

Burmese IPA Transcription

Tyler D. Davis, Updated 10. July 2026

There are many systems of transcribing Burmese for those who can't read the script, including the Library of Congress system, the Myanmar Language Committee system, the Okell system, and the ever-evolving popular Burglish/Myanglish system. However, I think the most apt is just to transcribe things into IPA and I want to provide a guide for that here. This is, of course, the way I do it, but others may feel free to modify it as they see fit.

A note on best practices

As I inferred above, there are already several different transcription systems for Burmese that are not IPA, and several researchers differ in how Standard Burmese is transcribed in IPA anyway. When publishing, it would be fit to either include a long footnote or an appendix that explains your system of transcription, since it could be different from how other researchers would transcribe. My recommendation, as I do here, is to use [broad IPA transcription](#) rather than narrow.

Consonants

For the consonants, please note that I transcribe the IPA based upon the modern Burmese pronunciation and not based upon the historical Brahmic properties of the character (i.e. ယ <g^h>, ဘ <b^h>, သ <s>).

The transcription of these into IPA is pretty straightforward, as you'll see below.

က	/k/	ခ	/k ^h /	င	/g/	ဂ	/g/	ဇ	/ŋ/
စ	/s/	ဆ	/s ^h /	ဇ	/z/	ဇ	/z/	ည	/ɲ/
တ	/t/	ထ	/t ^h /	ဒ	/d/	ဃ	/d/	ဏ	/n/
တ	/t/	ထ	/t ^h /	ဒ	/d/	ဃ	/d/	န	/n/
ပ	/p/	ဖ	/p ^h /	ဗ	/b/	ဘ	/b/	မ	/m/
ယ	/j/	ရ	/j/~ɹ/	လ	/l/	ဝ	/w/	ဝ	/θ/ (/t̪/)
		ဟ	/h/	ဠ	/l/	အ	/ʔa/~ /ʔə/		

There is some discussion and disagreement about the transcription of certain characters. For example, Watkins (2001) transcribes ဝ as /θ/, which is similar to <think> [θɪŋk^h] in English. Others (anonymous p.c.) argue that it's not really a fricative, but a dental /t̪/, as in Spanish <todos> [ˈtoðos] 'all'. For simplicity's sake, I write it as /θ/, but I think the dental claim has merit. For what it's worth, Watkins (2001) explains that θ is often realized as a dental affricate [t̪θ].

Complex onsets

Basically, Consonant + ချ or ငြ is C + j (i.e. ငြ /pjə/), unless it's a velar from the first row:

ကျ ကြ /tɕ/၊ ချ ငြ /tɕ^h/၊ ဂျ ငြ /dʒ/

The medial <့> should be transcribed as /C + w/, except when it is functioning as a closed vowel (see below). For example ကွေးသွားသတ္တဝါ /twá.θwá.θæʔtəwa/ 'crawling creature.'

Devoiced Consonants

Consonants are devoiced in Burmese with the ဟထိုး /h̥.tʰó/ < ဟ >. Its use applies to the following and should be transcribed as follows (only for basic onset, this table does not include tone or vowel quality):

Junction with Consonant	IPA
မ	/m̥/
န or ဏ (rare)	/n̥/
လ	/l̥/ (sometimes transcribed as /ɬ/)
ရှ or လျှ or သျှ (rare)	/ɾ̥/

Allophones

I don't really want to take the time to discuss allophones here, since we're discussing simple transcription, but Okell (1969: 6), Watkins (2001) and Gruber (2011) all discuss allophones more in depth.

Vowels

Let's start first with the open vowels. This table is modified from Adoniram Judson's *A Grammar of The Burmese Language*, 1883, public domain.

Vowel	Symbol	Name of Symbol	Junction with က	IPA
အ	none	-	က	/ka̯/
အာ	ာ or ိ	ရေးချ	ကာ	/ka/
အိ	-ိ	လုံးကြီးတင်	ကိ	/ki̯/
အို	-ီ	လုံးကြီးတင်ဆန်ခတ်	ကီ	/ki/
ဥ	-ု	တချောင်းငင်	ကု	/ku̯/
ဦ	-ူ	နှစ်ချောင်းငင်	ကူ	/ku/
ဧ	ေ-	သဝေထိုး	ကေ	/ke/
အဲ	-ဲ	နောက်[သို့]ပြစ်	ကဲ	/kɛ/
ဩ	ေ-ာ	သဝေထိုးချ	ကော	/kɔ̯ ¹ /
ဩတ်	ေ-ာ်	သဝေထိုးချရှေ့ထိုး	ကော်	/kɔ/
အို	-ို	လုံးကြီးတင်တချောင်းငင်	ကို	/ko/

1 This example specifically is denoted by a high (falling) tone.

And move on to the closed and nasalized vowels

Vowel	Junction with က	IPA
-နံ	ကနံ	/kã/ or /kaŋ/
-စံ	ကစံ	/kɪʔ/
-ငံ	ကငံ	/kĩ/
-ိတ်၊ ဝိပ်	ကိတ်၊ ကိပ်	/kɛiʔ/
-က်	ကက်	/kɛʔ/
-တ်၊ -ပ်	ကတ်/ကပ်	/kaʔ/
-ွန်	ကွန်	/kɔ̃/ or /kɔŋ/
-ွတ်၊ -ွပ်	ကွတ်၊ ကွပ်	/kɔʔ/
-ုပ်၊-ပုတ်	ကုပ်၊ ကုတ်	/kɔ̃ʔ/
-ုန်	ကုန်	/kɔ̃/ or /kɔŋ/
ိုင်	ကိုင်	/kaĩ/ or /kaɪŋ/
-ိုက်	ကိုက်	/kaɪʔ/
ေ-ာက်	ကောက်	/kãʔ/
ေ-ာန်	ကောန်	/kã/ or /kãŋ/

Tone

The number of tones varies depending on whether you're speaking to a linguist or a Burmese speaker. Burmese people generally learn that there are three tones အ အာ အာ့, which translate to creaky, low, and high (falling). Linguists would add the stopped (glottal) tone, as well, which is found with the closed vowels given above. Different linguists have transcribed the tones in different ways, but I prefer to use the following system:

Tone	Open σ	IPA	Closed σ	IPA
Creaky	ကု	/k _u /	ကော့	/ka _u /
Low	ကူ	/ku/	ကောင်	/ka _u /
High	ကူး	/kú/	ကောင်း	/ká _u /
Glottal	ကုတ်	/kouʔ/	ကော့	/ka _u ʔ/

Burmese tonal transcription is often open to personal interpretation and, honestly, preference. Lin Kyaw Zaw (2017: 9–10), for example, classifies what I call a “High” tone as a “Level” tone leaves it unmarked, and combines both what I call “Creaky” and “Glottal” into a single “High falling tone” category. When looking just at pitch, Lin Kyaw Zaw has good reason to combine these tone categories and I have no problem with him or anyone transcribing that way for a system of transcription. I personally feel, however, that having a 1:1 correlation which recognizes the different syllable types (open, closed, nasalized) is best.

Demonstrations

Words/Phrase Demonstration

The first demonstration showcases a few words or names that might appear in a typical Burma Studies article.

Burmese	Common Anglicized Rendering	IPA
ဆရာစံ	Sayar San	/s ^h ə.ja.sã/ or /s ^h ə.ja.san/
ဘုရင်	Bayin	/bə.jĩ/ or /bə.jɪn/
လွှတ်တော်	Hluttaw	/lʊʔ.tə/
တပ်မတော်	Tatmadaw	/taʔ.mə.tə/
ကလောင်း	galaung	/kə.láũ/ or /kə.láũn/
ဝိရသူ	Wirathu	/wi.rə.θu/ (Pāli loan)

Ideally, terms would be written in phonetic style either in-line next to the actual Burmese term, or at least upon first mention as a pronunciation reference, with an Anglicized rendering next to it that remains consistent throughout the text (1) or in a footnote (2):

1. Missionaries, known to Burmese Christians as သာသနာပြု /θa.θə.na.pjʊ/ (henceforth *thathanapyu*)...
2. Missionaries, known to Burmese Christians as *thathanapyu*², ...

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect casual readers of Burma Studies literature to be versed in IPA. Display Burmese text is now easier than ever with Unicode support in most word processors (even X_EL_AT_EX, with much effort), but not all Burma Studies readers will necessarily know how to read the script either (or are maybe in the process of learning it). No matter the case, making it available in publications is nonetheless beneficial to some degree, and that's why I promote it here.

2 သာသနာပြု /θa.θə.na.pjʊ/

Paragraph Demonstration

For the second demonstration of my transcription, I'm using a few sentences from the first paragraph of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, [converted](#) into Unicode HTML by the *UDHR in Unicode* project. Please note that this a broad transcription that doesn't showcase all allephony, like *o* being pronounced as [z] in certain environments. For reading simplicity, I will follow the spacing conventions of the document and go clause-by-clause. Please note that I will only transcribe words and not digits or punctuation. I include syllable breaks next to glottal stops /ʔ/ to distinguish between the start of independent vowels and closed consonants with glottal tone³.

ဤကဲ့သို့ ရာဇဝင်တင်မည့် ကြေညာချက်ကို ပြုလုပ်ပြီးနောက်

ʔikɛθʊ jazəwĩtĩmĩ tɕɛnatɕʰɛʔko pɕjulʊʔpĩnaʊʔ

ဤညီလာခံအစည်းအဝေးကြီးက ကမ္ဘာ့ကုလသမဂ္ဂအဖွဲ့ဝင် နိုင်ငံ အားလုံးအား ထိုကြေညာစာတမ်းကြီး၏ စာသားကိုအများပြည်သူတို့ ကြားသိစေရန်

ʔijɪlakʰǎ.ʔəsí.ʔəwétɕíkə kəbəkʊləθəməgə.ʔəpʰwɛwĩ nāĩṇǎ ʔáloʊʔ.á tʰotɕɛnasatátɕí.ʔĩ saθá ko.ʔəmɰáɰjiθutʊ tɕáθĩsejǎ

ကြေညာပါမည့် အကြောင်းကိုလည်းကောင်း၊

tɕɛnatpami ʔətɕáʊkoləkaʊ

ထို့ပြင်နိုင်ငံများ၊ သို့တည်းမဟုတ် နယ်မြေများ၏ နိုင်ငံရေး အဆင့်အတန်းကို လိုက်၍

tʰɔpɰĩnāĩṇǎmjá θɔtíməhoʊʔ nɛmjɛmjá.ʔĩ nāĩṇǎjé ʔəsʰĩ.ʔətáko laĩʔ.jwĩ

ခွဲခြားခြင်း မပြုဘဲအဓိကအားဖြင့် စာသင်ကျောင်းများနှင့် အခြားပညာရေး အဖွဲ့အစည်းများတွင်

kʰwétɕʰátɕʰĩ məpɰubé.ʔədíkə.ʔápʰjĩ saθĩtɕáʊmjánĩ ʔətɕʰápĩnajé ʔəpʰwɛ.ʔəsímjátwĩ

ထိုကြေညာစာတမ်းကြီးကို ဖြန့်ချိ ဝေငှ စေရန်၊

tʰotɕɛnasatátɕíko pʰjǎtɕʰĩ wɛṇǎ sejǎ

မြင်သာအောင် ပြသထားစေရန်၊

mɰĩθa.ʔaʊ pɰəθəʔtʰásejǎ

ဖတ်ကြားစေရန်နှင့်

pʰaʔtɕásejǎṇĩ

3 The discrepancy could also be cleared up if one chooses to use a superscript /-ʔ/ for glottal tone.

အဓိပ္ပာယ်ရင်းလင်း ဖော်ပြစေရန်

၇ədeɪʔpɛ̌ɰlɪ̌ pʰəpjəsejā

ဆောင်ရွက်ပါမည့် အကြောင်းဖြင့် လည်းကောင်း ဆင့်ဆို လိုက်သည်။

sʰǎpjwɛʔpamǐ ʔətɕǎpʰjɪ̌ ləkǎ sʰɪ̌sʰo laɪʔ.θi

Comments?

I welcome any questions, thoughts and/or comments on the subject and this squib is subject to further revision, in order to make it more helpful.

References

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