Script and Sounds

Introduction

Burmese is a language of syllables, and these syllables are consistently structured (with few exceptions). It uses its own script derived from south Indian alphabets and, as such, it is an abugida types where consonants have an inherent vowel. This can be either an implicit "a" or by explicit vowel. The explicit vowel is normally by markers but can be with an independent vowel.

The standard form of a syllable is C(c)ᴜ(?)(T) e.g. ြမန်း where:

- The onset or head of the syllable is ြမ being C(c) and the rhyme of the syllable is န်း being ᴜ(?) + T.
- မ is C, the initial consonant. There are 33 individual consonants, one with two forms and 34 initial consonant sounds. There are 6 initial consonant sounds made by adding an aspiration marker. This adds a pre aspiration to the initial sound. A further 4 initial consonant sounds are made by adding a medial consonant where this changes the initial sound (e.g. to make a tɕ/dʑ (ch/j) or ʃ/ɕ (sh) sound).
- ြ is an optional (c) which refers to the medial consonant. The medial consonant adds to the end of the initial consonant. These are the second consonant in consonant clusters. There are only 3 medial consonants (e.g. the "my" sound in Myanmar).
- ◌ is and explicit ᴜ or the vowel. Most of the vowels are dependent vowels that are either implicit or attach to the consonant or consonant cluster. The implicit vowel is the equivalent of /a/ or /ə/. The explicit dependent vowels can attach to the right of the consonant group, above the group, below, both above and below, or both to the left and right. The vowel may be open or close.
- န် is (?) or a nasalised closed end to the vowel. The closed end can be a nasalised end or a glottal stop.
- ◌း is the T and is an explicit tone marker. A syllable that ends with an open vowel or a nasalised vowel will have one of three tones. These are often called a low tone, a high tone or a creaky tone. Syllables that end with a glottal stop end with are the fourth tone know as a stopped tone. Some syllable ends with an implicit /ə/ and this may be considered as the fifth tone.

Onset or Head: Initial Consonants and Sounds

The 33 consonants in the traditional layout

Each box includes the consonant, its sound, name in Burmese script and how this name is pronounced.

The colour coding is to show the phonetic groupings within the alphabet's structure and order.

It also shows the degree of duplication of sounds primarily as a result of Pali based texts (e.g. the third row) and changes in pronunciation over time (e.g. the first 5 letters in each of columns 3 and 4).

Table 1 The Burmese Alphabet: The 33 initial consonants and first 24 initial sounds

က	ခ	ဂ	ဃ	င
/k/ or /g/	/kʰ/ or /g/	/g/	/g/	/ŋ (ng)/
ကကြီး	ခခွေး	ဂငယ်	ဃကြီး	င
ká dʑì	kʰá gwè	gá ŋɛ	gá dʑì	ŋá
စ	ဆ	ဇ	ဈ	ည ၊ ဉ
/s/ or /z/	/sʰ/ or /z/	/z/	/z/	/ɲ (ny)/
စလုံး	ဆလိမ်	ဇကွဲ	ဈမျဉ်းဆွဲ	ည (ကြီး) ၊ ဉကလေး
sá lòun	sʰá lein	zá gwὲ	zá myìn-zwὲ	ɲá (dʑì) or ɲá gəlὲ
ဌ	ဍ	ဎ	ဏ	တ
/t/ or /d/	/tʰ/ or /d/	/d/	/d/	/n/
ဌသန်လျင်းချိတ်	ဍွဝမ်းဘဲ	ဎုရင်ကောက်	ဏရေမှုတ်	ဏကြီး
tá θəyin-dʑei?	tʰá wὺn-bὲ	dá yin-gəu?	dá ye-ʰmou?	ná dʑì
တ	ထ	ဒ	ဓ	န
/t/ or /d/	/tʰ/ or /d/	/d/	/d/	/n/
တဝမ်းပူ	ထဆင်ထူး	ဒထွေး	ဓအောက်ချိုက်	နငယ်
tá wὺn-bu	tʰá sʰìn dú	dá dwe	dá ʔau?-tɕʰai?	ná ŋɛ
ပ	ဖ	ဗ	ဘ	မ
/p/ or /b/	/pʰ/ or /b/	/b/	/b/	/m/
ပစောက်	ဖဦးထုပ်	ဗထက်ချိုက်	ဘကုန်း	မ
pá zau?	pʰá ʔou?-thou?	bá lətɕʰai?	bá gòun	má
ယ	ရ	လ	ဝ	သ
/y/	/y/ or /r/	/l/	/w/	/θ (th)/ or /ð (dh)/
ယပက်လက်	ရကောက်	လ	ဝ	သ
yá pɛ?-lɛ?	yá gau?	lá	wá	θá
	ဟ	ဠ	အ	
	/h/	/l/	/ʔ ə/	
	ဟ	ဠကြီး	အ	
	há	lá dʑì	ʔá	

There are 10 initial consonant sounds made by adding medial consonants and/or the aspiration marker:

Table 2: 10 Additional initial consonant sounds

ကျ ၊ ကြ	ချ ၊ ခြ	ဂျ ၊ ဂြ	လှ ၊ ရှ ၊ လျှ ၊ သျှ
/tɕ (ch)/ or /dʑ/	/tɕʰ (chʰ)/ or /dʑ/	/dʑ (j)/	/ʃ or ɕ (sh)/

ငှ	ညှ	ဏှ ၊ နှ	မှ	လှ ၊ ဠှ	ဝှ
/ŋ̊ or ʰŋ/	/ɲ̊ or ʰɲ/	/n̥ or ʰn/	/m̥ or ʰm/	/l̥ or ʰl/	/w̥ or ʰw/

Note: Where the medial consonant adds to the initial consonant sound this forms a Cc consonant cluster instead. For example the မျ /my/ in မြန်မာ Myanmar.

The importance of the alphabetical order to pronunciation

The first 25 letters are grouped in a logical phonetic order. Each row has a tenuis or unvoiced plain consonant, an unvoiced aspirated consonant, a voiced plain consonant, a previously voiced aspirated consonant that is now said the same as the preceding plain voiced consonant and finishes with a nasal consonant where these five consonants are all pronounced at a similar point of articulation. As you go down the rows, this point progresses from the "k" group (Velar -at the back) through "s" and "t" to the "p" group (Labial - at the lips). There are 2 "t" groups, the first for inherited Pali words (that were previously pronounced as retroflex), and each nasal has a pre-aspirated version using the ◌ှ marker. There are 2 versions of consonants for the ɲ (or "ny") sound:

Table 3: ဝဒ် /we?/ - Grouped Consonants

Grouped initial consonants by general point and manner of articulation		Unvoiced		Voiced	Nasal	
		Plain	Aspirated	Plain	Plain	Aspirated
k ကဝဒ်	Velar stops & nasals	က /k/	ခ /kʰ/	ဂ၊ဃ /g/	င /ŋ/	ၚ /ŋ̊ or ʰŋ/
s စဝဒ်	Palatal nasals Alveolar fricatives	စ /s/	ဆ /sʰ/	ဇ၊ဈ /z/	ည၊ဉ /ɲ/	ည /ɲ̊ or ʰɲ/
t တဝဒ်	Alveolar stops & nasals	ဋ၊တ /t/	ဌ၊ထ /tʰ/	ဍ၊ဎ၊ဒ၊ဓ /d/	ဏ၊န /n/	ဏှ၊နှ /n̥ or ʰn/
p ပဝဒ်	Labial stops & nasals	ပ /p/	ဖ /pʰ/	ဗ၊ဘ /b/	မ /m/	မှ /m̥ or ʰm/

(**Note:** The alphabetical order is in the reverse order of places of articulation commonly used in phonetics.)

The အဝဒ် or ungrouped initial consonants are less logically arranged. There are multiple versions of ၵ (sh) and two versions of each consonant in the "ch" group, two pronunciations for သ "th" and ရ (y & r). Like the "t" group there is an old and modern version of "L". အ is an "a" that can act like a consonant or a silent letter for a vowel marker.

Table 4 အဝဒ် /we?/ - Ungrouped Initial Consonants (Note ဝ /w/ is a co-articulated labial-velar)

Other initial consonants by general point and manner of articulation			Unvoiced		Voiced
			Plain	Aspirated	Plain
အဝဒ်	Glottal	stops	အ /ʔ or ə/	ဟ /h/	
	Velar	approximants	ဝ /w/	၀ှ /w̥ or ʰw/	
	Palatal	fricatives (sh)		ယှ၊ရှ၊လျှ၊သျှ /ʃ or ʂ/	
		stops (ch/j)	ကျ၊ကြ /tɕ/	ချ၊ခြ /tɕʰ/	ဂျ၊ဂြ /dʑ/
		approximants	ယ၊ရ /y/		
	Alveolar	approximants	ရ /r/		
	Dental	stops	သ /θ/		သ /ð/
		approximants	လ၊ဠ /l/	လှ၊ဠှ /l̥ or ʰl/	
	Labial	approximants	ဝ /w/	၀ှ /w̥ or ʰw/	

The Burmese Alphabet: The 33 initial consonants and first 24 sounds

က	ခ	ဂ	ဃ	င
/k/ or /g/	/kʰ/ or /g/	/g/	/g/	/ŋ (ng)/
ကကြီး	ခခွေး	ဂငယ်	ဃကြီး	င
ká dàì	kʰá gwè	gá ŋɛ	gá dàì	ŋá
စ	ဆ	ဇ	ဈ	ည ၊ ဉ
/s/ or /z/	/sʰ/ or /z/	/z/	/z/	/ɲ (ny)/
စလုံး	ဆလိမ်	ဇကွဲ	ဈမျဉ်းဆွဲ	ည (ကြီး) ၊ ဉကလေး
sá lòun	sʰá lein	zá gwὲ	zá myìn-zwὲ	ɲá (dàì) or ɲá gəlὲ
ဋ	ဌ	ဍ	ဎ	ဏ
/t/ or /d/	/tʰ/ or /d/	/d/	/d/	/n/
ဋသန်လျင်းချိတ်	ဌဝမ်းဘဲ	ဍုရင်ကောက်	ဎရေမှုတ်	ဏကြီး
tá θəyin-dʑei?	tʰá wùn-bὲ	dá yìn-gəu?	dá ye-ʰmou?	ná dàì
တ	ထ	ဒ	ဓ	န
/t/ or /d/	/tʰ/ or /d/	/d/	/d/	/n/
တဝမ်းပူ	ထဆင်ထူး	ဒထွေး	ဓအောက်ချိုက်	နငယ်
tá wùn-bu	tʰá sʰin dú	dá dwe	dá ?au?-tɕʰai?	ná ŋɛ
ပ	ဖ	ဗ	ဘ	မ
/ρ/ or /b/	/ρʰ/ or /b/	/b/	/b/	/m/
ပစောက်	ဖဦးထုပ်	ဗထက်ချိုက်	ဘကုန်း	မ
pá zau?	ρʰá ?ou?-tʰou?	bá lətɕʰai?	bá gòun	má
ယ	ရ	လ	ဝ	သ
/y/	/y/ or /r/	/l/	/ɰ/	/θ (th)/ or /ð (dh)/
ယပက်လက်	ရကောက်	လ	ဝ	သ
yá ρɛ?-lɛ?	yá gau?	lá	ɰá	θá
	ဟ	ဠ	အ	
	/h/	/l/	/? ə/	
	ဟ	ဠကြီး	အ	
	há	lá dàì	?á	

The 10 additional initial consonant sounds

ကျ ၊ ကြ	ချ ၊ ခြ	ဂျ ၊ ဂြ	ယှ ၊ ရှ ၊ လျှ ၊ သျှ
/tɕ (ch)/ or /dʑ/	/tɕʰ (chʰ)/ or /dʑ/	/dʑ (j)/	/ʃ or ɕ (sh)/

�	ညှ	ကြ ၊ နှ	မှ	လှ ၊ ဠှ	၀ှ
/ŋ̊ or ʰŋ/	/ɲ̊ or ʰɲ/	/ŋ̊ or ʰn/	/m̥ or ʰm/	/l̥ or ʰl/	/ɰ̥ or ʰɰ/