

## Notes on the evolution of the Burmese phonological system

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At present we know the phonological systems of the two extreme periods of the development of Burmese – Old (OBur, xii-xiiiith c.) and Modern (MBur). Intermediate stages of the evolution of the system have not hitherto been given much attention. The problem is intriguing because since the old period Burmese orthography has almost not changed, and in the inscriptional heritage of the Burmese there are no illiterate samples which could contribute to obtaining convincing conclusions.

The key for establishing the periodization of the evolution of the initials lies in the analysis of the peculiarities of OBur syllables with velar initials followed by high front vowels. In the course of time such syllables acquired medial y in their orthographic form. This minor orthographic reform tells us that the original complex palatalized initials, i.e. those which originally contained medial y and were represented already in OBur, had by the time of this reform evolved into simple palatals without changing their graphic form. The described processes of palatalization triggered the rephonologization of the original simple palatal initials c and ch, represented as such in OBur, which evolved as s and sh, in which phonetic form they are represented in MBur, preserving their original graphic form unchanged.

We may infer also that the merging of medial r with y and subsequent evolution of the complex palatalized initials into simple palatals took place simultaneously with the evolution of velar initials followed by front vowels into simple palatals.

It appears that the system of initials as represented in MBur was formed already by the end of the XVth century. As for the rhymes, minor orthographic changes that have taken place since the OBur period do not contain any hints on when the essential sound shifts, especially in the system of closed rhymes, occurred. Yet it is possible to come to the important conclusion that the vowels in closed rhymes evolved to their present phonetic value before the final consonants underwent overall merger, and not vice versa as might be expected. This becomes evident from the analysis of the origins of the alternation of the sequences in some MBur words.