

Paper title: Phonological Scansion in Loanword Adaptation:
Evidence from English Loans in Burmese

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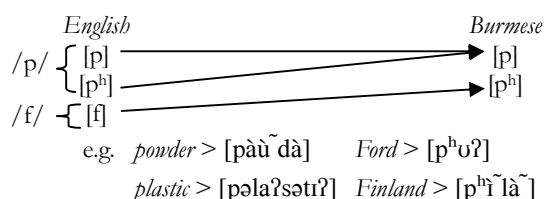
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Loanword phonology has been studied extensively in recent years, and the process of loanword adaptation has been modeled in various ways (e.g. Silverman 1992, Paradis 1996, Kenstowicz 2001, Steriade 2002) that say different things about the stages of adaptation and the relative importance of factors such as the borrower's proficiency in the source language and the veridicality of cross-language speech perception. The Burmese language, however, has not been very heavily studied, and the few sources that do comment on Burmese phonology are generally quite old or brief (e.g. Cornyn 1944, Wheatley 1987). Although Win (1998) presents an in-depth discussion of the accent of Burmese learners of English as a second language, the present study is the first that specifically concerns the phonological incorporation of loanwords borrowed from English into Burmese.

In this paper, I provide a comprehensive description of the patterns that emerge from a corpus of 200 loanword adaptations, examining the phonological constraints of Burmese that appear to be active by observing the strategies employed to repair offending input. The data show that English loanwords undergo systematic modifications in Burmese—some reflecting productive aspects of native Burmese phonology, others reflecting static patterns of the language that do not obviously result from active phonological processes, and still others having no correlate in Burmese phonology whatsoever.

This case of loanword adaptation both supports and contradicts current models of loanword phonology. While Burmese loanword adaptation occurs in a two-stage process akin to the multiple scansions in Cantonese adaptations of English loanwords described by Silverman (1992), in contrast to the Cantonese case the process of adaptation in Burmese begins with an initial English-to-Burmese mapping that occurs on a phoneme-to-phone basis. The result is that phonemic distinctions are maximally preserved in the output:

Figure 1. Maintenance of source phonemic distinction in adaptation



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As seen above, rather than the (non-phonemic) aspiration in word-initial [p^h] being assimilated to Burmese [p^h], it is adapted in such a way as to prevent neutralization of the phonemic distinction between /p/ and /f/. The rendering of English [t] displays a similar respect for source phonemics: it is adapted as Burmese [d], which prevents it from falling together with adaptations of English [t]. The results of this study thus suggest a level of phonological scansion that is not normally assumed in models of loanword adaptation, which for the most part emphasize the phonetic/perceptual nature of the process.

Reference

Silverman, D. 1992. Multiple scansions in loanword phonology: Evidence from Cantonese. *Phonology*, 9, 298-328.