

A Phonological Study of Burmese Language Spoken by Migrant Workers in Talaad Thai Market of Thailand

Sumana¹, Veerakarn Kanokkamalade² and Sakchai Posai³

Received: 12 February 2024; **Revised:** 26 November 2024; **Accepted:** 05 December 2024

Abstract

This thesis, titled "A Phonological Study of the Burmese Language Spoken by Migrant Workers in Talaad Thai Market, Thailand," explores the phonological variations in Burmese as used by migrant workers. The study's objectives are: (1) to examine sound variations in the Burmese language spoken at Talaad Thai market in Pathum Thani, Thailand; (2) to identify factors influencing these variations, comparing them to Burmese speakers at Bahan market in Yangon, Myanmar; and (3) to analyze similarities and differences between the two groups. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 40 key informants from both locations, focusing on the sound system of consonants, vowels, and tones.

The findings reveal significant phonological variations, offering valuable insights into language typology, preservation, and education in the context of Myanmar. Differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and individual speech patterns were observed, influenced by factors such as age, education, and social background. Distinct vocabulary choices and pronunciation styles emerged as major points of variation. The research systematically presents unique responses from key informants, detailing their views, feelings, and usage of Burmese in daily life. Specific linguistic features, including eleven categories of frequently used words related to markets, kinship terms, and essential vocabulary, are highlighted to complement the study. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of Burmese phonology, shedding light on linguistic dynamics across different sociolinguistic contexts.

Keywords: A Phonological Study; Burmese Language; Migrant Workers Talaad Thai Market of Thailand

¹ Master of Art in Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, Mahachulanongkornrajavidyalaya University

^{2 3} Lecturer of the Faculty of Humanities, Mahachulanongkornrajavidyalaya University

Corresponding author, e-mail: sumanamy409@gmail.com

Introduction

Myanmar or Burmese is the official language of Myanmar since a long time ago. The population of the country was estimated at 54.1 million people according to Myanmar Population (Worldometer,2022) who used Burmese's official language in the media, government administration, and all levels of education. The utilization of minority languages is suppressed by the authoritarian regime. Several ethnic groups dwell in Myanmar and the Burmese language is one of the original languages in Myanmar because, according to estimation, 33 million people have spoken the Burmese language in the ancient period. The area of the whole spread of the country can be divided into three parts of the zones involving the upper, middle, and lower zones. Most of the people in the central regions and lower parts speak the Burmese language as a mother tongue, while people in other parts employ their languages for communication among themselves.

The population of about 70% of Myanmar according to Administrative Map of Myanmar (2022) is the mother tongue user of Burmese language, whereas other ethnic minority groups learn Burmese as a second language at school and in daily activities for contact. In overseas countries like Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, many people fleeing from Myanmar including migrant workers, students, and asylum seekers apply the Burmese language but the pronunciation and tones are much different from those who live in Yangon. Talaad Thai was established in 1997 and administrated by Dr. Thanom Angkanawatana who was the founder of Thai Agro Products Company Limited, and it is Thailand's biggest central market for agricultural products. The idea of establishing the market place was too important for the agricultural products, while the free trade system became a vital concern for the traders. The service of a collection and distribution channel for both local and international agricultural products were the major function of the market. Talaad Thai is situated on Phaholyothin Road (KM. 42), Khlong Luang district, Pathum Thani province, and is not far from Thammasart University (Rangsit campus). Due to its excellent location, local traders from all over the country and international traders can commute to and from the market very conveniently.

The period revealed by the Myazedi stone showed the gradual decline in the formal use of the Pāli and Mon languages, and the rise of the Burmese language, which was becoming mature as a medium of literary expression, using Mon script. The later decades of the Pagan period marked the ascendancy of Burman cultural

traits at the expense of Mon tradition. The Myazedi inscription is a benchmark from which to chronicle the development of a peculiarly Burmese culture according to language of Myanmar (Britannica, 2022).

Major problems of the research can be conducted as a speech sound problem where the speech sounds of an individual's language are not produced properly, not produced at all or not used correctly. There are two main types of speech sound problems which include: 1. Articulation disorder which means disorder in which an individual cannot produce speech sounds correctly due to the imprecise placement, timing and movement of the speech muscles, lips, tongue, palate or throat. And Phonological disorder takes place where an individual will have a difficulty in using the rules of the sound system of their language correctly. An individual with a phonological disorder may have difficulty in recognizing the difference between a pair of sounds. For example, knowing that the 's' in 'sin' is different to the 's' in 'shin', this may result in a difficulty producing these sounds correctly, the individual may say 'sin' for 'shin' (Watkins Justin, 2005).

Research on problems can be classified as two major factors that emerge when interpreting is an ongoing process. The errors occur omissions of important information and the listeners need more attention to understand the speakers. Complex communication has several challenges for interpreters, and more effort needs to be put into listening, and understanding. So, there is a requirement of this sort of research to provide the necessary guidance for those who have an interest in better communication.

Research Objectives

1. To examine sound variations in the Burmese language spoken by migrant workers at Talaad Thai market, Pathum Thani, Thailand.
2. To explore the factors influencing sound variations in the Burmese language used at Bahan market, Yangon, Myanmar.
3. To compare the similarities and differences in Burmese language usage between migrant workers at Talaad Thai market and speakers at Bahan market.

Research Methodology

The researcher needed to study all available information about the phonology of Burmese spoken in Talaad Thai and Bahan market where diverse ethnic

people of Myanmar have been living. This study applied a mixed method nature that focuses on a phonological study of the Burmese language spoken in Thailand, which collected the data from key informants at Talaad Thai market of Thailand and Bahan market, Bahan township, Yangon, Myanmar, where the people used the Burmese language in their daily lives.

The idea of choosing the survey area was under the supervision of supervisors who are chairman and member of the thesis committees. The written records of the survey were done continuously during the 2021 to 2024. Since, the books, articles, journals, and thesis books were collected for the research, the data was derived from the various scholars and researchers of course. To obtain the exact data, the researcher went to Talaad Thai market several times. The reason why the interviewees had different professions, time management played an important role in interviewing.

Research Tools

In terms of data collection, every stage was carried out systematically to make sure that the facts and the information were explicit and effective for application in the respective field. Hence, tools for data collection played a vital role in achieving better research. The tool of data collection was an In-depth interview with the scheduled questions of a phonology of the Burmese language, the sound system of consonants, vowels, and tones spoken in Talaad Thai market, Pathum Thani province of Thailand and Bahan market of Myanmar. The questions were written for efficient and effective communication to get valid and reliable data.

For the instruments, in this study, there applied questionnaires; an interview, and a test. The questionnaires were used by asking for general information from the respondents. The interview was also used as an instrument to acquire more in-depth information about the Burmese language spoken by the speakers from Talaad market and the speakers from Bahan market as the certain participants in their background and language use in their daily lives.

The test results were used to compare the comparison of both Burmese languages in the Talaat Thai market used by different ethnic groups of migrant workers and the Burmese language spoken by the speakers in the Bahan market, Bahan Township, Yangon City, Myanmar, who played a role in the subjects' performance.

Results

According to the finding contributed to the broader understanding of language typology and provide valuable insights for linguistic research, language preservation, and language education in the context of Myanmar. With the result of the comparison, the outcome of individual speech patterns displays distinct between the Burmese language users. Additionally, vocabulary choices are one big different thing among them; pronunciation is another important variation.

For the result of the investigation on the main factors revealed that there still have some factors such age, educational level, and social background also can contribute to an individual difference in the way of speaking Burmese language. For further detail, the result of unique replying of the key informants was arranged in an academic way of the research. And general answer of the key informants was presented, then, the investigation and function of Burmese language were explored in a systematic way including key informants' feeling, view, and function of the Burmese language. For another result of the distinctive sounds between the Burmese language users, and vocabulary choices were mentioned as the big different thing, as an additional support pronunciation was found as one major variation for the key informants.

Lastly, the result of comparison for the testing of the similarities and differences of the Burmese language spoken by migrant workers at the Talaad Thai market in Pathum Thani, Thailand and people from the Bahan market, Bahan township, Yangon City, Myanmar. Burmese language's pronunciation which involved eleven categories concerning with daily usages involving related words of market, kinship terms and essential words of people were mentioned for the complement of the research. The researcher disbursed the test for key informants from a sample of (11) categories presented as follow:

No	Words in English	Indicator of the Pronunciation used by Myanmar people in two areas			
		Talaad Thai Market	Same	Bahan Market	Difference
1.	fruit	[θiʔθ]		[θiʔθ]	×
2.	banana	[ŋəpyɔθi]	√	[ŋəpyɔθ]	

No	Words in English	Indicator of the Pronunciation used by Myanmar people in two areas			
		Talaad Thai Market	Same	Bahan Market	Difference
3.	mango	[θəye θi]		[θəyeʔθi]	×
4.	betel nut	[g`aNz`e]	√	[g`aNz`e]	
5.	grape	[ts`abyi]	√	[ts`abyi]	
6.	guava	[m`aliga]	√	[θiʔθ]	
7.	coconut	[? ɔ3]	√	[ŋəpyɔθi]	
8.	mango	[θəyeʔ θiʔ θ]	√	[θəye θi]	
9.	pepper	[ŋəyouʔ]	√	[g`aNz`e]	
10.	orange	[eɪmɔ θiʔ]	√	[ts`abyi]	
11.	durian	[duyin]	√	[duyin]	
12.	mangos teen	[minguʔθi]	√	[duyin]	
13.	olive	[θaNIwiNθi]	√	[θaNIwiNθi]	
14.	pomegranate	[sàlɛθi]	√	[ŋəyouʔ]	
15.	fig	[θaph ^h éũθi]	√	[eɪmɔ θiʔ]	
16.	pear	[θɪtɔθi]	√	[duyin]	
17.	pineapple	[nánaʔθi]		[minguʔθi]	×
18.	watermelon	[θak ^h úáθi]	√	[θaNIwiNθi]	
19.	lemon	[θapɯjáθi]		[sàlɛθi]	×
20.	Plum	[zɪθi]	√	[θaph ^h éũθi]	
21.	Cherry	[tɕ ^h éθi]	√	[θɪtɔθi]	
22.	Dragon fruit	[nágammaʔθi]	√	[nánaʔθi]	
23.	avocado	[thɔbɛθi]	√	[θak ^h úáθi]	
24.	tamarind	[madzɪθi]	√	[θapɯjáθi]	
25.	potato	[álúθi]	√	[zɪθi]	
26.	tomato	[k ^h jántɕ ^h ũθi]	√	[tɕ ^h éθi]	
27.	pumpkin	[phjáουθi]		[phjáουθi]	×

No	Words in English	Indicator of the Pronunciation used by Myanmar people in two areas			
		Talaad Thai Market	Same	Bahan Market	Difference
28.	santol	[θɪʔtoθi]	√	[tʰɔ̃bɛθi]	
29.	Eggplant	[kʰjáũθi]	√	[madzɪθi]	
30.	papaya	[θaʔbòθi]	√	[áluθi]	

Table 1 (Category-1) Pronunciation of Vocabulary Word List for the fruits (30) words

The table above presents the phoneme pronunciations of 30 fruit-related words provided by the key informants. Minor differences were observed between Burmese speakers from Myanmar and those at Talaad Thai market.

For instance, in words 1 and 3, slight pronunciation differences were noted. In word 1, speakers from Bahan Market in Myanmar pronounced it as [θiʔ], while those from Talaad Thai market pronounced it as [θi], indicating a distinct pronunciation system. In the case of word 3 (betel nut) [gaNze], migrant workers at Talaad Thai omitted the suffix, likely due to pronunciation shifts after relocation.

In word 17, differences were observed as [nánaʔθi] and [nánaθi], with the glottal stop [ʔ] omitted by speakers from Talaad Thai. Similarly, in word 19 (lemon), there was a distinction between [θapɯjáθi] and [θabɯjáθi], where the former used "pɯ" and the latter used "bɯ." While these differences were minor due to shared familiarity, informants mentioned they often communicate in Thai to avoid misunderstandings.

In conclusion, pronunciation variations stem from the speakers' environments and long-term residency in different communities. These challenges can be addressed through dialogue and mutual exchange among the informants.

Discussion

This discussion highlights the phonological study of the Burmese language, focusing on three objectives: (1) examining sound variation among Burmese-speaking migrant workers at Talaad Thai Market in Pathum Thani, Thailand; (2) investigating factors influencing sound variation in the Burmese language at Bahan Market in

Yangon, Myanmar; and (3) comparing phonological similarities and differences between these two groups.

The study analyzed the sound system of Burmese, including its inventory, distribution, and combination rules. Burmese, as Myanmar's official language, presents intriguing phonological features, which future research could explore further. Previous studies, such as that by Erbs (2021), emphasize the importance of phonological awareness and phonetics in language acquisition. Erbs highlighted that phonics and phonemic awareness are critical for learners' communication skills, a finding resonant with this study's emphasis on how phonological features support effective language use.

Similarly, Lajoie (2020) explored phonological strategies for students with learning disabilities in foreign language classes. His study demonstrated the benefits of multisensory techniques in enhancing accessibility and progress in language learning. Although Lajoie's work differs in focus, both studies underline the role of phonological awareness in fostering communication and comprehension.

Phonological studies by Obiri-Yeboah (2021) and Sandar Linn (2018) offer further insights into vowel properties, syllable structures, and tonal systems. For instance, Obiri-Yeboah examined vowel distinctions and syllable patterns, while Linn's research on Yangon Burmese emphasized tonal variations and phonological word structures. Both studies provide valuable context for understanding the phonological features identified in this research, such as the predictable tonal contours and stress patterns in Burmese words.

This study also revealed assimilation phenomena in Yangon Burmese, including regressive, progressive, and coalescent types, which occur frequently and influence pronunciation. Additionally, the findings identified four types of phonological words (monosyllabic, disyllabic, trisyllabic, and tetrasyllabic) and three syllable types (major, minor, and pre-syllable), each contributing to the language's unique phonological system.

In comparing these studies, key parallels emerge, such as the importance of phonological awareness in language use and the shared focus on tonal and syllabic structures. However, this research distinguishes itself by examining sound variation between migrant workers and native speakers, highlighting the impact of social and environmental factors on language use.

In summary, this study adds to the broader understanding of Burmese phonology by identifying patterns and variations shaped by migration and local context. It underscores the dynamic nature of phonological systems and provides a foundation for further exploration of language variation and its sociolinguistic implications.

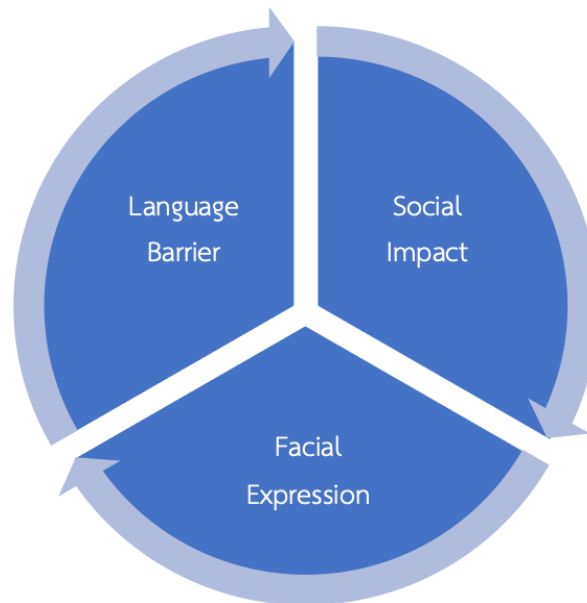
New Knowledge

Previous research by Sandar Linn, titled *"A Phonological Study of Burmese Language Spoken in Yangon, Myanmar,"* primarily explored the phonological system of Yangon Burmese using Tagmemic theory. The study analyzed tonal groups, phonological structures, syllables, and phonemes. The findings highlighted that the intonation of final syllables or particles could predict the tone of an utterance: a falling pitch resulted in a falling tone, while a rising pitch led to a rising tone. However, this predictability proved challenging in real-world contexts, as understanding intonation contours alone was insufficient. Observing facial expressions during conversation emerged as a more effective communication tool.

In addition to linguistic findings, the study underscored the significance of social impact assessments, particularly for migrant communities. Limited academic attention had been given to the lives of grassroots populations. Migrants, when given a platform, often shared their experiences candidly, reflecting a strong need for support from both the government and researchers.

Language barriers were a key challenge for migrants. Many participants, despite being Myanmar citizens, struggled with fluency in Burmese. Some also lacked proficiency in Thai, which further complicated communication. This dual language gap often resulted in misunderstandings and hindered effective dialogue, as illustrated in the accompanying diagram.

This study emphasizes the need for holistic approaches to linguistic and social integration, ensuring that migrant communities are supported linguistically, socially, and institutionally.



Picture 1 Sounds of Burmese language spoken in different areas

Overall, these are the fundamental values of new knowledge from the study because the previous research proved about the Burmese language in many ways. However, in this article, the new knowledge was simple and real, and of course, it was in need because of the rare investigation about them.

Conclusion and Suggestion

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the phonological system of the Burmese language, emphasizing its rich consonant inventory, tonal distinctions, and syllable structures. Key findings include the identification of four types of phonological words (monosyllabic, disyllabic, trisyllabic, and tetrasyllabic) with strong stress patterns and three syllable types (major, minor, and pre-syllable). Additionally, assimilation processes—regressive, progressive, and coalescent—were found to occur frequently in Yangon Burmese, along with the identification of four tonal categories: high falling, mid falling, mid-high, and high abrupt tones.

The study, conducted using a mixed-method approach, focused on Burmese spoken by individuals in Thailand, specifically at Talaad Thai market, where Burmese is commonly used in daily interactions. This phonological analysis is valuable for language learners, linguists, and educators, offering practical insights for proficiency development, linguistic typology, and curriculum design. While this research

enhances our understanding of Burmese phonology, further exploration into its sociolinguistic dimensions and interactions with other linguistic elements is recommended.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research on Burmese phonology offers several intriguing opportunities,

1. Diverse Ethnic Communities: Investigate phonological variations among Myanmar's ethnic groups living in different regions, uncovering unique sound systems.

2. Phonological Change Over Time: Study historical shifts in Burmese phonology, factors driving these changes, and their effects on the modern phonological system. Incorporating experimental phonology, such as perception studies or acoustic analysis, can complement traditional approaches.

3. Dialectal Variations and Tone Systems: Examine phonological differences across dialects and explore how tonal variations influence meaning in diverse contexts.

4. Technological Applications: Utilize tools such as speech recognition software, acoustic analysis, and computational models for documenting and analyzing Burmese phonology. Focus on consonant clusters and syllable structures to reveal phonotactic patterns.

5. Pedagogical Applications: Apply phonological research to improve language teaching methodologies, particularly for learners with different phonological backgrounds. Investigate morphophonological processes to understand the interaction between morphology and phonology.

6. Loanword Adaptation: Analyze how Burmese adapts loanwords phonologically, considering both historical and contemporary influences.

References

- Justin Watkins. (2005). *Studies in Burmese Linguistics* Pacific Linguistics. (Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies). Australian National university, Cirils Digital Printers, Fyshwick, Canberra, Australia.
- Lesley E. Lajoie. (2020). *A case study analysis of phonological awareness strategies aimed at helping students with learning disabilities in foreign language* (College of Professional Studies). Northeastern University Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

- Michelle Erbs. (2021). *Phonological awareness and phonics*. (Master's Theses in Education). Northwestern College, Iowa, USA.
- Sandar Linn. (2018). *A Phonological Study of Burmese Language Spoken in Yangon of Myanmar*. (Thesis of M.A. (Linguistics). Mahachulalongkorn rajavidyalaya University, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province.
- Administrative Map of Myanmar. Retrieved October 6, 2022, from <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/Myanmar-administrative-map.htm#:~:text=The%20country%20is%20divided%20into,of%20the%20respective%20ethnic%20groups>
- Amazing Thailand. *Talaad Thai Market*. Retrieved October 6, 2022, from <https://www.tourismthailand.org/Attraction/talaad-thai-market>
- Britannica. *Myazedi Inscription*. Retrieved October 6, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Myazedi-Inscription>
- Worldometer, *Myanmar Population*. Retrieved October 6, 2022, from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/myanmar-population/#:~:text=The%20current%20population%20of%20Myanmar,the%20latest%20Nations%20data>