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Writing Modern Burmese: an examination of the status of colloquial Burmese

U Saw Tun ဦးစောထွန်း
Northern Illinois University
stun@niu.edu

On Writers' Day, held on 28 November 1965 and sponsored by the Upper Burma Writers' Association အထက်ဗမာနိုင်ငံစာရေးဆရာအသင်း, Maung Tha Noe မောင်သာနိုး (Tha Noe 1966) submitted a monumental paper, *Modern Burmese Writing* ဗမာစာ အရေးအသားသစ် ရဲပြုသနာ on behalf of the Prose Commission စကားပြေ ကောမရှင် in which he suggested that people begin writing in Modern — or colloquial — Burmese, language spoken by the people, to narrow the gap between the written and spoken languages (Upper Burmese Writers' Association [hereafter UBWA] 1966:86).

Now, nearly forty years later, the use of colloquial Burmese has become noticeably more popular, although not necessarily as a direct result of Maung Tha Noe's paper. The popularity of colloquial Burmese is not limited to prose, the major target of the Commission, but has spread into poetry as well. Nevertheless, the art of writing in Modern Burmese (MB), overshadowed by the older written language, has still not achieved the high status or regard it well deserves for its clarity and effectiveness. In this paper I will point out some remedies for the mishandling of Modern Burmese by mixing it with Formal Burmese (FB).

For those readers with insufficient background knowledge of the movement in 1965, this paper provides a brief account of the literary scene of the time, some statements from the paper by the Commission and its advocates, as well as the voices of readers. I will then give examples of some common writing styles found in current Burmese periodicals and news media, with recommended solutions.

1 The Paper *Modern Burmese writing*

At the time of the submission of the paper *Modern Burmese writing*, colloquial Burmese had already appeared in literary writing. The Prose Commission of the Upper Burma Writers' Association expressed their displeasure with the pace of the transition away from writing in literary style language as one reason for calling for change in Modern Burmese writing, which they thought should be based on the actual language the people of that time used. The Commission gave a brief account of the history of Burmese writing from the

Bagan period ပုဂံခေတ် (1110–1300 CE) to 1965, claiming that Burmese writing had diverged into two systems, colloquial and literary, since 1300 when people began to adorn their writing with literary usages even though the practice of the Bagan period was to write in the colloquial Burmese of that time. This also led to the divergence of the colloquial and literary styles in the Nyaunyan period ညောင်ရမ်းခေတ် (1599–1754) with the evidence from the *eingyin* ချောင်း poems and the stories of Yathawuddhana ရသဝနာ. Scholars credit the favorable reception of U Ponnya's ဦးပုည literary works in the Konbaun period ကုန်းဘောင်ခေတ် (1754–1885) to his cleverness in using the language of the people of his time. P. Moe Nin ပီမိုးနင်း (1883–1940) and Theikpan Maung Wa သိပ္ပံမောင်ဝ (1899–1942) made efforts to avoid the ornamentation of language in their works. The Commission pointed out that some writers were still reluctant to write in the language spoken by the people, although at the same time some had shown certain progress by using literary but simple Burmese.

The Prose Commission suggested that literary Burmese should be replaced by Modern Burmese, pointing out the problems of using the literary language. Because of the wide differences between colloquial and literary writing, the Commission made the following points (UBWA 1966):

1. Students who finished the second grade, as reported by the Educational Research Bureau, were unable to read Burmese after not having reading for a certain period of time (UBWA 1966:62);
2. Young students face the difficulties of learning a foreign or ancient language besides studying the writing system of their own language (UBWA 1966:70, 71);
3. People in the countryside had trouble understanding the educational literature distributed to them (UBWA 1966:74–77).

The Commission hoped that people would derive maximum enjoyment from literature which was written in Modern Burmese. Later, the Commission began to advocate Modern Burmese, drawing a distinction between that and conversational spoken Burmese as actually uttered, including hesitations, groping for words, and words in incorrect order. The proposed Modern Burmese would entail systematic spelling and grammar, and would be divisible into three levels:

1. Formal Burmese, the style of language prepared before presenting to a public audience;
2. Standard Burmese, the style spoken by and comprehensible to most people;
3. Daily conversational Burmese.

The Prose Commission advocated the use of Formal and Standard Burmese.

2 Advocates of the Paper

Although the Prose Commission made their statements clear, the matter became complicated when two influential individuals, Dr Than Tun ဒေါက်တာသန်းထွန်း and U Kyaw Yin ဦးကျော်ရင်, added their views. Dr Than Tun, then Professor of the Department of History at Mandalay University, presented a paper *Early Burmese* in support of the proposal made by the Commission. Based on his theory that the people of the Bagan

period wrote as they spoke, he asserted that the spelling and syntax of that time were explicit and simple (UBWA 1966:47). Dr Than Tun concluded his paper advising, 'Burmese, without worry, should be written effectively just as it is pronounced.' U Kyaw Yin, Rector of Mandalay University at the time, expressed his delight as the keynote speaker of the conference when hearing that 'people are going to write [the language] as it is pronounced without paying attention to spelling.' (UBWA 1966:170). Dr Than Tun and U Kyaw Yin clearly misinterpreted the Prose Commission's paper as a suggestion to write the language as it is spoken.

3 Against Modern Burmese

This misinterpretation of the paper continued to spread and sparked a furious debate which did not die down until 1970. Those who disagreed with the paper offered the following reasons (UBWA 1966):

- The entire nation has already accepted the present writing practices (UBWA 1966:196, 255);
- The quality of Burmese prose will decline with the increase in literary work by unskilled writers (UBWA 1966:191, 192);
- The splendour of Burmese — the richness of vocabulary, explicitness and compactness of aesthetic literature — will disappear if a literary work were written in spoken Burmese (UBWA 1966:189, 191, 197);
- Orthographic problems could arise due to the nature of the Burmese language (UBWA 1966:224).

These were the linguistic reasons related to the issue – some participants in the argument suggested that an effort should be made to help village people become literate (UBWA 1966:184), and some argued that a conceptual and political revolution were more important to a literary movement (UBWA 1966:200). I will not address these issues here because they are not linguistic matters.

The most reasonable of the four arguments above is the assertion that the current literary style was comprehensible to and accepted by the whole nation. Thein Aung, who gave his views after reading the Commission's paper thoroughly, said that even Burmese people who had never learned basic writing did not have a problem understanding written Burmese when someone read it to them (UBWA 1966:258). What he said is absolutely right. However, although the current orthography is perfectly intelligible, we should still encourage the development of an easier, improved writing system to promote better communication between readers and writers.

Anxieties about the decline in quality of Burmese literature from the loss of verbal ornamentation are as unfounded as are worries about the rise of orthographic problems associated with the introduction of Modern Burmese. The colloquial Burmese every speaker uses does not lack flavour in comparison to the formal Burmese which people do not read or write in daily lives; in fact, it is even richer. The people of Hladaw village in Upper Burma are one example, described by Aung Naing (1982). Although most of the villagers could not read or write, they adorned their daily language with fantastic similes and metaphors. If we take writing as a tool for communication, then any undue concern

over decorative language is misplaced. Everyday language is clearer because readers and writers are already familiar with it.

Likewise some writers expressed their concerns about the orthographic problems that might arise if they wrote in Modern Burmese. Yan Aung (1968), a well-known veteran writer, mocked the movement saying that his mother, who was not properly trained in writing, made spelling mistakes in the spoken language she wrote in letters. Tet Toe, who is knowledgeable in both Burmese and English literature, also criticized Modern Burmese writing, branding it 'Spoken language writing.' (Tha Noe 1972:204). Thein Pe Myint, a respectable journalist, wrote against the use of Modern Burmese in an articles in the newspaper *Botahtaun* ဗိုလ်တထောင် (Tha Noe 1972:204).

Such mockery and criticism resulted from some zealous advocates overstating the subject, and from some irresponsible critics not reading the paper thoroughly. As noted above, Dr Than Tun and U Kyaw Yin misinterpreted the Prose Commission's paper as a suggestion to write as spoken. Maung Swan Yi မောင်စွမ်းရည်, a well-known poet and literary critic, started his essay of support as if the paper had suggested that one should 'write like we talk' (UBWA 1966:202), a phrase he uses repeatedly throughout his essay. Finally, the original proposal to 'use Modern Burmese' was replaced with the phrase 'spell according to pronunciation' and 'write it the way it's spoken.' Thein Aung (1966:37) misinterpreted the paper as being centred on the suggestion to 'write it the way it's spoken.' No wonder the paper caused anxiety over the future of Burmese literature among readers who never cared to read the paper exhaustively. Yan Aung, Tet Toe and Thein Pe Myint are just a few examples of this kind of reader. Because of these critics, Maung Tha Noe, instrumental in submitting the paper, became unnecessarily preoccupied with defending his proposal, saying that he never meant for people to write exactly as they spoke. Besides not reading the paper thoroughly, the critics' level of linguistic expertise was a source of unnecessary problems. Establishing a great name in Burmese literature does not automatically bring with it a full awareness of the mechanics of the language. No critic of the movement proved himself to be a qualified linguist.

4 The current status of Modern Burmese

Despite such negative reactions, writing in Modern Burmese started gaining a stronger foothold in various media after 1965, although it is hard to say whether this was the outcome of the paper or part of the language's natural course of development.

Weekly journals, distributed throughout the country, have been one area of increased writing in Modern Burmese (see Appendix 1): more pages are written in Modern Burmese today than in periodicals published prior to 1965 (see Appendix 2). Since I am focusing on prose in Modern Burmese, I will not address Modern Burmese in poetry here, although there too its use is apparently gaining in popularity. Modern Burmese is more fashionable than ever in Burma's information media — newspapers and broadcasting stations. Although newspaper reports are still in literary Burmese, most freelance writers use Modern Burmese in their articles. News reports on Myanmar Television are all in Modern Burmese, while the Myanmar Broadcasting Service still uses literary Burmese for news reports. The broadcasting services outside Burma, such as the BBC, RFA and VOA, all use Modern Burmese.

Nevertheless, the language of many sources of information in Burmese is not yet pure Modern Burmese, but continues to be mixed with literary style. Here are some examples

- (4) ရူးသွပ်အောင်ဖမ်းဆီးခြင်းခံရမှုကိုလည်း ခုခါမှာတော့
 [VP]-m̥p̥.gò.lé [NP]
 [be possessed and rendered mad]-NOM.OBJ.also [now however]

ရိုးသားစွာ ဝန်ခံပါရစေ။
 [VP]-zwà [VP]
 [honest]-ADV [let admit]
 ‘Now let me admit honestly how [I] was crazily possessed.’ *Shway Amyutei Monthly* ရွှေအမြုတေ, Yangon: Zabutalu Press, February, 2001, p.111.

- (5) တာဝန်ကျေခြင်း၊ သစ္စာရှိခြင်းနဲ့ ဝတ္တရားကိုစွဲစွဲမြဲမြဲဆောင်ရွက်နိုင်ခြင်းတွေဟာ
 [VP]-d̥áin [VP]-d̥áin.nɛ [VP]-d̥áin.dwè.hà
 [fulfil duty]-NOM [loyal]-NOM [can carry out duty consistently]-NOM.PL.TOP

ဇနီးတိုင်းမှာရှိရမယ့်အရည်အချင်းတွေ မဟုတ်လား။
 [NP] [VP]
 [qualities every wife should have] [isn't it?]
 ‘Is it not the case that fulfilling her responsibilities, being loyal and consistently carrying out her duties are the qualities that every wife should have?’ *Myanatmaung Monthly* မြားနတ်မောင်, Yangon: Nyeingyanyei Sapei, July 2001, p.83.

Literary Burmese still dominates not only written information but also audio and audiovisual reports. (6) consists of a single sentence: it is an extract from a broadcast by the Myanmar Television Service on 18 December 2000. The numbered, underlined words in Literary Burmese are glossed in the table below the passage.

- (6) ပြပွဲမှာ ကျန်းမာရေးဝန်ကြီးဌာနမှ ^(a)ဆောင်ရွက်လျက်ရှိ ^(b)တဲ့ တိုင်းရေးဆေးကဏ္ဍမှာ နိုင်ငံတော်မှ ^(c)တာဝန်ရှိသူများရဲ့ဆောင်ရွက်မှုများ ^(d)ကို ဓာတ်ပုံများဖြင့်လည်းကောင်း ^(e)၊ ညွှန်ကြားချက်များ ^(f)ကို ပုံစံတင်ကြီးများရေးသားပြီး လည်းကောင်း ^(g)ပြသခြင်း ^(h)၊ တိုင်းရင်းဆေးဝါး သုတေသနစမ်းသပ်မှုများ ⁽ⁱ⁾ကို လက်တွေ့ပြသခြင်း ^(j)၊ တိုင်းရင်းဆေးကောင်စီဝင် ဆရာကြီးများ ^(k)က ဆေးကုထုံးများ ^(l)ကို လက်တွေ့ကုသပေးခြင်း ^(m)၊ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအတွင်း ပေါက်ရောက်သော ပရဆေးပင်များကို ပန်းခြောက်သားနဲ့ ပြုလုပ်ပြီး ၎င်းတို့ ⁽ⁿ⁾ပေါက်ရောက်ရာဒေသ၊ အသုံးဝင်ပုံတို့ကို ဖော်ပြခင်းကျင်းပြသခြင်းနှင့် ^(o)ပရဆေးပင်များပေါက်ရောက်ရာ ဒေသအလိုက် မြန်မာပြည်မှာ ရေးဆွဲဖော်ပြခြင်း ^(p)တို့ဖြင့် ပြသထားတဲ့အပြင် ပုဂ္ဂလိကတိုင်းရင်းဆေးဝါးထုတ်လုပ်သူများကဏ္ဍနဲ့ ပုဂ္ဂလိကတိုင်းရင်းဆေးဝါး ကုန်ကြမ်း ရောင်းဝယ်သူများ ကကြို့မှာ ပုဂ္ဂလိကဆေးဝါးထုတ်လုပ်သူများက ၎င်းတို့ ^(q)ထုတ်လုပ်သော ဆေးဝါးများကို ခေတ်မီ စက်ကိရိယာများနှင့်တွဲဖက်ပြီး ပြသထားကာ ^(r)ပုဂ္ဂလိကတိုင်းရင်းဆေးဝါး ကုန်ကြမ်းရောင်းဝယ်သူများက မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအတွင်း ထွက်ရှိတဲ့ ပရဆေးကုန်ကြမ်းနမူနာများကို အခန်းငယ်များဖြင့် ^(s)ပြသထားပါတယ်။

a,c	[NP]-မှ	[NP]- <i>m̥a</i>	[NP]-SUBJ
b	[VP]-လျက်ရှိ	[VP]- <i>ʔəjɛʔ.ɲi</i>	[VP]-while
d, i	[VP]-များ	[VP]- <i>m̥jə.mjá</i>	[VP]-NOM.PL
e,g	[Phr]-လည်းကောင်း	[Phr]- <i>ləgáun</i>	[Phr]-whether
f, k, l	[NP]-များ	[NP]- <i>mjá</i>	[NP]-PL
h,j,m	[VP]-ခြင်း	[VP]- <i>dzín</i>	[VP]-NOM
n,q	လည်းကောင်းတို့	<i>ləgáun.dɔ</i>	aforementioned.PL
o	[NP]-ခြင်းနှင့်	[VP]- <i>dzín.ŋjɪn</i>	[VP]-NOM.INSTR
r	[VP]-ကာ	[VP]- <i>kà</i>	[VP]-while
s	[NP]-ဖြင့်	[NP]- <i>pʰjɪn</i>	[NP]-by means of

The Ministry of Information’s reluctance to use Modern Burmese in written and audio-visual reports can be attributed to the tendency of governmental organisations in general to use formal language. Foreign broadcasting stations, however, although active users of Modern Burmese, also have the same problem of unnecessarily mixing literary Burmese in their Modern Burmese in their reports. (7)–(11) are some examples from the BBC Burmese Service evening broadcast of 2 January 2002, with suggested Modern Burmese (MB) equivalents.

- (7) BBC ဥရောပရှိဈေးဆိုင်များ
 MB ဥရောပကဈေးဆိုင်တွေ
 ‘shops in Europe’
 Changes: ‘in’ in the phrase ‘[NP] in [place]’ translated with က *kə* instead of ရှိ *ɲi*;
 noun made plural with တွေ *twè* instead of များ *mjá*.

- (8) BBC လုံခြုံရေးတင်းကျပ်စွာ ချထားတဲ့အောက်မှာ ကျမ်းသစ္စာ ကျိန်ဆိုခဲ့ပါတယ်။
 MB လုံခြုံရေးတင်းတင်းကျပ်ကျပ် ချပြီး ကျမ်းသစ္စာကျိန်ခဲ့ပါတယ်
 ‘The oath was taken with security strictly imposed.’
 Changes: adverbs formed by reduplication rather than -စွာ -*swà* suffix; subordinate
 clause formed with [VERB]-ပြီး *pí*; monosyllabic verbs preferred over
 disyllabic.

- (9) BBC အောက်စဖို့တက္ကသိုလ်မှ အာဂျင်တီးနားဆိုင်ရာ လေ့လာရေး အစီအစဉ်
 MB အောက်စဖို့တက္ကသိုလ်က အာဂျင်တီးနားဆိုင်ရာ လေ့လာရေး အစီအစဉ်
 ‘Oxford University Argentinian studies programme.’
 Changes: location marked with က *kə* instead of မှ *m̥ə*

- (10) BBC လမ်းမတွေပေါ်မှာ ဆူပူလှုပ်ရှားစေခဲ့တာဟာလဲအနေနဲ့
 မလုပ်သင့်တဲ့အလုပ် ဖြစ်သွားစေခဲ့ပါတယ်။
 MB လမ်းမတွေပေါ်မှာ ဆူပူလှုပ်ရှားခိုင်းခဲ့တာဟာလဲ သူ့အနေနဲ့ မလုပ်သင့်တဲ့အလုပ်
 ရောက်သွားပါတယ်။
 ‘[It] turned it into something they shouldn’t do — something which
 might cause unrest on the streets’
 Changes: Causative suffix စေ *sè* replaced by ခိုင်း *kʰáin*;

- (11) BBC လန်ဒန်မြို့ဘိဘီစီမှ မြန်မာပိုင်းအစီအစဉ်တွေကို နားဆင်နေကြတာဖြစ်ပါတယ်။
- MB လန်ဒန်မြို့ဘိဘီစီက မြန်မာပိုင်းအစီအစဉ်တွေကို နားဆင်နေကြတာပါ။

Changes: Avoidance of the wordy practice of nominalising verbs with တာ tà and re-verbalising them with ဖြစ် phji?

Examples (12)–(16) are from the morning programme broadcast by the Burmese service of Voice of America (VOA) on the same day, 2 January 2002:

- (12) VOA စတင်ပြုလုပ်နေပြီ ဖြစ်ပါတယ်။
 - MB စလုပ်နေပါပြီ
- Changes: disyllabic verb စတင် sətɪn ‘start’ replaced with monosyllabic စ sɑ; redundant copula ဖြစ်ပါတယ် phji?.pà.dè removed.

- (13) VOA အဲဒီ အုပ်စုနှစ်ခုရဲ့သတင်းကို သိရှိလိုလို့
 - MB အစည်းအဝေးကို ကျင်းပပါမယ်
- Changes: [VERB]-လို lò ‘want’ replaced with [VERB]-ချင် tsɪn

- (14) Broadcast အစည်းအဝေးကို ကျင်းပမှာဖြစ်ပါတယ်။
 - MB အစည်းအဝေးကို ကျင်းပပါမယ်။
- Changes: As in (12), the redundant copula ဖြစ်ပါတယ် phji?.pà.dé is removed

- (15) Broadcast ၅၆ ရာနှုန်းဖြစ်တဲ့ လူ (၁၀၁၃)ဦးက
 - MB ၅၆ ရာနှုန်း လူ (၁၀၁၃)ဦးက
- Changes: As in (12), the redundant copula ဖြစ်ပါတယ် phji?.pà.dé is removed – here it is in a redundant relative clause.

- (16) Broadcast ပိုပြီးဆိုးရွားတဲ့အခြေအနေကို တွန်းပို့ခဲ့ကြပါတယ်
 - Mod Bse ပိုဆိုးသွားပါတယ်
- Changes: As (13).

The evening programme in Burmese from Radio Free Asia (RFA) on 2 January 2002 contained the following:

- (17) RFA ပိုပြီးဆိုးရွားတဲ့အခြေအနေကို တွန်းပို့ခဲ့ကြပါတယ်
 - MB ပိုဆိုးသွားပါတယ်
- Changes: wordy language simplified; monosyllabic verbs preferred over disyllabic

- (18) RFA ကရင်ဒုက္ခသည်များ နေထိုင်လျက်ရှိတဲ့ ...
 MB ကရင်ဒုက္ခသည်တွေနေတဲ့ ...
 ‘...where the Karen refugees lived.’
 Changes: noun made plural with တွေ twè instead of များ mjá;
 monosyllabic verb နေ nè ‘live’ preferred over complex verb string
 နေထိုင်လျက်ရှိ nè.t^hàin.ʔəjɛʔ.ʃi
 verb slimmed down from bisyllabic to monosyllabic
- (19) RFA နောက်လိုက်(၂၀)ကျော်မျှကျ
 MB နောက်လိုက်(၂၀)လောက်ကျ
 ‘there were about 20 followers’
 Changes: [NOUN]-ကျော်မျှ ʔə̀.mjə ‘approximately’ replaced with Modern Burmese
 form [NOUN]-လောက် lauʔ
- (20) RFA အဖသတင်းတစ်ရပ်မှ ဖော်ပြထားပါတယ်
 MB APသတင်းတစ်ရပ်က ဆိုပါတယ်။
 APသတင်းတစ်ရပ်မှာ ပါပါတယ်။
 ‘reported by AP news agency’
 Changes: Two simplified alternatives given, avoiding the non-colloquial noun
 marker မှ မှာ
- (21) RFA အမှာညီအကိုအား ပြန်လည် နေရာချထားရေး
 MB အမှာညီအကိုကို ပြန်နေရာချထားဖို့
 ‘In order to resettle the twin brother and sister...’
 Changes: Two simplified alternatives given, avoiding non-colloquial language
 such as noun marker အား ʔá

5 Formal language

Writers and broadcasters are still stumbling out from under the shadow of literary style in their attempts to use Modern Burmese. One of the many reasons for such hesitation is their tendency to use formal language. Maung Tha Noe, the individual instrumental in submitting and defending the Commission’s paper, himself exhibits literary-language habits in his recent works. The underlined words he uses in (22) are never found in Modern Burmese unless the writer is trying to be formal.

- (22) ဘုရားသခင်ဟာ သူတစ်ပါးအကူအညီမပါ ကိုယ်တော်တိုင် အားထုတ်ကာ အလုံးစုံ
 သိမြင်တော်မူတဲ့ သဗ္ဗညုတဉာဏ်တော်ကို ရရှိတော်မူလျက် အမြတ်ဆုံး ဆရာတစ်ဆူအဖြစ်
 လောကမှာ ပေါ်ထွန်းတော်မူခဲ့တယ်။ (Tha Noe 1966:81)

The sentence in (22) above could be rewritten in pure Modern Burmese as (23), making the substitutions and stylistic changes described in (24) and (25).

(23) ဘုရားသခင်ဟာ ဘယ်သူ့အကူအညီမှမပါဘဲ ကိုယ်တော်တိုင် အားထုတ်ပြီး အလုံးစုံ သိမြင်တော်မူတဲ့ သဗ္ဗညုတဉာဏ်တော်ကို ရှုတော်မူပြီး လောကမှာ အမြတ်ဆုံးဆရာတစ်ဆူ ဖြစ်လာတယ်။

(24) FB → MB
 ကာ kà ‘while [VERB]’ → ပြီး pí SUBORD
 ရရှိ jəjí ‘acquire’ → ရှု ja ‘acquire’
 လျက် təjɛ? ‘while [VERB]’ → ပြီး pí SUBORD

(25) FB → MB
 [NOUN]-အဖြစ် ပေထွန်း → [NOUN] ဖြစ်လာ
 [NOUN]-?əpʰji? pətʰún [NOUN]-pʰji?lā
 ‘emerge as [NOUN]’ ‘became [NOUN]’

Although Modern Burmese is acceptable for its clarity, succinctness and effectiveness in comparison to formal Burmese, many writers and broadcasters still use the latter: a muddled mixture of colloquial and literary Burmese.

Although writing in Modern Burmese is now found in contexts where only formal literary Burmese might once have been appropriate, the new language still retains some of the undesirable features of literary Burmese, such as ambiguity and verbosity.

One example is the use of the grammatical particle မှ မှဲ့ in Formal Burmese. While က ကာ is used both as a subject marker and to mean ‘from’ in the spoken language, in the literary language မှ မှဲ့ is used only as the latter, and is not used instead of က ကာ as a subject marker. Yet, during the 1970s, out of an over-eagerness to show respect to authorities, followers of the Burmese Socialist Programme Party မြန်မာ့ဆိုရှယ်လစ်လမ်းစဉ်ပါတီ started to replace subject-marking suffix က ကာ with the literary equivalent of the homonymous postposition က ကာ ‘from’ in, for instance, phrases like (26), introducing the chairman in at official meetings, as if the established subject-marking suffix က ကာ to the chairman of the meeting would be insulting, and only a overtly literary suffix such as မှ မှဲ့ would be appropriate. Here, မှ မှဲ့ does not sound right even though it may conform to the perceived preferences of the authorities for its supposed literary weightiness.

(26) ဥက္ကဋ္ဌကြီးမှ မိန့်ခွန်းပြောပါတော့မယ်။
 ʔouʔkətʰa.dʒí.mə meingún.pjo.bà.dɔ.mɛ
 chairman.big.?SUBJ address.say.POL.henceforth.IRR
 ‘The Chairman is about to make an address.’
 ?? ‘It is requested that an address be made to the Chairman.’

The misuse of the literary suffix အား ʔá for colloquial object-marking suffix ကို kò is another example of the problem of unnecessary formality in Burmese. In the belief that အား ʔá sounds more polite, it is common to see အား ʔá used wrongly in place of ကို kò, as in (27). In fact, the postposition အား ʔá is not used in spoken Burmese at all. Thus (27) may be said with the intended meaning of ‘The Chairman is requested to make an address.’ In fact, this can also be parsed as meaning ‘It is requested that an address be given to the Chairman.’ There would be no such potential ambiguity if speakers referred to the speech they might themselves produce.

- (27) ဥက္ကဋ္ဌကြီးအား မိန့်ခွန်းပြောကြားပေးပါရန် ပန်ကြားပါသည်
 ʔouʔkətʰa.ɰá.ʔá meĩngún.pjótɕá.pé.bà.jàn pàntɕá.bà.ðì
 chairman.big.to address.say.BEN.POL.PURP request.POL.REAL
 ‘The Chairman is requested to make an address.’
 ?? ‘It is requested that an address be made to the Chairman.’

An alternative rendition in Modern Burmese would be (28).

- (28) မိန့်ခွန်းပြောကြားပေးဖို့ ဥက္ကဋ္ဌကြီးကို ပန်ကြားပါတယ်
 meĩngún.pjótɕá.pé.bq ʔouʔkətʰa.ɰá.gò pàntɕá.bà.dè
 address.say.BEN.PURP chairman.big.to request.POL.REAL
 ‘The Chairman is requested to make an address.’

Other problems arise in the use of lexical items. Wordiness results from the unnecessary use of doubled verb agglomerations like ရောက်ရှိ *jauʔ.ʃi* ‘arrive.exist’ or သွားရောက် *θwá.jauʔ* ‘go.arrive’, where the single verbs ရောက် *jauʔ* ‘arrive’ and သွား *θwá* ‘go’ are entirely sufficient for the purpose. The use of the pronoun သူမ *θùmq* for ‘she’ instead of the third-person pronoun သူ *θù* which does not specify gender is unnatural and awkward. The use of သူမ *θùmq* presumably arose from the misconception that it was more polite and appropriate to have a specifically feminine pronoun in Burmese to translate the English pronoun ‘she’ in the literary translations and English lessons during the colonial period.

Further examples of literary habits creeping into colloquial Burmese involve the use of the copula ဖြစ် *pʰjiʔ*. Formal sentences like (29) can be written or said more simply in Modern Burmese as (30).

- (29) ကျွန်တော် ဆရာ ဖြစ်ပါတယ်။
 tɕənbò sʰəjà pʰjiʔ.pà.dè
 I teacher be.POL.REAL
 ‘I am a teacher.’

- (30) ကျွန်တော် ဆရာပါ။
 tɕənbò sʰəjà.bà
 I teacher.POL
 ‘I am a teacher.’

This use of the copula ဖြစ် *pʰjiʔ*, which does not exist in modern spoken Burmese, occurs also in the structure in (31), where it detracts from the conciseness of the spoken language equivalent in (32).

- (31) ကျွန်တော် သွားမှာ ဖြစ်ပါတယ်။
 tɕənbò θwá.mà pʰjiʔ.pà.dè
 I go.IRR^{NOM} be.POL.REAL
 ‘I will go.’

- (32) ကျွန်တော် သွားပါမယ်။
 tɕənò θwá.bà.mè
 I go.POL.IRR
 'I will go.'

See Appendix 2 for more examples of formal or literary Burmese grammatical and lexical items found in broadcasts, along with their equivalents in Modern Burmese.

6 Conclusion

Aware of the Burmese writers who are talented both in the use of spoken and literary Burmese, I have no intention of advocating the sole use of Modern Burmese. The late Ludu U Hla လူထူးလှ, who led the Upper Burma Writers Association, and his wife Daw Ama ဒေါ်အမာ are good examples. Readers recognise their works as great: the earlier works in literary Burmese, and the later ones in colloquial style. Similarly, writers like Aung Thinn အောင်သင်း and Nay Win Myint နေဝင်းမြင့်, to mention just a few, are brilliant in both styles.

However, I do recommend that formal Burmese, which is currently gaining ground in communication media, should be replaced with Modern Burmese in order to enhance the effectiveness of written Burmese for the benefit of Burmese writers and readers. Broadcasters need never be bothered again by the choice of formal literary words they believe to be appealing to their readers and listeners; they can become their own teachers and use the language they currently use in speech without worrying that it might be inappropriate. Some individuals may enjoy mixing literary Burmese into their conversational language, saying the phrases in (33) instead of their equivalents in (34).

- (33) ဒါသော်လည်း အဲဒီလိုပြောပြီးသကာလ
 dà.ðòlɛ ʔɛ̀di.lò.pjɔ́.bí.ðə.kàlɑ̀
 that.however that.like.say.finish.REAL.time
 'However...' 'having spoken like this...'
- (34) ဒါပေမယ့် အဲဒီလိုပြောပြီးတော့
 dà.bèmɛ ʔɛ̀di.lò.pjɔ́.bí.dɔ̀
 that.however that.like.say.finish.when
 'However...' 'having spoken like this...'

Listeners and readers may accept the forms in (33) as idiolects. Writers and broadcasters must pay particular attention, however, to arranging their daily language in an acceptable order. Modern Burmese is in many ways simpler and more user-friendly than formal or literary Burmese, yet the use of formal Burmese with the literary features it retains, is annoying for readers and listeners because of its wordiness and vagueness. The use of a standardised form of Modern Burmese, as outlined in this study, will help the users come closer to their target audience for its conciseness and clarity.

Appendix 1

(35) Approximate proportion of Modern Burmese in some magazines in 1962–1965

magazine name	date	total pages	pages of Modern Burmese
သွေးသောက်စာစာပေစာအုပ်	Feb 1962	270	18 – correspondence
ရှုမဝ <i>shumawa</i>	Feb 1964	256	7 – story-telling
မြဝတီ <i>mjawadi</i>	Nov 1965	250	3 – a letter
ငွေတာရီ <i>rwetajì</i>	Nov 1965	250	3 – a letter

(36) Approximate proportion of Modern Burmese in some journals in 2001

journal name	date	total pages	pages in MB	%
နံနက်ခင်းသတင်း <i>nànnè?kʰín.θədín</i>	17 May 2001	14	8	57%
မနောမယ <i>mənoʹməjə</i>	27 Jun 2001	16	6	37%
ပြည်မြန်မာ <i>pji.mjànmà</i>	29 Jun 2001	14	8	57%

(37) Approximate proportion of Modern Burmese in some magazines in 2000 and 2001

magazine	date	total pages	pages in MB	%
မဟေသီ <i>mənèθi</i>	Feb 2000	200	75	37%
နေ <i>dəna</i>	Nov 2001	168	79	47%
ငွေတာရီ <i>rwetajì</i>	Nov 2001	160	21	13%
ရွှေအမြုတေ <i>ʃwè?əmjutè</i>	Feb 2001	188	128	68%
မြားနတ်မောင် <i>mjàna?màun</i>	Jul 2001	184	105	57%

Appendix 2

Examples of Formal Burmese (FB) replaced with Modern Burmese (MB)

(38) subject marker [NOUN]မှ *mja* → [NOUN]က *ka*

FB		→	MB
...မှ	အသံလွှင့်နေပါတယ်။	→	...က အသံလွှင့်နေပါတယ်။
...မှာ	ဒီရေကန်မှာပဲ။	→	...က ဒီရေကန်မှာပဲ။
...from/*SUBJ	sound.broadcast.POL.REAL	→	...from/SUBJ sound.broadcast.POL.REAL
	‘Broadcasting from...’		‘[This is]...broadcasting.’

→ မှ *mja* is never used as a subject marker in spoken Burmese; it should be replaced with subject marker က *ka*

(39) verb nominaliser [VERB]မှု *mju* → [VERB]တာ *tà*

FB		→	MB
အနိုင်ရခဲ့မှုကို	ဂုဏ်ပြု	→	အနိုင်ရတာကို
ဒီအနိုင်ရမှုကို	ဂုဏ်ပြု	→	ဒီအနိုင်ရတာကို
victory.get.REM.NOM.OBJ	honour	→	victory.get.REM.REAL ^{NOM} .OBJ
	‘honouring the victory’		‘honouring the victory’

→ Although မှု မှု occurs used in the spoken language as a derivational morphological suffix to generate nouns from verbs (eg အောင်မြင် ?àunmjìN ‘succeed’ → အောင်မြန်မှု ?àunmjìN.မှု ‘success’), it is not used in syntactic constructions requiring a nominalised verb phrase, where a nominalising verb marker (eg realis တာ tà) is found.

(40) [VERB] မှုလုပ် → [VERB]

<i>FB</i>		<i>MB</i>
လိုက်ရောမှု လုပ်တယ်။	→	လိုက်ရောတယ်။
lai?jò.မှု.lou?tè	→	lai?jò.dè
follow.NOM.do.REAL	→	follow. REAL
‘complies’		‘complies’

→ [VERB]မှုလုပ်- can simply be replaced with [VERB]- on its own.

(41) Avoidance of [VERB]ခြင်း တ်းင် → [VERB]-တာ တဲ

a. <i>FB</i>		<i>MB</i>
အပစ်အခတ် ရပ်စဲခြင်းဟာ	→	အပစ်အခတ် ရပ်တာ
?əpjì??ək ^h a?ja?sɛ.ဇ်းင်.hà	→	?əpjì??ək ^h a?ja?.dà
shooting.cease.NOM.TOP	→	shooting.cease.REAL ^{NOM}
‘the end of the shooting’		‘the end of the shooting’

b. <i>FB</i>			
အစောင့်အကြပ်များထားရှိခြင်း	မရှိသေးကြောင်း	ပြောသွားပါတယ်။	→
?əsəuN?ətɛa?.mjá.t ^h á.ရှိ.ဇ်းင်	mə.ရှိ.ဇ်းင်.ဇ်းင်	pjò.ဝံwá.bà.dè	→
escort.PL.place.be.NOM	NEG.exist.yet.QUOT	say.‘go’.POL.REAL	→

<i>MB</i>			
အစောင့်အကြပ်တွေ	မထားသေးတဲ့အကြောင်း	ပြောသွားပါတယ်။	
?əsəuN?ətɛa?.dwè	mə.t ^h á.ဝံwé.tɛ.?.ဝံwé.ဇ်းင်	pjò.ဝံwá.bà.dè	
escort.PL	NEG.place.yet.REAL ^{A+TR} .QUOT	say.‘go’.POL.REAL	
‘It is said that the escorts are not yet in place.’			

c. <i>FB</i>		<i>MB</i>
ပါဝင်ခြင်း မရှိပါဘူး။	→	မပါဝင်ပါဘူး။
pàwìN.ဇ်းင်.mə.ရှိ.bà.bú	→	mə.pàwìN.bà.bú
include.NOM.NEG.exist.POL.NEG	→	NEG.include.POL.NEG
‘there is no inclusion of ...’		‘...is not included.’

Both the meanings of င်းင် : ləgáun in (42) and (43) can be replaced by a spoken Burmese equivalent.

(42) င်းင် : ləgáun → အဲဒီ ?édì ‘that; the aforementioned’;
[PHRASE]-လည်းကောင်း : ləgáun → [PHRASE]-ရော့ jò ‘both...and’

<i>FB</i>		
င်းစာအုပ်	င်းတို့က	→
ləgáun.sà?ou?	ləgáun.dò.gə	→
that.book	that.PL.SUBJ	→
‘that book’	‘the aforementioned [people/things]	

MB

အဲဒီစာအုပ် အဲဒီပုဂ္ဂိုလ်/အဖွဲ့အစည်းတို့က
 ?édì.sà?ou? ?édì.pou?gò(?əp^hwɛ?asi).dɔ.gə
 that.book that.person/organisation.PL.SUBJ
 ‘that book’ ‘the aforementioned [people/things]’

(43) [PHRASE]-လည်းကောင်း lagáun → [PHRASE]-ရော့ jǝ ‘either...or...’

FB

ကျောင်းသားတွေကိုလည်းကောင်း၊ ဆရာတွေကိုလည်းကောင်း →
 tsáunθá.dwè.gò.ləgáun, shəjǝ.dwè.gò.ləgáun →
 student.PL.OBJ.either, teacher.PL.OBJ.either →

MB

ကျောင်းသားတွေကိုလည်းရော၊ ဆရာတွေကိုလည်းရော
 tsáunθá.dwè.gò.jǝ, shəjǝ.dwè.gò.jǝ
 student.PL.OBJ.either, teacher.PL.OBJ.either
 ‘whether [they be] students or teachers [or whoever]’

FB

တစ်လအတွင်းသော်၎င်း နှစ်လအတွင်းသော်၎င်း →
 tə.lə.ʔətwin.θǝ.ləgáun n̥ə.lə.ʔətwin.θǝ.ləgáun →
 one.month.within.either two.month.within.either →

MB

တစ်လအတွင်း ဖြစ်ဖြစ်၊ နှစ်လအတွင်း ဖြစ်ဖြစ်
 tə.lə.ʔətwin.p^hjiʔp^hjiʔ, n̥ə.lə.ʔətwin.p^hjiʔp^hjiʔ
 one.month.within.be.SUBJUNC^{REDUP}, one.month.within.be.SUBJUNC^{REDUP}
 ‘be it within one month or two’

(44) [NOUN]ထံ t^hàn → [NOUN]ဆီ s^hì. ထံ t^hàn is unusual in spoken Burmese.

FB

ဝန်ကြီးချုပ်ထံ → ဝန်ကြီးချုပ်ဆီ
 wundzi^hdzou?^hàn → wundzi^hdzou?^hì
 Prime Minister.vicinity → Prime Minister.vicinity

MB

(45) စေ sè → ခိုင်း k^háin. Causative စေ sè never appears in normal spoken Burmese except when expressing wishes such as လာစေချင်တယ် là.zè.dzìn.dè come.CAUS.want.REAL ‘I’d like you to come.’

a. FB

မေးစေတယ်။ → မေးခိုင်းတယ်။
 mé.zè.dè → mé.k^háin.dè
 ask.CAUS.REAL → ask.CAUS.REAL
 ‘[He] had [someone] ask.’

MB

(50) [VERB]ရန်ရှိ jàɴ.ʃi → [VERB]နိုင် nàiɴ

a. *FB*
 မကြာမီလအနည်းငယ်အတွင်းမှာ ပြောင်းလဲမှုများဖြစ်ရန်ရှိပါတယ်။ →
 mə.tɛ̀.ə.mì.lə.ʔəɴéɴgè.ʔətʷíɴ.mə̀ pjàunléɴm̥u.mjá.pʰjiʔ.jàɴ.ʃi.bà.dé →
 NEG.long.before.month.little.within.in change.NOM.PL.be.PURP.exist.POL.REAL →

MB

မကြာခင်လပိုင်းအတွင်းမှာ အပြောင်းအလဲတွေဖြစ်နိုင်ပါတယ်။
 mə.tɛ̀.ə.gìɴ.lə.ʔəpáɪɴ.ʔətʷíɴ ʔəpjáunʔələ́.dwè.pʰjiʔ.nàɪɴ.bà.dé
 NEG.long.before.month.part.within change.PL.be.exist.can.REAL
 ‘There may be changes within a month.’

(51) [NOUN]-ခန့် kʰáɴ → [NOUN]-လောက် lauʔ

a. *FB* *MB*
 ကျောင်းသားငါးရာခန့် → ကျောင်းသားငါးရာခန့်
 tɛ̀áunʔá.ŋá.jà.gə̀n → tɛ̀áunʔá.ŋá.jà.lauʔ
 student.five.hundred.approximately → student.five.hundred.approximately
 ‘approximately five hundred students’

Replacing formal lexical items which do not occur in spoken Burmese with MB equivalents, as in (52):

(52) *FB* *MB*
 ယခု jəkʰu → အခု ʔəkʰu ‘now’
 ယမန်နေ့ jəmàɴnɛ → မနေ့က mənɛgə ‘yesterday’
 သူမ θùmə → သူမိ θù ‘she’

Bisyllabic verbs where the second verb is unnecessary can be replaced by monosyllabic verbs, or the semantically redundant material from complex verb phrases can be removed altogether to reduce wordiness, as in (53)–(56):

(53) *FB* → *MB*
 ရောက်ရှိ jauʔ.ʃi → ရောက် jauʔ ‘arrive’
 သွားရောက် θwá.jauʔ → သွား:θwáor ရောက် jauʔ ‘go’

(54) *FB* → *MB*
 သတင်းမှာ ဖော်ပြထားပါတယ်။ → သတင်းမှာ ဆိုပါတယ်။
 θədín.mə̀ pʰò.pjə.tʰá.bà.dé → θədín.mə̀ sʰò.bà.dé
 news.in reveal.show.set.POL.REAL → news.in say.POL.REAL
 ‘...it is reported in the news.’

(55) *FB* → *MB*
 [VERB]မှာ ဖြစ်ပါတယ်။ → [VERB]-ပါမယ်။
 [VERB].mə̀ pʰjiʔ.pà.dé → [VERB]-pà.mè
 [VERB].IRR^{NOM} is.POL.REAL → [VERB]-POL.IRR
 ‘will [VERB]’
 → the construction [VERB]-မှာ ဖြစ်ပါတယ် [VERB]-mə̀ pʰjiʔ.pà.dé is unusual in Modern Burmese.

(56) *FB*

[PHRASE]ကြောင်း	ပြောကြားသွားကြောင်း	သိရပါတယ်။	→
[PHRASE]-.təáun	pjɔ̌.dʒá.ðwá.dʒáun	θi.jə̌.bà.dè	→
[PHRASE]-.fact	say.inform.go.fact	know.get.POL.REAL	→

MB

[PHRASE]-ကြောင်း	ပြောသွားပါသတဲ့။
[PHRASE]-.təáun	pjɔ̌.ðwá.bà.ðə.dɛ
[PHRASE]-.fact	say.go.POL.REAL.EUPH

‘It is said/known that [PHRASE]...’

→ It is more concise to avoid multiple constructions using ကြောင်း təáun

(57) *FB*

သတင်းများကို	ကြေညာလျက်	ရှိပါတယ်။	→
θədín.mjá.gò	tɛəjə̌.ʔəjɛ?	ʃǐ.bà.dè	→
news.PL.OBJ	announce.cont	exist	→

MB

သတင်းတွေကို	ကြေညာနေပါတယ်။
θədín.dwè.gò	tɛəjə̌.nè.bà.dè
news.PL.OBJ	announce.CONT.POL.REAL

‘The news is being announced.’

→ the construction VERB-လျက် ရှိ VERB-ʔəjɛ? ʃǐ- is never used in Modern Burmese

(58) *FB*

အကျဉ်းသားများအပေါ်	ကယ်တင်ခဲ့မှုအပေါ်	ဝေဖန်သွားပါတယ်။	→
ʔətɛín.ðá.mjá.ʔəpò	kè.tìn.gɛ̌.mjə̌.ʔəpò	wèpʰàn.ðwá.bà.dè	→
prisoner.PL.on	save.REM.NOM.on	criticise.go.POL.REAL	→

MB

အကျဉ်းသားများကို	ကယ်တင်ခဲ့တာနဲ့	ပတ်သက်လို့
ʔətɛín.ðá.mjá.gò	kè.tìn.gɛ̌.dà.nɛ̌	paʔθɛ̌.lə̌
prisoner.PL.OBJ	save.REM.REAL ^{NOM} .with	concerning.SUBORD

ဝေဖန်သွားပါတယ်။
wèpʰàn.ðwá.bà.dè
criticise.go.POL.REAL

‘The rescue of the prisoners was criticised.’

→ the construction VERB-မှု အပေါ် VERB-ጠ့.ʔəpò is never used in Modern Burmese

(59) *FB*

ပါဝင်ခြင်း	မရှိပါဘူး။	→
pàwìn.dʒín	mə̌.ʃǐ.bà.bú	→
include.NOM	NEG.exist.NEG	→

MB

မပါဝင်ပါဘူး။

mə.pàwìɴ.bà.bú

NEG.include.POL.NEG

'...does not include.'

→ the construction VERB-ခြင်းမရှိ VERB-တဲင်မရှိ is never used in Modern Burmese

(60) *FB*

ပြောင်းလဲမှုတွေ ဖြစ်ရန် ရှိပါတယ်။ →

pjáunlé.mù.dwè p^hji?jàn jì.bà.dè →

change(v.).NOM.PL be.PURP exist.POL.REAL →

MB

အပြောင်းအတွေ့ ဖြစ်နိုင်ပါတယ်။

?əpjáun?əlé.dwè p^hji?.nàin.bà.dè

change(n.). PL be.can.POL.REAL

'there may be changes'

→ the construction VERB-ဖြစ်ရန် ရှိ VERB-p^hji?jàn jì is never used in Modern Burmese

(61) *FB*

အလားအလာ ရှိနိုင်ဖွယ် မရှိပါ။ →

?əlá?əlà p^hji?jàn mə.jì.bà →

potential exist.can.GERUND NEG.exist.POL →

MB

အလားအလာ မမြင်ပါ။

?əlá?əlà mə.mjìɴ.bà

prospect NEG.see.POL

'no prospects are envisioned'

→ unnecessary wordiness can be avoided in Modern Burmese

