



## Languages in the Rohingya response

This overview relates to a Translators without Borders (TWB) study of the role of language in humanitarian service access and community relations in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh and Sittwe, Myanmar.

Language use and word choice has implications for culture, identity and politics in the Myanmar context. Six languages play a role in the Rohingya response in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Each brings its own challenges for translation, interpretation, and general communication. These languages are Bangla, Chittagonian, Myanmar, Rakhine, Rohingya, and English.

### Bangla

Bangla's near-sacred status in Bangladeshi society derives from the language's tie to the birth of the nation. Bangladesh is perhaps the only country in the world which was founded on the back of a language movement. Bangladeshi gained independence from Pakistan in 1971, among other things claiming their right to use Bangla and not Urdu. Bangladeshis gave their lives for the cause of preserving their linguistic heritage and the people retain a patriotic attachment to the language. The trauma of the Liberation War is still fresh in the collective memory. Pride in Bangla as the language of national unity is unique in South Asia - a region known for its cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity.

Despite the elevated status of Bangla, the country is home to over 40 languages and dialects. This diversity is not obvious because Bangladeshis themselves do not see it as particularly important. People across the country have a local language or dialect apart from Bangla that is spoken at home and with neighbors and friends. But Bangla is the language of collective, national identity - it is the language of government, commerce, literature, music and film. Most other languages are understood as purely functional and reserved for personal matters.

## Chittagonian

Despite these associations and assertions, local language and dialect greatly affect social integration. Local language plays a role in how close or distant diverse communities feel to one another. It also affects their opportunities for social and economic advancement. The Chittagong Division of Bangladesh, where Chittagonian is the local language and which includes Cox's Bazar District, is a case in point.

Chittagong Division, in southeast Bangladesh, stretches from the capital, Chittagong, in the north, to the Chittagong Hill Tracts<sup>1</sup> in the east, and Cox's Bazar District in the south. To the east and south the division borders India and Myanmar. Chittagong Division has a distinct cultural and linguistic heritage, although locals are sometimes reluctant to admit this to outsiders. Instead, they may say they speak the local language (*ediyar hotha*) or regional language (*ansolik basha*), in other words, a local variety of Bangla.

Despite low mutual intelligibility between Bangla and Chittagonian, the Bangladesh government views Chittagonian as a regional dialect of Bangla. Chittagonians without a Bangla education are unlikely to understand many technical and administrative Bangla words, like *bikash* (development) and *kendro* (centre). Bangla speakers will find it even more difficult to understand Chittagonian. Not only is it a tonal language, but it contains many loanwords from Arabic, Farsi, and even Portuguese, that were not adopted into Bangla. Chittagonian also has geographical variations: someone from Chittagong will speak a different dialect to someone from Teknaf, in the south.

## Myanmar

Myanmar is the official language of Myanmar, spoken by about two-thirds of the country's population. The ethno-language group that speak Myanmar as their native language are the Bamar. The language, known in colonial times as Burmese, rose to national prominence after the political uprising of 1962.

Although there are not many native speakers of Myanmar in either Rakhine State or Cox's Bazar, it is a central language for the humanitarian response. The Rohingya community prefer it for written communication. It is the official language of instruction for primary education in the Sittwe rural camps, and one language of instruction in the temporary learning centers of Cox's Bazar. It is also important in relation to the Rohingya community's hopes of eventual Myanmar citizenship and the rights and opportunities that come with it.

Many people across the country speak a local language or dialect at home and with neighbors and friends. However Myanmar is the language of collective national identity, used in government, commerce, literature, music and film.

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<sup>1</sup> A number of linguistic cultural groups exist in this area. They include Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, indigenous Assamese, Keot (Kaibarta), Chak, Pankho, Mro, Murang, Bom, Lushei, Khyang, and Khumi.

## Rakhine

Rakhine is the dominant local language in Rakhine State in western Myanmar, where the Rohingya camps are located.

Rakhine State stretches from Maungdaw Township in the north to Gwa in the south. To the west and north the state borders Bangladesh and India. Rakhine State has a distinct cultural and language heritage, which locals are beginning to reclaim after years of downplaying it in line with official narratives. A reactivated political and militant movement seeks to distance the Rakhine people from the Myanmar culture and language.

Rakhine speakers generally have a high command of the Myanmar language due to exposure to government schools, media, and commerce. However, older Rakhine speakers and those from remote, rural areas may not understand technical or academic Myanmar words, or words related to ethnic Bamar culture and customs.

Myanmar speakers often find it difficult to understand Rakhine. Both languages are from the same language family (Lolo-Burmese) and were historically influenced by the Pali language. However, they differ in pronunciation and vocabulary. Rakhine, having had historical ties to South Asia and maritime trade, contains many loanwords from Hindi, English, and even Portuguese. These words were not always adopted into the Myanmar language. Rakhine also has geographical variations: someone from Mrauk-U, in the northeast, will speak a different dialect to someone from Sittwe, in the central part of the state.

## Rohingya

Rohingya is another major language of Rakhine State. Between 1.5 and 2 million speakers lived in Myanmar before 2012. Nearly 1 million Rohingya speakers left Myanmar due to violence in 2012, 2016 and 2017. Rohingya is related to other South Asian languages, with which it shares Sanskrit and Pali roots. As the Rohingya community is largely Muslim, the Rohingya language shows Arabic and Urdu influences. It is also substantially influenced by the neighboring Rakhine language, and has adopted technical and academic words from standard Myanmar.

The Rohingya language has different dialects within Rakhine State. Compared to the townships in the north (Maungdaw and Buthidaung), Sittwe and Mrauk-U dialects show a greater influence of the Rakhine language. In some remote Rohingya communities, like Sin Tet Maw and Ramree, many Rohingya are bilingual in Rakhine. In such cases the dialect can be mutually unintelligible with the dialect spoken by the Rohingya community of urban Sittwe.

Rakhine and Rohingya are distinct languages, but over time speakers of each have adopted words from the other. This is common in urban settings, particularly among families whose heritage is a mix of Rohingya and Kaman, a subgroup of the Rakhine people.

Over time, communication and understanding have improved between Rakhine and Rohingya speakers, the two groups with the most interaction. However, speakers of all language groups report that instances of miscommunication and misunderstanding persist, often on critical matters.

## English

English is the former colonial language in Myanmar. It was the main language of instruction in higher education from the late 19th century to 1964, when General Ne Win mandated educational reforms to "Burmanize". Today, English has a clearly diminished role, though it continues to be used by educated urban elites in Yangon and the national government. English is the second language taught in schools after Myanmar. Several Yangon-based newspapers and magazines are also published in English.

English is also the former colonial language of Bangladesh, from when the country was part of India. Officially, the Bengali Language Implementation Act of 1987 relegated English to the judiciary and foreign affairs. It does not otherwise play a part in the daily life of most Bangladeshis. However, English is a compulsory subject in all schools, colleges and universities. Among the Bangladeshi elite, many choose to send their children to schools where English is the language of instruction. Some Dhaka-based newspapers are also published in English.

English plays a major role in the Rohingya humanitarian response. As an official language of the United Nations, English is the dominant language in humanitarian activities from policy and coordination to operations. Most signage and written communication with displaced Rohingya in the Sittwe camps is in English and Myanmar. In Cox's Bazar, written communication with the refugees is largely in English, Bangla, and Myanmar.

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TWB envisions a world where knowledge knows no language barriers. The US-based nonprofit provides people access to vital knowledge in their language by connecting nonprofit organizations with a community of language professionals, building local language translation capacity, and raising awareness of language barriers. Originally founded in 1993 in France (as Traducteurs sans Frontières), TWB translates millions of words of lifesaving and life-changing information every year. In 2013, TWB created the first crisis relief translation service, Words of Relief, which has responded to crises every year since.

For more information about this study or to find out how TWB is supporting the Rohingya response in Bangladesh and Myanmar, visit our website or contact [myanmar@translatorswithoutborders.org](mailto:myanmar@translatorswithoutborders.org) or [bangladesh@translatorswithoutborders.org](mailto:bangladesh@translatorswithoutborders.org).