

Language use and policy in a linguistically
fragmented refugee community

R Sproat

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Declaration of originality of research

I certify that the research described in this dissertation has not already been submitted for any other degree. I certify that to the best of my knowledge all sources used and any help received in the preparation of this dissertation have been acknowledged.

Signed:

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Note on terminology

The country which is the focus of this dissertation has one of the most politicised place-naming systems in the world¹. The following account of the terms *Burma* and *Myanmar* is from Okell (undated: 4):

The largest of [the ethnic and linguistic groups that make up Burma] is the Burmese, who account for nearly 70% of the population.

The Burmese name for themselves and their language has two forms: you use *Myanmar* in formal contexts (e.g. in book titles or the names of university departments) and *Bamar*² in informal conversations. The name of the country in other languages - English, French, German, Thai, Japanese - is based on the informal version. The difference between the two forms is rather like the way speakers of English talk informally about going to 'Holland' but address letters to 'The Netherlands'.

In 1989 the government announced that they wanted foreigners to stop using the words 'Burma' and 'Burmese'. Instead they wanted the world to use 'Myanmar' for the country and its indigenous people, and 'Bamar' for majority ethnic and linguistic group. So members of the ethnic minorities - Karen, for example - would be Myanmar by nationality and Karen by race; while the majority group would also be Myanmar by nationality, but their race would be Bamar. Previously, the same distinction was made by using 'Burmese' for the nationality and 'Burman' for the race. ...

Not everyone accepts the change of name. International organisations like the UN have naturally acted on notification from the government; and the international business community, who need to avoid governmental displeasure, have adopted the new name without reservation. Foreigners and Burmese expatriates who oppose the military government, and contest its right to rule, deliberately persist in using the old names *Burmese* and

1 For a brief account of the contested place-name reforms introduced in Burma from 1989 onwards, see Chapter 1, section *Linguistic unification in Burma*.

2 *Bama* is an alternative romanisation for this word, as is *Myanma* for *Myanmar*. On transliteration of Burmese words, see Houtman (1999: chapter 2 & fn56).

Burma as a symbol of their opposition and defiance.

This dissertation, based on data collected in one Karenni refugee camp in Thailand or from Karenni informants in camps and elsewhere, has adopted the usage of the Karenni exile community. *Burma* is used for the country, except in quotations whose authors have used *Myanmar*. Similarly, *Rangoon* is used in preference to *Yangon*.

Burman is used to refer to the majority ethnic group in *Burma*. Occasionally, in quotations, the term *Burmese* is used by respondents with this meaning.

Burmese is used as the nationality term and also to refer to the *Burmese* national language, which is the language of the *Burmans*. Occasionally, members of ethnic minorities refuse to use the term *Burmese* for their nationality (because they understand it to refer to the *Burmans* only), and instead they use 'people from *Burma*' or something similar.

Karenni state, or informally *Karenni*, is the component state which was renamed *Kayah* state by the *Rangoon* government in 1951, after the largest *Karenni* sub-group the *Kayah*. Before *Burma* became independent from Britain in 1948, *Karenni* state was referred to as *Karenni* states and consisted of three feudatory states which were anomalously not part of *British Burma*³. The troubled relationship between *Karenni* and *Burma* provides the context for this dissertation. Although there are people of several ethnicities in *Karenni*, including *Burmans*, *Shans*, *Karennis*, *Karen*, *Pa-O* and *Chinese*, the *Karennis* are the titular people and consist of several sub-groups: the *Kayah* are the majority, but there are also *Kayan*, *Kayaw*, *Manaw*, *Bre* and other smaller groups. All of the *Karenni* sub-groups have multiple alternative names, which are discussed below but are generally avoided in this dissertation. *Padaung* is a very common alternative name for *Kayan*⁴.

3 A summary account of *Karenni* independence is given in Appendix 1.

4 See Chapter 1, section *Karenni state, ethnicity and languages*.

The language of the Kayah has been adopted as the 'national' language of Karenni by the Karenni National Progressive Party, an insurgent group. This dissertation refers to the language of Karenni sometimes as Karenni, sometimes as Kayah. Similarly, Karenni state is sometimes referred to by the name Kayah state.

Some sources are given only cryptically; this is standard usage in Burma opposition politics and reflects the real need to protect some identities in relation to a country where arbitrary detention is widespread.

The terms *minor languages* and *lesser-used languages* are used synonymously, and refer to languages whose use in Karenni camps is minor; thus Karen and Shan are both called minor or lesser-used languages even though they are widely used elsewhere in Burma.

Acronyms and abbreviations

ABSDF	All Burma Students Democratic Front
AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
AIDS	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
BBC	Burmese Border Consortium
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CCSDPT	Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand
CHRO	Chin Human Rights Organisation
COLT	Communicative orientation of language teaching observation scheme
EU	European Union
HIV	Human immuno-deficiency virus
IDP	internally displaced person
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
KNPLF	Karenni People's Liberation Front
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNU	Karen National Union
LI	first (native) language
NHEC	National Health and Education Committee
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
RA	research assistant
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace-keeping and Development Council
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCHR	United Nations Commission on Human Rights
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UWSA	United Wa State Army



Map of Burma, showing its 7 states, 7 divisions and the surrounding countries. Karenni (Kayah) state is at the very centre of the map. The capital Loikaw and the Salween River are shown, with to the south, Pa-an, the capital of Karen (Kayin) state, to the west in the plains, Pyinmana and Toungoo, and to the east, Mae Hong Son, Thailand. The northern Karenni camp is on the Burma-Thai border due west of Mae Hong Son, and the smaller southern camp is on the border south-west of Mae Hong Son. *Reproduced from a US government map available online at the University of Texas: http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_eastjind_asia/burma_pol_96.jpg*

Abstract

The context of this dissertation is the conflict-ridden attempt in Burma to create a unitary nation state, also the parallel attempt by the Karenni political opposition, based in refugee camps in Thailand, to create a viable nation-in-opposition from the many Karenni ethnolinguistic groups. New data is presented on language use at public sites in one of the two Thailand-based Karenni refugee camps, where 11 languages are in daily use. Observations at schools, public meetings, acts of worship and shops, and exit interviews at clinics, show that public language use is dominated by the use of Karenni (Kayah), Burmese and English, with lesser-used community languages in a state of critical decline.

Karenni and Burmese predominate in spoken language, while Burmese and English are the most important languages in written discourse. In schools the use of Karenni declines as students move up through the system, while the use of English and Burmese increases. Although 23% of the camp population are speakers of languages other than Karenni and Burmese, these other languages are underrepresented at the sites investigated. At schools minor languages feature mainly in the speech of students who are probably explaining to each other what their teacher is saying in Burmese or Karenni. At public meetings, minor languages play a similar role, featuring in non-official speech overheard by observers; official speech is dominated by

Karenni and Burmese. At shops, there are clusters of locations where minor languages are used, but the vast majority of transactions are in Karenni or Burmese. Language use at Christian places of worship depends on the denomination of the church. Catholic churches use Karenni, with one or two also using Burmese; and Baptist churches use Karen with some Burmese. Written texts in churches vary, with some in Karen, some in Karenni roman script and a few in Karenni camp script. At all churches the phenomenon of congregations praying in several first languages simultaneously was observed. At clinics, the language of consultation was either Karenni or Burmese.

English accounts for 31% of writing or use of written texts at the sites observed. However, the use of English as the preferred medium of instruction in upper secondary schools has been limited by lack of teachers' proficiency and lack of texts in English. Burmese continues to be the leading medium of instruction in the upper school system.

About one third of the population of Kayah state has been displaced since 1996, and at least two fifths of its villages destroyed or relocated for security reasons. Many refugees have been displaced from monolingual villages. Those who now live in Karenni northern camp find themselves in a linguistically complex environment where in some cases their own language now cannot probably be used in the local shop, and is not supported in the school system at any level. Although some of these languages, for example Kayan, have quite large core communities elsewhere, some do not, and these languages must now be at risk of disappearing completely. They include Kay aw, Manaw and Bre.