

Taungyo Proverbs

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The Taungyo (Tauñ-yoù) dialect¹ of Burmese is spoken by about 22 000 people in the Pintaya and Pwehla townships of the Taunggyi district, Southern Shan states.² From Standard Burmese it is mainly distinguished by the treatment of closed *a*-vowel syllables and the preservation of initial consonant-*l*-clusters. These features make the Taungyo dialect important for comparative studies in the Burma branch³ of Sino-Tibetan languages.

The following proverbs,⁴ however, do not represent the spoken dialect. They were written down upon request by literate villagers in Burmese script, thus being really attempts at using the Burmese medium rather than their own dialect. Nevertheless, a number of specific Taungyo usages were preserved; these will be pointed out below. It should also be noted, that in ‘Taungyo Burmese’ initial surds are never voiced and that the formative prefixes⁵ *a-* and *ma-* are pronounced with a level tone rather than as toneless neutral.

While thus the linguistic interest of the materials published here is not high, it is nevertheless hoped that they will serve as a useful addition to U HLA PE's *Burmese Proverbs*,⁶ both from a literary and a folkloristic point of view. Some of these ‘proverbs’ are for instance also recorded in the *myi'tāṣa* of *Kyi-kañ Hyiñ-kyi*⁷ (1757–1818); whether the poet made use of popular maxims – perhaps even

1 For a description of this dialect, cf. L. F. TAYLOR, “The dialects of Burmese”, *JBRS* 11 (1922), pp. 89–97. This is the material used by R. SHAFER, *Introduction to Sino Tibetan* (Wiesbaden 1966 sqq). For the most recent, comparative treatment see note 4, below.

2 Cf. MRAN-MA¹ CWAY-CUM-KYAM³, Vol. 5. (Rangoon 1961), s. v. Toñ-rui³ lū-myui³.

3 For the terminology, see R. SHAFER, *op. cit.* p. 1 sqq.

4 The materials published here were collected by one of the authors during the years 1967–70, while working on the Burmese literary campaign. They form part of his (unpublished) M. A. thesis: OÑ SIÑ³ (AUNG THEIN): *Toñ-rui³ bhāsā-cakā³ kui Añ³ sā³-Thā³ way – Rakhuiñ bhāsā-cakā³-myā³-nhañ¹ nhuiñ³-yhañ¹-le¹-lā-khyak* (typescript, Rangoon 1970). The transcription used for giving the text of the proverbs is that of John OKELL, *A Reference Grammar of Colloquial Burmese* (London 1969). The authors would also like to thank Mr. Okell for some additional references and suggestions.

5 For the terminology, cf. John OKELL, *op. cit.* p. 2.

6 HLA PE, *Burmese Proverbs* (London 1962, *Wisdom of the East* series). The consecutive numbering given by U HLA PE will be used for reference purposes.

7 KYAÑÑ³-KAN SHYAN·KRI³. Reference is to the translation by Maung HTIN AUNG, *Epistles written on the eve of the Anglo-Burmese war* (The Hague 1968). Proverb 12 can be found *op. cit.* p. 35; proverbs 20, 31 and 35 are also reminiscent of this epigrammatic style, further examples of which can be found *op. cit.* pp. 5, 17, 18, 21, 33, 34, 35.

taken from some local tradition –, or whether on the contrary the Taungyo ‘proverbs’ are survivals of literary epigrams can at present not be answered.

1. *kiñpùñ-ti'-pwè mì-loùñ-hmañ.*

T: /ti'/ = B: *tap /ta'/'*.

“To be hit by a rocket on a name-giving festival.”

An expression for unexpected bad luck. Rockets are used only in the celebration of major festivals (and at a monk's funeral), not when bestowing a name on a child.⁸ A Burmese proverb expressing the same idea is:

nwà-hcì-pouñ jou-coù. “A cow breaking her horn in a heap of cowdung.”

2. *koùy-kou kouy-hcì koùy-ì kouy-nàñ.*

T: /ì/ = B: */ipau/'*

“To exhale oneself is like smelling one's own wind.”

3. *koùy-kouy-kou cou'-hswè-hcá.*

“To hang oneself with a rope.”

To create troubles for oneself.

4. *cau'-hcò yei-pe' mawiñ.*

“One cannot pour water into a smooth⁹ stone.”

Corresponds to *Burmese Proverbs* 29: “Water can never be forced into solid bamboo.” Trying to teach a dunderhead is a vain effort.

5. *cauñ-hkaiñ-loú hniñ macwei, hkwi-sei-loú yei mayá.*

T: /hkwi'/ = B: */hkwei/'*

“No snow will fall by asking¹⁰ a cat, you won't get water by sending a dog.”¹¹

Cf. *Burmese Proverbs* 480: “The cat walks by, but the dewdrops don't fall.” “An action of no consequence has no effect on serious matters.”

6. *hcì-tò lá-tha.*

“Moonshine on a heap of dung.”

8 Cf. SHWAY YOE, *The Burman, His Life and notions* (London³1910), p. 3, for details. For the use of rockets at a monk's funeral, cf. *op. cit.* pp. 581 sq: “... A pôngyi byan in the old days was frequently attended with the loss of life. Some one, at any rate, of the bigger rockets was sure to fly off at a tangent and plunge into the crowd, where its weight, to say nothing of its fiery belchings, found one or more victims ...”

9 A variant uses *khè* ‘hard’.

10 A variant uses *sei* ‘to send, send on business, employ’ in the first part, too.

11 This refers to the unrelatedness of some action and the expected result, while the Burmese proverb *hkwei-hlei-hkouñ-loú myu-hmouñ* (or according to JUDSON'S version: *hpouñ*) *măhtá*. (“Though the dog fleas jump, it raises no dust.”) is used “when speaking disparagingly of an enemy” (JUDSON'S *Burmese-English dictionary* s.v. *hkwei-hlei*; Appendix B gives the addition “an insignificant person when trying to encompass the ruin of a great man”). ≙ *Burmese Proverbs* 481.

Corresponds to *Burmese Proverbs* 41: “The moon shining in the hollow of the bamboo.” Something futile, or in U HLA PE's words “Buried talent. Applied to someone who shows off his skill and ability where they cannot be appreciated.”¹²

7. *hci kauñ-yiñ pou maká, thu-seiñ kauñ-yiñ myou makà.*

/myou/ = /ãmyouãhswei/

“If a cotton thread is good, then it is better than silk; if a stranger is good, then he is better than a relative.”

Cf. *Burmese Proverbs* 188: “A real friend is a relative, a dish you like is a feast.”

8. *hcouñ-luñ-thò-mou-ká hkauñ, co-luñ-té-mauñ-ká wei.*

“Though the sky is very thundery, it hardly rains; though the young man is very popular (with girls), he remains remote.”

Cf. the Burmese proverb: *co-tó hlei-thãcì nyà-tó hlei-h̄tòu-thà* “While the boat-master gets famous the boat-man gets married.”

Referring to unusual or surprising happenings.

9. *ngwei mahyi-hlyiñ lu hcuhca, ngwei hyi-hmá lu leiñma.*

“If there isn't any money, one is unhealthy, only if there is money one can be good.”

Cf. *Burmese Proverbs* 109: “A full gut supports moral precepts.” (*u-má tauñ hmá thi-lá saùñ.*)

10. *sãpà pya-tha-noù-noù sãpà htauñ-kauñ-noù-noù.*

“Should one winnow paddy or pound rice?”

An expression of undecidedness.

11. *sãpà-lè hsoùñ, lú-lè hsoùñ.*

“To loose both rice and millet.”

To loose everything one owns. Cf. the proverb: *mweipa-lè hsoùñ, thà-lè hsoùñ.*

“To loose both mongoose and one's son.”¹³

12. *sei'-tu-tó thiñ-hpyù, sei'-matu-tó hsei-saùñ-hsù.*

/hsei-saùñ-hsù/ ‘desert thorn’.

“If your minds agree (you're on) a fine mat;¹⁴ if they don't, (you're in a patch of) thorn.”

13. *sei'-hyi-ká tá-hi-hi, sei'-mahyi-ká nyi-si-si.*

“If one is pleased (by someone or something), one laughs; if not, one is discontented.”¹⁵

12 *Burmese Proverbs* p.22, ad 41.

13 This proverb might refer to the well known tale (*Pañcatantra* Book V), in which the father kills the tame mongoose, thinking he has killed his son, while in reality the mongoose has killed the snake threatening the child.

14 Cf. SHWAY YOE, *op.cit.* p.79: “Softer, finer articles are made from the skin of the theng, a species of rush, which takes a black dye, and is often worked into patterns ... A cooler bed could not easily be found.”

15 Literally, ‘to be discontented and groan’.

14. *hsouñ-kañ-makaùñ htaùñ-cí-hmà thí,*
lu-kaùñ-makaùñ paùñ-cí-hmá thí.

“To know whether or not a mortar is good, you have to try it by pounding (rice in it); to know whether or not a man is good, you have to try him by associating (with him).” No exact parallel is found among the *Burmese Proverbs*, but nos. 6 and 9 express more or less the same sentiment.

15. *hteì-lou-hlyiñ yweì-ká sú, mwè-lou-hlyiñ hkauñ-ká hpye’.*
/yweì/ = /hciñ-yweì/

‘the seed of *Abrus precatorius*’ used as a weight, the smallest weight used.

“If you want to become rich, (start) by saving even a small amount, if you want to become poor, (start) by taking down the roof (oft your home).”

16. *tǎyà-lè na pyà-lè hsa.*

T: /hsa/ = B: /rhā/hya/.

“To be looking for honey while listening to a sermon.”

Cf. *Burmese Proverbs* 308: “His mouth says ‘Buddha, Buddha’, but his hand acts contrariwise.”, and *hpǎyà-lè hpù, lei’ú-lè tù* “Digging for turtle-eggs while worshipping the Buddha.”

17. *tauñ-youù kà-tiñ tǎ-nei-wiñ, bǎma hou-nà tǎ-neá thwà.*

T: /kà-tiñ/ = B: /dì-nà-tiñ/

“If a Taungyo man (says) ‘Just here’, (you will have to go) till sunset; if a Burman (says) ‘Over there’, you will have to walk the whole day.”

In spite of the difference in expression, both Taungyo villager and Burman mean the same.

18. *twiñ-hsouù-cuñ-hlyiñ nwi’ yá-thi,*
sākā-cuñ-tho nwi’ mayá.

T: /nwi’/ = B: *nut /nou’/*

“Even if one puts one's foot into a deep hole, one can extricate oneself; if one puts one's foot in with a word, one can't get out.”

Recorded by JUDSON¹⁶ as “If a person puts his foot through the floor, he can extricate it; but if he commits himself in speech, he cannot extricate himself.” U HLA PE¹⁷ has the version “If the body goes through a hole it can be pulled out; if the mouth slips it cannot retract.”

19. *htì-tiñ-pwè-lè mami, báci-thei-ta-lè mayau’.*

“To miss both the umbrella-placing¹⁸ festival and one's uncle's funeral.”

“To fall between two stools.” *Burmese Proverbs* 344 gives the variant “He fails to find his rich uncle and in the meantime he misses the festival of putting the umbrella on a pagoda as well.”

16 *Burmese-English Dictionary*, s. v. *cuñ*.

17 *Burmese Proverbs* 450.

18 The final act in building a pagoda.

20. *htiñ-taiñ-lè malai'-hniñ, myiñ-taiñ-lè macai'-hniñ.*

“Don't follow everything you think; don't love everybody you see.”

21. *nei-ta-ká hcouñ-cà, pyò-ta-ká mou-hpyà.*

“As for a home, you have got the jungle as roof; but as for talking, the sky is the limit.”

Unwarranted showing-off. *Burmese Proverbs* 88 and 94.

22. *nei-wiñ-hmá sǎpà-hlàñ.*

“To spread out the paddy (for drying) only at sunset.” *Burmese Proverbs* 396 gives the longer variant “Putting the fowl on its perch at daybreak, spreading out the paddy at sunset.” Missed opportunities.

23. *nwà-kwè klà kai', lu-kwè thu-myà yai'.*

T: /klà/ = B: *kyā*³ /cà/

“When the bullocks are scattered, the tiger (can) attack; when men are divided, others (can) strike.”

24. *nwà-hpyiñ-tó hcou-kou', lu-pyiñ-tó mi hmou'.*

“The worthless bullock indeed (is distinguished by) twisted horns; the lazy man (only) blows into the fire.”

Cf. *Burmese Proverbs* 22: “A lazy man lies flat on his back, a lazy woman stretches out her legs.”

25. *pyiñnya-ta'-tó thiñ-hpyù, thaiñ-ta'-tó myei-lù.*

“He who masters knowledge (sits on) a fine mat;¹⁹ he who masters wrestling (rolls on) the ground.”

26. *pè-sà pè-kouñ, hsa'-sà hsa'-kouñ.*

T: /kouñ/ = B: /gouñ/ (Pali: *gūṇa*.)

“If you eat beans, that is your character, if you eat millet, that is your character.”

27. *pwi'-htè-ká pè tǎ-lè-lè.*

T: /pwi'/ = B: *put* /*pou*'/

“Beans from the (same) basket are all the same.”

Burmese Proverbs 2 records the form *thi-pou'-htè-ká thi-pè htwe'-hma-hpè*

“Naturally the same beans from the same bin.”

28. *pyà-pyaùñ thi'-hkaùñ cañ.*

“After the bees have flown away, there is (only) a hollow tree left.”

The essential characteristics remain, while ‘reflected glory’ can depart any moment.

29. *pyo-pyo nei thei-hkè, pyiñ-pyiñ nei siñ-siñ thei.*

“Living happily makes for a long life,²⁰ a bored life makes for an early death.”

19 Cf. above note 14.

20 Literally ‘hardly dies’.

30. *pyò-tó ahwi', lou'tó alwè.*

T: /ahwi'/ = B: /ǎhou'/

“To speak right and do wrong.”

31. *pyò-taiñ-lè mayouñ-hniñ, youñ-taiñ-lè mapouñ-hniñ.*

“Don't believe everything (he) says; don't amass everything you believe.”

32. *hpǎyà-lè hpù, pyà-lè tù.*

“At the same time to revere the Buddha and to dig for honey.” Contradictory behaviour, cf. above proverb no. 16.

33. *mahmi-té-pàñ-kou toùñ-hkú-loú mahlàñ-né.*

“Don't prop up a log to reach for the flower you can't reach (otherwise).” Don't overreach yourself.

34. *mayè-pé-hniñ cwè-pyè sì.*

T: /pyè'/ = B: /pyei'/

“To ride a tough buffalo without courage.”

Burmese Proverbs 149 gives the form: *mǎyè-pè cwè-pyè sì-hciñ*. “He would like to ride a difficult buffalo but hasn't got enough courage.”

35. *malou-hlyiñ apyi' pouñ-thi, lou-hlyiñ ahci' youñ-thi.*

“If he doesn't want it, he heaps up blame, if he wants it, he is all trust and love.”

Extremes. Cf. *Burmese Proverbs* 453: “The more violent the love, the more violent the anger.”

36. *mou-kouñ-hmá htuiñ-hcá, thu-hkou pyañ-hmá hlañ-kuñ.*

/kuñ/ ‘to move spirally’

“To start harrowing only after the rainy season has ended; to throw the spear only after the thief has gone.”

Cf. above proverb 22 and *Burmese Proverbs* 395 and 396; but possibly this is a contamination with a different type of proverb indicating cowardice instead of missed opportunities: cf. *Burmese Proverbs* 148: “Only when the thief has run away do the tattoo spots show their power.”

37. *mou-yei' mathi-tó mou-thi hti-thi.*

“If you don't know the future weather,²¹ you will be hit by hail.”

38. *mou-ouñ-pye' anei-hke', lu-ouñ-pouñ apauñ-hke'.*

“When the sky is overcast (i. e. in the pre-monsoon season), life becomes uneasy; when a man is disguised, one is uneasy in his company.”

39. *hmañ-kou cí-touñ kouy-kou youñ, hmañ-kou cí-pì*

kouy-kouy-kou hci.

“(He) looks again into the mirror and trusts himself; having looked (at himself) in the mirror, he praises himself.” Cf. above proverb 2 and *Burmese Proverbs* 70 “He praises the pickling of his own fish.”

21 Literally, ‘the intimations of the sky’.

40. *yei neiñ-ya sì, mì myiñ-ya laun.*

“Water flows down, fire bums up.”

41. *lu-pyiñ-hyi-ya lu-hpyiñ la,
ahmai'-hyi-ya hkwi'-hcei la.*

T: /hkwi/ = B: /hkwei/

“The lazy man is joined by the useless man; the refuse by the dog's excrements.”

Cf. *Burmese Proverbs* 181 “Ox to ox, novice to novice.”

42. *lu-á mauiñ-niñ, lu-pyiñ htiñ-hkwei.*

“A dumb person pounding the rice, a lazy one collecting firewood.” We are not quite clear as to the meaning of this proverb.

43. *liñ-hmá hpouiñ-twei.*

“To find the blanket only at dawn.” Cf. above proverb 22.

44. *lwè-mé-lwè-tó tãhswè-loiñ.*

“To be wrong all the way.”²²

45. *wà-loiñ tãhlé, wà-hcàñ tãhlé.*

“Sometimes a whole bamboo, sometimes a bamboo split in half.” Unconstant mind.

46. *thù-ywa-hma nei thú thañhteì.*

/thañhteì/ = Pali *sandhi*. Obviously used here to mean ‘custom, behaviour’. The development of this meaning, however, is not clear.

“If you stay in their village, (behave according to) their customs.”

47. *thú-ayei'-lè mahkou-hniñ,*

thú-kaiñ-lè mahcoi'-hniñ.

“Don't take shelter in its shade, don't break off its branches.”

This would seem to be a variation on the theme of ingratitude expressed in *Burmese Proverbs* 122 “Taking shelter in the shade, breaking off the branches.”

But in the Taungyo proverb the implication rather seems to be an exhortation of independence coupled with the ‘dog-in-the-manger’ theme.

48. *thu-taiñ-sà-hciñ hkwe'-sauñ pyaiñ.*

“(Even) the beggars will be jealous over each other's begging bowls being unequally (filled).”

49. *asá kaiñ-hma ahnaiñ thei-hca.*

“If the beginning is good, the rest will be well finished.”

50. *apo-ká ayauñ, ahtè-ká cauñ.*

“The outside is all colour, the interior is gray.” Ostentation and false pretenses.

Cf. *Burmese Proverbs* 89 “The golden monastery is shining, but the stomach is empty”, where U HLA PE also refers to the Thai proverb “Splendid without but

²² *tãhswè*, i. e. ‘one weight’ corresponds to 25 viss, the maximum weight of the native scale, and can thus express a totality.

empty within". Cf. also the Burmese proverb *a āpo-yañ hywei hmouñ-cè, āhtè-ká nwà-hci-hkañ*. "Spread goldpowder on the outside, while keeping the cowdung within."

51. *ayù sauñ pyau'*.

"The fool lost his blanket."

Futility: certain types of people will go on behaving the same way, whatever happens. Cf. the Burmese proverb *hsa'-pya-thi liñ pyau'*. "The unsteady woman²³ loses her husband."

52. *athì lou apiñ pyú, si-pwà lou ayiñ sú.*

"If you want fruit, plant a tree, if you want riches, (start) saving first."

53. *ahauñ-kou pyi'-ywei athi'-kou hya,*

apyou-tha myà-ywei mayà matwei.

"If you (always) leave the old and look for the new, you (will find) many unmarried women but no wife."

Cf. the Burmese proverb *hcauñ-kou pyi'-ywei myi'-kou hya yei-tha-myà-ywei ngà mātwei*. "He left the brook to look for the river; there he found much water but no fish."

54. *athwà tātaiñ apyañ tātaiñ.*

"To go the distance of one poststage, to return the distance of one poststage." Action and reaction.

55. *a'-thwà-ya a'-hci-pa.*

"Where the needle goes, the thread follows." This is identical in meaning with *yauñ-nau' hsāñ-htouñ pa*. "The wife follows after the husband." Cf. also *yei-lai' ngà-lai'*. "The fish goes where the water goes"; and *Burmese Proverbs 222* "Only at high water is the water-lily at its best" (with U HLA PE's note "The wife's position depends upon her husband's").

23 Literally, 'the soap-sellers wife'.