4. The sound system.

In Pali every syllable is either long or short. (In India the terms are “heavy” and “light”.) It is essential both to know which is which and to make the difference clear in pronunciation: this means making clear both the difference between a long and a short vowel, and the difference between a single and a double consonant.

A syllable is long for one of three reasons:
1) It contains a long vowel.
2) Its vowel is followed by \( m \) (anusvāra).
3) Its vowel is followed by more than one consonant (= a conjunct consonant).

A syllable cannot be long for more than one reason. There are very few exceptions to this rule and they are almost all in loan words from Sanskrit.

This rule means that a long vowel can never be followed by \( m \) or by a conjunct consonant. If word formation threatens to make this happen, either the vowel is shortened or what follows the long vowel is changed.

The long vowels in Pali are \( ā, ī, ū, e \) and \( o \). Both \( e \) and \( o \) follow the above rule like all other vowels: if they are followed by \( m \) or by more than one consonant, they become short. What is confusing is that no system for writing Pali (so far as I know) marks whether an \( e \) or \( o \) is long or short. However, there is no ambiguity in the pronunciation.

The stress in a Pali word falls on the penultimate syllable if that is long. If it is short, the stress goes back (towards the beginning of the word) until it finds a long syllable. For purposes of stress, however, detachable parts like verbal prefixes do not always count as part of a word, so that occasionally one has to understand a word in order to know where the stress falls.

The vowel \( a \) (short \( a \)) has two different pronunciations. In a stressed syllable it is open like the \( u \) in English *but*. In an unstressed syllable it is the middle vowel, like the last sound in English *butter*.

In sum, the writing system is an almost perfect guide to the pronunciation; the only exceptions to this are that it does not indicate stress, and the vowels \( a, e \) and \( o \) each have two pronunciations which are not marked, but can be deduced.

Certain consonants are never doubled in Pali. There is no double \( ň ň \), no double \( rr \), no double \( vv \), no double \( hh \). Where word formation might lead to \( vv \), Pali changes this to \( bb \).
A Pali word cannot end in a consonant. The only exceptions are in circumstances inherited from Sanskrit, where two words are felt and pronounced as one, because the second is very weakly pronounced; the consonant in question is thus felt to be medial, not final. Example: *tad eva*: “that same (thing).”

A Pali word cannot begin with a conjunct consonant.

There is no conjunct in Pali of more than two consonants. (The commonest conjuncts are of the same consonant doubled, of which the second may be aspirated, or of a nasal plus a stop.)

There are exceptions to the above two rules, and in all of them the Pali has restored the Sanskrit phonetics. It is often clear that this is in order to decrease ambiguity. For example, the nominative singular of the second person pronoun (English: “you”) is *tvam* in Pali, from *tvam* in Sanskrit. The rule against having an initial conjunct would produce *tam*, but that sounds the same as *tam* meaning “that”, one of the commonest words in the language.

The following must be constantly kept in mind when using a dictionary: The fact that a conjunct consonant is allowed inside a word but not initially accounts for a frequent feature: that when a word beginning with a single consonant has a prefix, that consonant may be doubled. Examples:

*piya*: “dear, pleasant”  *appiya*: “not dear, unpleasant” (*a* is the negative prefix).

*kamati*: “walk, go to”  *pakkamati*: “set out” (*pa* is a verbal prefix).

Note also that in these examples the stress moves back to the first syllable (see above).