

## THE YAW DIALECT OF BURMESE

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### 1. Introduction

It was no doubt his admitted lack of information which made Forbes (1881:56) think that the Yaw dialect of Burmese was 'certainly unintelligible to any Burman. In fact, as Houghton (1897:456) and Taylor (1921:91) observe, Yaw had few differences from Standard Burmese. A British Settlement Officer reported that, 'at first, the dialect is difficult to understand, but after a few days one finds oneself speaking it and it presents no difficulty' (Abigail 1932:6).

Few and unspectacular though the differences are, they are important, as they place Yaw (YW\*) several steps closer than Standard Burmese (SB\*) -- or any of the recognised dialects -- to Written Burmese (WB\*), and this feature makes it a valuable ingredient in comparative studies.

Despite its importance in this respect, Yaw has not been described in any detail till relatively recently (Kya Htùn 1969:; Yabu Shiro 1980). Ono (1969) allows just over a page to Yaw, and earlier studies went no further than noting a few forms in comparative lists (Buchanan 1799; Houghton 1897; Grierson 1928; Taylor 1921). A description in English, and a comparison with Standard Burmese and Written Burmese has been lacking. I was fortunate in being able to record two texts of spoken Yaw in Burma, and to have the assistance of the speakers in transcribing them. These texts, supplemented by my informants' answers to queries, provide the material for the outline description presented here.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.1 Features of particular interest

For many, the most spectacular feature of Yaw is its rhymes /ak/ and /aŋ/, corresponding to Standard Burmese /εʔ/ and /in/. (For systems of transliteration and transcription see Okell 1971.) Yaw not only reflects more closely the ak and aŋ of Written Burmese, but also -- with occasional lapses -- has velar closure for both. It also has velar closure in its YW /auk/, WB ok, SB /auʔ/, though not, curiously, in its YW /aun/,

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\* These are the abbreviations used in tables and examples. ((Ed.)

WB oŋ, SB /aun/. For the standard array of eight final consonants in Written Burmese, none of the other major dialects now has anything more than glottal stop (for Written Burmese obstruents) or nasalised vowel (for Written Burmese nasals). In these circumstances, Yaw's velar closure is a remarkable relic.

Yaw has also not yet allowed initial, or medial /w/ to alter the quality of the following vowel.

For WB	<u>at</u>	<u>an</u>	<u>wat</u>	<u>wan</u>
and	<u>ap</u>	<u>am</u>	<u>wap</u>	<u>wam</u>
where SB has	/aʔ	an	wuʔ	wun/
Yaw stoutly preserves	/ɛʔ	ɛn	wɛʔ	wɛn/

One other point worth mentioning here is the consistency of the Yaw rhyme /ɛ/ (rarely /e/) for Written Burmese aff. Like the reflexes of this rhyme in other dialects, Yaw's consistency shows how eclectic Standard Burmese has been with its /i/, /e/ and /ɛ/ realizations.

## 1.2 Location and numbers of the Yaw

My informants said the main town centres of the Yaw are at Yaw itself, and at Htì-lìn and Gán-gàw, which places them at the head of the Myit-thà valley, with the Chin Hills on the west, and the Pon-daung and Pon-nya ranges on the east -- a geographical setting that might be expected to isolate them somewhat. This location is confirmed by Kya Htùn (1969:142) and by the *Swe-son kyàn* (1970:2). *The Linguistic survey of Burma* (LSB, Webb 1917), however, records the majority on the plains side of the watershed, 'between Saw and Seikpyu', with a few outliers further north on the western edge of the plain, reaching as far as Kani on the Chìn-dwìn river.

It is difficult to reconcile this discrepancy without a further survey. Some of the more obvious possibilities are that respondents to the LSB questionnaire in the valley, which the survey did cover, did not fully understand what was being asked; or my informants, being valley men, may have been unaware of the numbers of Yaw on the plains side; or there may have been appreciable population movements in the sixty years since the survey itself. There is also mention in the literature of a group of Yaw who fled to the upper Mù valley in the Katha District (Harvey 1925:262) and of two Yaw villages way up near Myit-kyì-nà (Webb 1917:33).

The present number of Yaw speakers is unknown. The LSB (Webb 1917:55) recorded over 24,000. This stands in marked contrast to the *Census* (1933) figures, but these can hardly claim serious consideration anyway, in view of their incredible fluctuations: in the five decades from 1891 to 1931 they give

370, 5, 0, 2 and 877 respectively! The low response to the *Census* (1933) is presumably due partly to uncertainty over the criteria that qualify one as a Yaw, and partly to a reluctance to identify oneself as a Yaw anyway (Scott 1900:569; Hardiman 1912:29).

### 1.3 Background

The antecedents of the Yaw are obscure, and have attracted some divergent speculations:

Dr Mason classes the Yaw as a Burmese tribe. In this he is followed by Dr Cushing. Mr Houghton is inclined to doubt the accuracy of this classification. The Shan chronicles of Mōng Kawng (Mogaung) seem to claim them as Shans, though perhaps they may be the Nora spoken of as earlier owners of the land. They themselves have a legend that they are descended from a clan of the Palaungs called Parawga or Payawga. This in time was shortened through Yawga to Yaw. There are still to be found Parawga sayas among them, oracles or mages, who make their divinations on the Tai cycle tables, which is significant. The common folk say that the reason why their dialect differs from Burmese is that they drink the water of the mountain streams. ... The dialect is a hybrid, nearest to Burmese now; possibly it was at one time nearer to Shan or to some of the Chin dialects (Scott 1900:569)

Other writers choose one or other of the alternatives offered here: primitive Burmans (Forbes 1881:56), from the Irrawaddy valley (Houghton 1897:456), captive Shans sent from Mogaung (Owens 1913:16), Burmese-speaking Chins (Taylor 1921:91), or Chin-tainted Burmans (Saw Shwe Boh 1973:18) -- all indicative of a notable absence of hard facts. Equally fanciful is the identification with Tavoyan (Symes 1800:2, 235), and the attempt to derive Yaw from Standard Burmese /Yḍ-naká/ 'Shan' (Saw Shwe Boh 1973:16).

The only real evidence one has for the origins of the Yaw is the dialect, and the closeness of this to Standard Burmese and Written Burmese indicates fairly strongly that as Kya Htùn (1969:141) suggests, the Yaw are nothing more exotic than a group of plains Burmans cut off from the mainstream of Standard Burmese development comparatively recently by a degree of geographical isolation.

The 'Payawga' derivation sounds like a folk etymology, based on the fact that the Yaw have a reputation for skill in the magical arts, one form of which -- by no means a Yaw monopoly -- is called /pəyḍ-gá/ in Standard Burmese, from Pāli *payoga*. Among the many varieties of Palaung listed in the LSB, none has a name resembling this word. Again, the idea that the

Yaw once spoke some more distant or unrelated language (Chin, Palaung, Shan) and subsequently adopted Burmese is an implausible explanation of the peculiarities of their dialect. Such differences as there are between Yaw and Standard Burmese in phonology, grammar and lexicon are not of a kind that can be considered vestiges of an unrelated language. Nor are alleged resemblances to Tavoyan persuasive.

In better documented times, there are records of a kind of Yaw autonomy. There was at one stage a *Yâw-lei-myó-wun*, with jurisdiction over the four towns of Pauk, Htî-lîn, Sâw and Laing-shei, and each of these towns was governed by a *saw-bwà* (shades of the alleged Shan connection). The *Saw-bwà* were replaced by *myó-thagyî* after a rebellion in the reign of Naung-daw-gyî (1763-65) (Owens 1913:15f.), and at the turn of the century the Yaw were still described as 'governed by chiefs of their own, but tributary to the Burmans' (Buchanan 1799:224) -- perhaps not wholly inconsistent with Symes' (1800:1, 235) information that 'the Yoos are subjects of the Birman state, and observe the same religious worship'. Their relative remoteness from central government at this stage is perhaps indicated by the attitude of the clerk who told Symes that they were 'exceedingly ugly, having protuberant bellies and white teeth'. My informants were, in fact, quite good-looking.

#### 1.4 Source of material

I did not go to the Yaw area, but made some recordings in Rangoon of unprepared speech by some students from Gân-gâw who had arrived in Rangoon for the first time only a few days previously. One recording describes some distinctive features of the Yaw area and its people, and the second, by a different speaker, is a folktale.