

Some Suggestions for Romanizing Siamese.

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Transcription from the alphabet of one language into that of another is always a makeshift, unless indeed the two alphabets are only different symbols for the same sound. Such we may consider the Pāli Mss. written for instance in Burmese, Cambodian and Sinhalese characters.

We revert to transcription either for practical reasons, such as want of type, or with a view to showing the pronunciation of foreign words, or for scientific reasons with a view to showing the relations of languages written in different characters to one another: to find indeed a common medium between them in pronunciation.

We reach a relative state of perfection if we are able to express the symbols of one language (the alphabet) in that of another without any ambiguity regarding pronunciation. This state we have reached in the different alphabets of Indian origin, in which for instance Pāli is written, inasmuch as the symbols, though different in form, have the same value; and we have also reached a relative state of perfection in the so-called Hunterian system of transcribing Indian alphabets with European letters, *i. e.* romanizing them.

The question is more complicated if for practical reasons we have to transcribe the symbols of one alphabet into that of another in which, with a view to showing a different enunciation, we must use diacritical marks, or if the languages belong to different families.

It is known that the different geographical societies, with a view to gaining uniformity in reducing into writing names of places

etc., have laid down certain rules which are excellent in themselves, but which were only made, as is too often forgotten, for reducing to writing languages which apparently have no written symbols for expressing sound. The mistake made in applying these rules is that they are applied to languages with an alphabet. It is as if we were to give some English place-name according to French pronunciation or vice versa, or if we were to write for French *Eu*, O in English.

Now it is unfortunately true that people are apt to treat a language, the alphabet of which they are unacquainted with, as if it did not possess an alphabet; and they reduce to writing words they hear according to their own fancy, and are especially happy if, by this rendering, they can evoke some connotation appealing to their intellect. It is in fact the Hobson Jobson style of transcription, which is certainly amusing in some instances, but is, we may safely assert, never correct. To it we owe such terms as Upper roger, Opperat (Dutch) for Uparāja, a form also appearing as Ombrat, the Umpire for Amphö, also written at the present time Umphur; and further the expression 'ballon', in the description of the French in the time of King Narayana, for the King's boats, as a rendering of the Pāli Siamese, pallaṅka, litter, palanquin. We find at the present time a "Book Club" for pudgal-labh (wealth of man) as the name of a money institute, a name which has now been changed into "Siam Commercial Bank," and the Pāli equivalent, as nearest in sound, found for it was สยามกัณฑ์มาจก meaning "Siam steady work."

This tendency then to reduce to writing words according to the way in which persons fancy they hear then pronounced can scarcely be called conducive to an exact knowledge, especially if the original connotation is made obscure. It is difficult, we think, in Siamese to recognize in the form "Payub" as the name of a Government Circle, the Pāli word Byāba, พายัพ, north-west

King Mongkut on several occasions rightly objected in his own forcible language to the curious way of transliterating Siamese adopted by the American Missionaries, and, in drawing already at that time the attention of scholars to the way of transliterating advocated in the Royal Asiatic Society's Journal, hoped that some improvement would take place. He wrote in view of the curious

way of dividing Siamese Pāli words in syllables, a practice which is not given up even at the present time:—

“Why is not the name of Mr. Knox printed thus, ‘Missa Nox’ or ‘Nawk,’ if the name of Chao Phya Bhuddharabhay is to be ‘P’raya Poo’ta’ra pie’? And why then is London not printed ‘Lundun’ or ‘Landan’ if Bejrपुरi is to be printed ‘Petch’abury’?”

We may therefore ask whether some simple rules may not be framed by which Siamese words can be romanized and which will enable us to reproduce these romanized characters in Siamese characters without ambiguity.

The only scholars who have tried to solve this question are the Roman Catholic Missionaries, and their system has been in use for the past seventy years and may be considered, from a purely practical stand-point, good, inasmuch as it is said that the converts after learning the Roman characters, find no difficulty in transcribing them into Siamese characters. But the system is far from perfect as we shall see. And it is said that transcription was only adopted because, in the reign of Phra Nang Klao, the Missionaries were forbidden to use, for their religious writings, the Siamese characters.

It is known that for 30 vowels and 43 consonants, 14 vowels and 20 consonants have been substituted, that no difference has been made between the letters of the three classes, the high, middle and low, and that consequently to mark the tones certain accents are used which have, as is known, a different value if they are placed over letters belonging to the different classes.

It will thus be easy to read and pronounce a Siamese text correctly, but it will be more difficult to retranscribe the romanized characters into the original Siamese, as no difference is made in transliterating the letters according to the class to which the letters belong and 𑄠, 𑄡, 𑄢 𑄣 𑄤 are alike transcribed kho, 𑄥 𑄦 𑄧 are alike transcribed pho, 𑄨 𑄩 𑄪=tho. Further no notice is taken of the original final letters, which are transcribed according to their pronunciation as ng, n, m, k, t, p.

It is therefore quite clear that the transliteration does not fulfil the requirements of science, but it has this great advantage that as far as vowels are concerned no ambiguity exists.

We may also refer in this connection to the attempt made in 1862 to adapt Lepsius' standard alphabet to romanizing Siamese. Dr. Bradley, in the Bangkok Calendar for 1863, writes in the course of his review of the noticeable events in the year 1862:—"Among the many noble objects embraced in the plans of the Prussian Embassy was that of establishing a 'standard alphabet for reducing unwritten and foreign graphic systems to a uniform orthography in European letters,' according to the plan of Dr. R. Lepsius, Professor at the University of Berlin. To this department Theodore von Bunsen, Esq. was devoted, and performed a good work while here, in preparing the way for writing the Siamese language according to that universal linguistic system. The editor of the Bangkok Calendar sees no serious difficulty in accomplishing this object, and fully intended to publish in this Number of his work, a table showing how Siamese words may be written by this new system. But the want of a few sorts of type has compelled him to postpone it a short time." The project has not been carried out, so far as I have been able to ascertain.

It will now be our duty to see whether a more satisfactory system of transliteration than those hitherto adopted, cannot be found.

For this reason it might be convenient to enquire into the origin of the alphabet. It is a fairly well established fact, that Siamese belongs to a family of languages such as Chinese which uses a hieroglyphic system to represent the spoken word. Thus the Chinese alphabet was adapted with more or less success for use in Annamese and Japanese, but Siamese which is closer related to Chinese, as it owes its whole civilization to Indian influence, adopted a syllabic Indian alphabet. During their migrations the Thai had not developed an alphabet of their own. They found, however, when they reached their present homesteads that these were inhabited by people who owed their civilization to Brahmanic influence and

who had consequently an alphabet adapted to the writing of an Indian language. The Thai under Phya Ram Kemheng of Sukhodaya adopted this Indian alphabet to reproduce their language and this fact is recorded in the Inscription from Sukhodaya now preserved in Wat Phra Keo, Bangkok, from which it appears, as has already been pointed out, that the Siamese alphabet dates from A. D. 1281 (Mahasakaraj 1203). Of course this Aryan alphabet to adapt it to the use of a Non-Aryan language had to be modified and this was done subsequently. The way in which these modifications were made are certainly ingenious and if the grammarians have not succeeded in smoothing over all difficulties as is shown by the difficulty we find in transliterating the alphabet, the means adopted by them were certainly skilful.

Now the original characters which were used for forming the Siamese alphabet were the following as used in Devanagari:—

Vowels:— ဝ a ဝာ ā ဝိ i ဝီ ī

 ဝု u ဝု ṁ ဝု ṛ ဝု ṛī

 ဝု ḷ ဝု ḷī ဝေ e ဝေ ai

 ဝေ o ဝေ au

 ḥ p visarga

 ḥ anusvara

gutturals	က	ခ	ဂ	ဃ	င
	k	kh	g	gh	ṅ
palatals	ဇ	ဆ	ဇ	ဆ	ည
	c	ch	j	jh	ñ
linguals	တ	ထ	ဒ	ဓ	န
	t	th	d	dh	n
dentals	တ	ထ	ဒ	ဓ	န
	t	th	d	dh	n

labials	ॡ p	ॢ ph	ॣ b	। bh	॥ m
semivowels	० y	१ r	ॡ l	ॣ v	
sibilants	ॢ s	ॣ sh	। s		
aspiration	ॣ h	। ʰ			

It can be easily seen that this Indian alphabet could not without some modifications be used for reproducing the sounds of the Siamese language.

We have roughly speaking in Siamese the following sounds apart from vowels, which have to be reproduced by letters, viz :

k,	kh,	ṅ,			
c,	ch,				
d,	t,	th,	n,		
b,	p,	ph,	f,	m,	
y,	r,	l,	s,	v,	h,

It can be easily seen that with a view to adapting the Indian alphabet to the Siamese language, it became necessary both as regards vowels and consonants to modify the original alphabet.

With a view to conformity certain letters have been added to the original Indian alphabet such as ॣ to represent a sanskrit ksh, further ॢ which only occurs in the Annamese word for neck khò.

The letters ॡ ॢ ॣ have been softened and were made to represent d, d, b, and consequently ॡ ॢ ॣ were added to represent the mutes t, t, p, whilst original ॣ । d, ॣ b have acquired the sound of aspirates and ॢ original g got hardened into the aspirate kh.

Some of the letters did not represent any sounds in the Siamese language and thus the whole series of linguals, the sonant

aspirates ข ฉ ฅ ฐ, could be discarded. Furthermore the ศ s and ษ sh also do not occur and are not written in pure Siamese words, and it is only a freak of the grammarians which prescribe ฐ ฑ in a few words, not of Indian origin such as เรือ ฆ่า. The sound represented by the letter y- ญ can be easily represented by the semivowel ย, in words of Siamese origin such as หยิง ไย

The alphabet as so modified did not as yet meet the requirements of the language and the grammarians in modifying the shape of some letters reproduced the following alphabet.

ก ข ค ง
 ฉ ด ฐ
 ต ศ ถ น
 บ ปร ผ พ ฬ
 ย ร ล ว ฬ ห ฬ

in which ฝ ฬ represent f.

They also divided these letters into three classes the high, middle and low class inasmuch as the accent placed over them affected their pronunciation and, thus we have in the middle

class letters: ก ฉ ต ศ บ ปร
 k, c, d, t, b, p,

In the high class letters: ข ฉ ถ น ผ ฬ ฬ ห
 kh, ch, th, ph, f, s, h

and in the low class ก ง ฐ ฑ ท น พ ฬ น ย ร ล ว ฬ
 kh, n, ch, s, th, n, ph, f, m, y, r, l v h,

It will be seen that the high and low class letters form a complementary series and in order to distinguish their phonetical value it is necessary to put a diacritical mark on the high class such as printing them in italics, or adding a line or point to them, in so far as they are identical in sound.

Knowing that the accents ' ˘ ˙ ˚ affect the pronunciation inasmuch as they are placed over the different class of letters, we may when necessary in transliterating adopt the signs as used in the Pallegoix dictionary and in the publications of the Roman Catholic Missionaries, viz :

á altus, à demissus,
 â circumflexus, a gravis, leaving the tonus rectus unmarked.

There is no objection to this plan if we remember that the use of these accents in old Mss. greatly varies.

If we now proceed to make some suggestions for a transliteration of vowels, we must once more repeat that we should use for every vowel or diphthong in transliterating vowels only, and we should not because of the Cockney pronunciation of English r revert to that letter to mark a long vowel, or because "aw" has in some instance the short O sound in English, use this in preference to a general recognized "O".

The value of the vowels should be the Italian one; but of course no transliteration will without the spoken word be satisfactory.

With regard to the transliteration of the vowels it is known that for purely practical reasons the Roman Catholic Missionaries only mark the short vowels, rightly contending that most of the vowels in Siamese are long.

Whilst giving due weight to their argument it appears more in accordance with general recognized principles that we should also mark in Siamese the long vowels in the few instances where transliteration must be reverted to.

In a transcription of the Siamese alphabet we should then mark the inherent short vowel (originally perhaps a) with o, and then further in accordance with the Indian vowel system,

ᳵ ā ᳶ ī ᳷ ṛ ᳸ u ᳹ ū
 Further ᳶᳵ o ᳶ᳷ ai ᳶ᳸ ṁ ᳶ᳹ au

The r and l vowels do not occur in words of Siamese origin and they must consequently be left out in pure Siamese words where they are replaced by $\overset{\text{a}}{\underset{\text{a}}{\text{r}}}$, $\overset{\text{a}}{\underset{\text{a}}{\text{l}}}$, $\overset{\text{a}}{\underset{\text{a}}{\text{r}}}$, $\overset{\text{a}}{\underset{\text{a}}{\text{l}}}$.

These original Indian vowels were further modified to mark some peculiar Siamese sounds viz: ü and ö sound by $\overset{\text{a}}{\underset{\text{a}}{\text{ü}}}$, $\overset{\text{a}}{\underset{\text{a}}{\text{ö}}}$, $\overset{\text{a}}{\underset{\text{a}}{\text{ü}}}$. We should transcribe them with ü and ö and not perpetuate the barbarism of transcribing them by ur or er according to English pronunciation.

The visarga of Indian grammar is used to mark a very short vowel and for the same purpose a modification of the anunasika in the shape of ~ is used.

This sign is, however, comparatively new inasmuch as in old writings a very short vowel is marked by the duplication of the consonant and both signs can thus be transcribed with the sign for a short vowel ~ . ~ and ~ are modifications of the sound 'ai' which are at present pronounced alike. ~ never occurs in words of Indian origin and consequently their uniform transliteration by "ai" cannot lead to any ambiguity.

If we shortly sum up what has preceded, it is clear that owing to the origin of the Siamese alphabet it will not be possible to transcribe a lengthy text. Under ordinary circumstances we should adopt when necessary for words of Indian origin a transcription according to that system.

When the knowledge of such origin has been obscured, we should treat them as Siamese words:— ~ and ~ are scarcely felt any longer as having been taken from Sanskrit Vara, excellent, and Varyas, more excellent, and thus quite apart from the fact that they are some of the few words known in European languages, although the explanation of their origin remains for the writers on things Siamese as obscure as most things Siamese, we should treat them in transcription as Siamese words.

In most cases there will be very little necessity of using diacritical signs in transcribing Siamese into a European language; but it is to be hoped that the Hobson-Jobson method of reproducing Siamese into European language will be given up, as the knowledge we may gain by a scientific transcription, would otherwise be lost.

Who would, to give only one instance, recognize in the word Sakate in "Wat Saket" one of the names of the old capital of Ayodhya bestowed on a Royal temple, a name which we find moreover in Srisaket, ศรัท สักเกต ?

Who would recognize in Tape, the word Deva (เทพ) ?

