BURMESE DISGUISED SPEECH

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1. Although disguised speech[1] of one sort or another is fairly common among the languages of the world, good descriptions of the manner in which the disguise is accomplished are still rather difficult to find.[2] Languages of Southeast Asia and the Pacific seem to have several varieties. Materials obtained from Burmese speakers between 1948-52 illustrate a number of these varieties and therefore seem to deserve a systematic presentation.[3]

Languages like Thai and Burmese have a type of syllable structure which can usefully be described in terms of an *initial* (i. e. the initial consonant or consonant cluster)[4] and a *final* (i.e. the vowel plus tone plus consonant, if any). Both languages have developed a kind of speech disguise in which the initials of affected syllables remain fixed while the finals are reversed. The Thai call this *khamphŭan* ("word-reverse") or "reversed speech"[5] and the Burmese call it *zəgəleynv*[6] ("speech-disguise") or "disguised speech." Some Burmese also refer to it as *zəgəhwe?* ("speech-hide") or "secret speech."[7]

This is reminiscent of the type of speech distortion known in English as a "Spoonerism." The chief difference is that in English it is usually the syllable-initial which is reversed and — at least in the most amusing instances — both renditions have meaning (e.g. half-[f]ormed [w]ish → half-warmed fish).[8] In Thai and Burmese, on the other hand, it is the syllable-final which is reversed and, since the reversed rendition is for the purpose of befuddlement and concealment, it may or may not have meaning. e.g.

Thai k[ôn] j[àj] "bottom big" → kàjjôn "chicken wrinkled"[9]

(1) Burmese b[eynx] z[ax] "opium-eater" → baxzeynx

However, it sometimes happens that one phrase is the mirror image, so to speak, of another and so it is not surprising to learn that "people like to joke with this," e.g.

(2) k[aw$^{\supset}$] y[owx] "straw" ↔ k[owx] y[aw$^{\supset}$] "nine (people)"[10]

There are also other types of speech distortion found in Burmese and some of these more nearly resemble what is called "Pig Latin" in English. These are described briefly in 5.

The principal users of disguised speech in Burma, as elsewhere, are school children and teenagers. They may employ it as a secret language for use among age-mates or for secrecy or joking among brothers and sisters. The favorite kind among the Burmese is *zəgəleynv* and children generally pick it up from listening to clowns who may use it during dancing festivals (with dancers, clowns, and orchestra) staged for the entertainment of villagers. It is also used for euphemism or concealment and a few phrases have come to have rather wide currency even among adults. References to the eating or smoking of opium are among these, as can be seen in example (1). Another example is:

(3) buv hyeynxdev ← b[eynx] hy[uv]dev "to smoke opium"

In addition, the use of *zəgəleynv* to disguise derogatory connotation has given rise to a number of expressions including the following very common one:

(4) khwav θeyxδeyx ← khw[eyx] θ[av]δav "little better than dogs" i.e. "very foolish" (khweyx "dog(s)," θav "to surpass").

2. Phonological rules for Burmese can be conveniently stated in terms of the basic form of a morpheme which is modified (or not modified) by preposed morphemes. These basic forms show the maximum differentiation of the initial consonant, e.g. kowv "to" (for kowv ~ gowv in definable circumstances), khəleyx "young" (for khəleyx ~ gəleyx in definable circumstances). Previous statements concerning the changes governed by these morphophonemic rules are to be found in "The Use of Numeral Classifiers in Burmese"[11] and in Cornyn's *Outline of Burmese Grammar*.[12] In the present paper the rules are summarized as the background for the special rules needed to explain the construction of disguised words.

3. Burmese preposed morphemes end in ˀ (the glottal stop), H (a special morphophonemic symbol), ə (a reduced vowel, or a full vowel or diphthong (nasalized or nonnasalized) with distinctive tone (v, x, or q).[13]

Burmese basic forms begin in one of three kinds of consonants: nonchangeable, limited changeable, and changeable. The nonchangeable consonants are the voiced stops and spirants (b, d, g, z, δ), the voiced and voiceless sonorants (m, n, ŋ, l, w, y, hm, hn, hŋ, hl, hw, hy,)[14] and the glottal stop and spirant (ˀ, h). The limited changeable consonants are the aspirated voiceless stops and spirants

(ph, th, kh, sh, and also θ which behaves like an aspirated spirant) and the changeable consonants are the unaspirated voiceless stops and spirants (p, t, k, and s).

It is not necessary to make any further statement about nonchangeable consonants since they remain the same in all environments. The following rules apply to limited changeable and changeable consonants.

(i) Limited changeable and changeable consonants remain unchanged after ˀ and H and H is then deleted.

(ii) Limited changeable consonants remain unchanged after ə.

(iii) Changeable consonants change to their voiced counterparts after ə.

(iv) Elsewhere both limited changeable and changeable consonants change to their voiced counterparts and h (aspiration) is deleted.

A couple of sets of forms are sufficient to illustrate these rules. In the first column below the preposed morphemes tə "one," hnəH "two," θownx "three," and thyawˀ "six" are combined with the morpheme thawnv " thousand " and in the second column they are combined with kawnv, clf. for animals. The number of the rule involved follows the gloss.

Limited changeable	Changeable
təthawnv "one thousand" (ii)	təgawnv "one (animal)" (iii)
hnəthawnv "two thousand" (i)	hnəkawnv "two (animals)" (i)
θownxdawnv "three thousand" (iv)	θownxgawnv "three (animals)" (iv)
thyawˀthawnv "six thousand" (i)	thyawˀkawnv "six (animals)" (i)

4. Before stating the rules which apply to the formation of disguised speech, it will be helpful to present the Burmese syllabic canon. This is of two types, full and reduced, as shown below:[15]

Full: $C\ (y)\ (w)\ \begin{matrix} T \\ V \end{matrix}\left(\begin{Bmatrix} nas \\ ˀ \end{Bmatrix} \right)$

Reduced: C ə

The syllable is further conveniently divided into two parts, the Initial, composed of the C (and following glides, if any), and the Final, composed of the V plus T (with nasalization or glottal stop, if either). Full syllables may occur in any position in the word but a reduced syllable may not be the ultima. Normal words contain either full syllables or a combination of reduced and full syllables. Hence every word will contain at least one full syllable and, if there is only one

full syllable, it will be the ultima. Examples:

mix "fire"	thəminx "cooked rice"
lavmev "will come"	lavməlax "will (you) come?"
duxyinxbinv "durian tree"	məsaxbux "won't eat"
leˀhmaˀ "ticket"	kələthaynv "chair"

Normal nondisguised words are the terminal strings which result from the application of the morphophonemic rules (3). Many such words can be subjected to an additional rule to produce the kind of disguised speech briefly described above (1). There is, however, a class of words to which this additional rule cannot be applied. Since a reduced syllable may not be the ultima, two-syllable words with ə in the first syllable and three-syllable words with ə in the first two syllables cannot be reversed. Examples of words of this class are thəminx and kələthaynv listed above. All other types of words can be converted into disguised speech by the application of the following rule:

(v) Reverse the Finals of the first and last full syllables of a word.

	Nondisguised	Disguised
(5)	(l[eˀ]hm[aˀ] "ticket"	laˀhmeˀ
(6)	m[ix]b[owv] "fireplace"	mowvbix
(7)	s[av]ˀ[owˀ] "book"	sowˀˀav
(8)	l[av]ˀ[ownx] "come here!"	lownxˀav
(9)	b[uv]davy[ownv] "railroad station"	bownvdavyuv
(10)	ˀəy[eˀ]ph[owv] "liquor distillery"	ˀəyowvpheˀ
(11)	θəy[eˀ]θ[ix] "mango,'	θəyixθeˀ
(12)	m[ix]yəth[ax] "train"	maxyəthix
(13)	məl[av]b[ux] "won't come"	məluxbav
(14)	ˀəy[eˀ]θəm[ax] "drunkard"	ˀəyaxθəmeˀ

(v.a) Across word boundaries reverse the Finals of the first full syllable of each word.

	Nondisguised	Disguised
(15)	b[ev]gowv θw[ax] "go where?"	baxgowv θwėx
(16)	b[eynx] hy[uv]dev "to smoke opium"	buv hyeynxdev

(v.b) If reduplication is involved both occurrences are subjected to the same change.

	Nondisguised	Disguised
(17)	khw[eyx] θ[av]ðav See (4).	khwav θeyxðeyx

Since any glides which follow the initial C are treated as part of the Initial their placement is normally unaffected by the reversal rule, e.g.

	Nondisguised	Disguised
(18)	mapy[ox]b[ux] "won't talk	məpyuxbox
(19)	ŋəhmy[ax]d[anv] "fishing-rod"	ŋəhmyanvdax
(20)	ŋəpy[ox]ð[ix] "banana"	ŋəpyixðox
(21)	θw[ax]m[ev] "will go"	θwevmax

See also (15) and (17) above. However, even in reversal the combination *CwuT is avoided.[16] Hence a restriction must be introduced before the reversal rule is applied to the effect that:

Cw + V.. in the env. Cu → C + wV..

We therefore have:

	Nondisguised	Disguised
(22)	məhl[wex]b[ux] "won't swing"	məhluxbwex
	not *məhlw[ex]b[ux] to avoid:	*məhlwuxbex
(23)	məθ[wax]b[ux] "won't go"	məθuxbwax
	Contrast (21) above.	

There is some evidence that there may still other restriction rules, at least for some speakers, e.g.

Cw V.. in the env. Ci nonnas → C wV

This would explain the following example:

	Nondisguised	Disguised
(24)	m[ix]ð[weyx] "charcoal"	mweyxðix

However, this example is not firm because the informant first gave meyxðwix as the disguised form and then corrected himself saying that mweyxðix is better. In normal speech *CwiT seems not to occur and the speaker with a sensitive ear would want to avoid it in disguised speech as well. But it is possible that not all speakers are equally fastidious. There are no restrictions in normal speech on the occurrence of Cwi nas T, e.g. kwinxdev "to make a ring (as for the finger)," but nasalized i is lowered to [I].

5. Most Burmese speakers prefer to use the term ***zəgəleynv*** only of disguised speech formed through the use of the reversal rule (v) shown in 4. However, they are also usually acquainted with one or more other kinds of ciphered speech. These remind one of our more familiar Pig Latin and all are characterized by the addition of extraneous phonological material. Each type can be generated

from normal speech by the operation of a special rule with the proviso that, as in *z̥ə̥g̥ə̥lɛynv*, reduced syllables are not subject to alteration. The simplest type is covered by the following rule:

(vi) In each normal full syllable use -inx as Final in place of the normal Final, then add the unaltered full syllable and a word boundary.

(25) Unaltered: θw[ax]m[ev] "will go"
Altered: θwinxθwax minxmev

(vi.a) A reduced syllable preceding the full syllable will be added along with the unaltered full syllable.

(26) Unaltered: məθw[ax]b[ux]l[ax] "won't (he) go?"
Altered: məθwinx məθwax bwinxbux linxlax

The remaining types[17] are slightly more sophisticated and involve the insertion of an extraneous Final plus Initial between the normal Initial and Final so that each single full syllable is replaced by two full syllables. There is, moreover, a certain phonological similarity among all of them, viz., that the extraneous Final always contains the vowel *a* (though variation is achieved by changing the tone or by using it in a diphthong followed by ˀ) while the extraneous Initial is always *t-*.

(vii) Insert Final -ayˀ and Initial t- between the Initial and Final of each full syllable and add a word boundary.

(27) Unaltered: b[ev]g[owv] θw[ax]məl[ex] "Where are (you) going?"
Altered: bayˀtev gayˀtowv θwayˀtax məlayˀtex.

(viii) Insert Final -aq and Initial t- between the Initial and Final of each full syllable and add a word boundary.

(28) Unaltered: sh[ax] y[uv] "bring the salt!"
Altered: shaqtax yaqtuv.

(ix) Insert Final -av and Initial t- between the Initial and Final of each full syllable and add a word boundary.

(29) Unaltered: sh[ax] "salt"
Altered: shavtax.

The last type involves the insertion of two different patterns of Final plus Initial in alternation:

(x) Insert Final -av and Initial t- between the Initial and Final of the first full syllable and Final -eˀ and Initial t- between the Initial and Final of the next full syllable and add a word boundary after each operation.

(30) Unaltered: sh[ax] y[uv] "bring the salt"
Altered: shavtax yeˀtuv.

In another example which is similar to this the first inserted Final is -aq in place of -av and the rule for the alternate Final is not entirely clear.

(31) Unaltered: m[aq] tw[eyv] sh[ax] y[uv] "Ma Twey (name), bring the salt!"
Altered: maqtaq tyeˀtweyv shaqtax yaqtuv.

This is only one example of this type at hand and it is not clear whether the proper name tweyv→tyeˀtweyv is to be interpreted as tw[eyv] with the insertion of -eˀ-t- and the substition of y for w or whether a new type of insertion is involved, namely -yeˀ-t-, and that t[weyv] → tyeˀtweyv. The point cannot be settled without more examples of the treatment of Initial Cw.

6. In addition to their intrinsic interest as examples of linguistic play, studies of disguised or altered speech can also be used as illustrations of phonological theory. An earlier draft of the present paper was written more than a decade ago and at that time I was disturbed by the fact that examples of ***zəgəleynv*** frequently appeared to constitute exceptions to morphophonemic rule (iv).[18] Thus:

(32) θiˀpinv "tree" → θinvpiˀ, not *θinvbiˀ.
(33) məθawˀphux "won't drink" → məθuxphawˀ, not *məθuxbawˀ.
(34) məθawˀthyinv "don't want to drink" → məθinvthyawˀ, not *məθinv-dyawˀ.
(35) siˀθax "soldier" → saxθiˀ, not *saxðiˀ.
See also examples (10), (11), and (14).

The difficulty, however, vanishes when it is recognized that morphophonemic rule (v), specifying the reversal of Finals, must be applied ***after*** the other rules. Hence Burmese ***zəgəleynv*** differs from standard Burmese by the addition of a single rule and no other statements need to be made. This is comparable to the statement made by Morris Halle in regard to the most economical method of describing the difference between Pig Latin and General American.[19]

The study of Burmese disguised speech also highlights some problems regarding the phonological nature of the Burmese syllable. Thus the restriction rules preceding example (22) and (23) show that even though initial Cw is usually treated as an inseparable unit in the application of the reversal rule (e.g. example [21]), the avoidance of combinations like *CwuT and *CwiT takes

precedence over the intactness of the initial consonant cluster. Therefore in the structure of the Burmese syllable the position of noninitial *w* is somewhat ambivalent. It normally belongs with the Initial but in some instances it can be taken as part of the Final. This may turn out to be significant in the predication of future sound changes and/or the elucidation of earlier ones.

Footnotes

[1] Harold C. Conklin has used the similar term "speech disguise" in his paper on "Tagalog Speech Disguise," *Language* 32.136-139 (1956). I am indebted to him for several interesting discussions of types of linguistic play some years ago. Various points in the present paper have also benefited from discussions with my colleagues, Professors Haruo Aoki, William S.-Y. Wang, and Karl E. Zimmer.

[2] What material there is exists in widely scattered sources and in various languages. An important paper, recently called to my attention by Professor Wang, is Y.R. Chao's study in Chinese which may be translated as "Eight Varieties of Secret Speech," BHIP 23.312-354 (1931).

[3] This work was done under the auspices of the Department of Oriental Languages, University of California, Berkeley. My chief informant at that time was Maung (now U) Tha Hto, but other speakers also contributed information; this is indicated in the footnotes where pertinent.

[4] The second consonant in standard Thai of Bangkok is *l*, *r*, or *w*. In the Burmese of Rangoon it is normally *y* or *w* and *w* may also occur as a third consonant after *y*. In these languages these second- or third- position liquids or glides are not treated as part of the vocalic nucleus but as part of the consonantal "initial."

[5] Information about Thai reversed speech was obtained some years ago from Mr. Heng Subhanka and Dr. Kaw Swasdi Panish. The terminology emplcyed by some cf the languages of the Philippines is similar to the Thai term. The Tagalog, for instance, have a variety of phonological types of disguised speech all of which are called ***balikîad*** "which in other contexts means 'inside-out, upside-down, inverted, or backward'" (Conklin, *op. cit.*, p. 136). The Hanunóo also indulge in various kinds of phonological distortion which they call "***sinulih*** 'turned wrong-side-up'" (Conklin, "Linguistic Play in its Cultural Context," *Language* 35.631-636 (1959)).

[6] Burmese tones are indicated in this paper by means of arbitrary letters: v, for the long low level tone; x, for the long high tone; q, for a rapidly falling tone with weak glottal stricture. Syllables which end in ? have an extra high pitch on the preceding vowel (which is always very short), but no other pitch precedes ? and so no tonal indication needs to be made in this position. In this interpretation final ? is considered a consonant and not, as previously, a kind of "tone." See Mary R. Haas, "The Use of Numeral Classifiers in Burmese," pp. 191-200 in *Semitic and Oriental Studies* (=University of California Publications in Semitic Philology Vol. XI (1951)).

[7] The morpheme hwe? is rare in occurrence but is also found in the expression hyowx hwe?tev "hides secretly" and is related to phwe?, as in phwe?tev "(he) hides"; information obtained from Maung Soe Win and friends who were attending Colorado School of Mines, Colorado, in 1952.

[8] The reversable or movable segments are placed in square brackets in this and other examples throughout the paper. Although the most usual type of reversal in English affects the syllable-

initial, occasional instances of the reversal of finals are also encountered, e.g. it is c[us]tomary to k[iss] the bride → it is kisstomary to cuss the bride.

[9] In Thai, as in Burmese, many instances of reversed speech are either accidentally or intentionally meaningful.

[10] Parentheses are placed around "people" since the Burmese term being translated is the classifier for people and not the noun meaning "people."

[11] Mary R. Haas, *op. cit.*

[12] William S. Cornyn, *Outline of Burmese Grammar*, Language Dissertation No. 38 (1944).

[13] The values of the tonal symbols are described in note 6.

[14] Many writers on Burmese linguistics treat *hy* as the spirant [š], an interpretation which overlooks two important facts about Burmese phonology. (1) Although Burmese y in noninitial position can be described as a glide, in initial position it is always strongly spirantized and resembles [ž] except that contact is made in the y-position; therefore to treat a ž-like sound in y-position as *y* but a š-like sound in y-position as š completely obscures the relationship between these two sounds. (2) If *hy* was a true spirant it would be one of the changeable consonants like *s* which regularly changes to *z* in circumstances described in rules (iii) and (iv). Although *hy* is indeed the voiceless counterpart of *y*, it does not belong to the class of changeable consonants any more than do *hw*, *hm*, *hn*, and *hŋ* which are the voiceless counterparts of *w*, *m*, *n*, and *ŋ*, respectively. It is also worthy of note that *hy* is written as such in the Burmese orthography (but in devanagari symbols).

[15] C = consonant, V = vowel, T = tone v, x, or q (as described in note 6), nas = nasalization of the vowel (writthen a n, e.g. lanx "road"), s = glottal stop, here considered a consonant which automatically induces a high-pitched tone.

[16] The combination CyiT however, is not avoided; see example (20). It also occurs in normal words, e.g. nyivduv "equally."

[17] The type described in rule (vii) was first brought to my attention by. Dr. R B Jones who learned of it from his Karen informant, Saw Judson Aung. According to Burmese informants there is considerable individual variation in the types of ciphered speech. Moreover, this kind of speech is not considered pleasing to the ear though *zəgəleyw* is.

[18] My earlier statement was as follows:

> Regular morphophonemic rules are suspended; thus voiceless unaspirated and aspirated stops are not changed to their homorganic voiced stops after v, x, and q. In other words, the twisted [disguised] form is an automatic reversal based on the straight [nondisguised] forms without any other change.

It is somewhat difficult now to see why this should have appeared so troublesome in the early fifties. However, this very fact points up some of the changes that have taken place in phonological theory since that time. See Morris Halle, "Phonology in Generative Grammar," *Word* 18.54-72 (1962).

[19] Halle, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.