarchy, such as Chinese and other traders who learn many languages to facilitate business. Absolute numbers can make a crucial difference: in some parts of lower Burma, where the Mons are the local majority, some Burmese do in fact learn Mon. Based on what I have observed up to now, the Intha who are a Muslim-majority country, the Bengali language stands above Marmas and Rakhaings, yet within local Buddhist communities, Rakhaing and Marmas are further apart. In the case of Intha, the final sound [l] here indicates a relative question (that is, involving who, what, where, when, who, and may be dropped off in very casual speech in some circumstances. In Intha, however, it appears to be normal to leave it off or even replace it with the [l], apparently from Shan. The other dialects follow Standard Burmese in this regard.

absolute numbers may also help explain the phonological situation in some of the Burmese dialects. Historically, apparently Shan learned Intha but not the other way around, and speakers of Karen languages around Tavoyan learn Tavoyan but not the other way around. When large numbers of speakers speak a higher status language, they may take with them certain speech habits. If the higher-status language is spoken by a fairly small number of people, the surrounding speech habits may work to morphologize the language.

Following this observation, Intha lacks the sound [f], having instead [fl], which represents the influence of Shan.

References

1 Numbers throughout are from the Ethnologue website, www.ethnologue.com.
2 In August 2016, I interviewed Danu and Taung’yo speakers near Pindaya in Shan State. Both groups seem to have a distinct sense of identity.
3 Following convention, forms between brackets <> represent transliterations from another alphabet (here Burmese), while forms between single slashes // represent sounds.