

New challenges in fieldwork in a changing Southeast Asia - languages of Myanmar

Mathias Jenny
University of Zurich

Myanmar, for a long time difficult to access for foreign researchers and with restricted possibilities for tourists, has been receiving large numbers of travelers from around the world for a couple of years. With the fast opening of the country come new opportunities, but also new challenges for linguists involved in fieldwork in the area.

With over a hundred languages and idioms spoken in the country, belonging mainly to three distinct language families, Myanmar offers a vast ground for linguistic investigation. Communication and transport within Myanmar was difficult for many decades though, resulting in a high degree of isolation both with the outside world and within the country. Although Burmese as sole official language was spread to most areas, in earlier centuries by state officials, more recently also by education and state media, the actual use of the language remained restricted in most ethnic areas. This led to substantial numbers of L2 speakers with imperfect knowledge of Burmese, which in turn brought about a number of local varieties of Burmese, alongside the widely spoken minority languages.

In the past years transportation as well as communication infrastructure improved in most parts of the country, leading to increased mobility of the population. Increasing numbers of private media, both printed and broadcast, bring standard Burmese closer to the people, also far away from the urban centers.

The outcome of this development in infrastructure has two effects on the linguistic landscape of Myanmar which are relevant to fieldwork. First, the positive point, many areas previously off-limits are now accessible to researchers. It is thus now possible to produce original material in many languages that were until now only poorly described, if descriptions are available at all. This enables us not only to gather more and better language material, we are also in a position now to discover and describe contact scenarios. One example are the long forgotten Lao communities, migrants from NE Thailand probably around 200 years ago, in southern Myanmar (Kayin and Mon States). Though Burmese is spoken by everyone, Lao language and culture has survived to the present day in eleven villages, which have their own Lao speaking community temples.

The second important effect of the modernization is that with improved infrastructure standard Burmese is gaining ground in more domains, possibly replacing local Burmese varieties and ethnic languages. Similarly, with increased mobility within the regions ethnic languages may develop new standard (or better ‘leveled’) varieties, as can be seen in urban centers of Mon State, where the variety of semi-formal Mon as used in popular media (songs, videos) is considered ‘good’ Mon, as opposed to local village varieties which in some cases diverge among each other to the extent that mutual intelligibility is reduced markedly.

Field work in Myanmar thus can profit from easier access, including less obstacles in doing audio and video recording, but the linguistic diversity is in danger of being lost in the not too far future.