

**BOOK REVIEW**  
***SOUTHERN LISU DICTIONARY***  
**BY DAVID BRADLEY**

*Berkeley, CA, STEDT Monograph 4, University of California, 2005.*  
*[Hardcover 346 pages body + xxxiv front-matter. ISBN: 0-944613-43-8]*

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

“Yes,” you might say, “now that you mention it, I have been wondering about where I could get a good dictionary of Southern Lisu.” Well, this is the best one, and it just might be more relevant to your work than you would at first suppose.

But first a bit of background: Who are the Lisu and where did they come from? The Lisu speak a Tibeto-Burman language, of the Loloish branch. This branch also includes the Akha and Lahu. The Lisu can be traced back to what is now Yunnan Province in China, and they have been moving south for centuries. Traditionally the Lisu are divided into the Northern, Central and Southern varieties. Practically all Southern Lisu speakers now reside in Thailand, with a few in Myanmar.

The author of this dictionary, David Bradley, is a professor at La Trobe University in Australia. He is an established researcher in Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages and in linguistics. Bradley has published numerous articles on Lisu and other TB languages, as well as a previous dictionary on Northern Lisu.

So what is this rather large dictionary? Perhaps it would help to put it in some context.

We have before us three Lisu dictionaries in English,<sup>1</sup> each of a different scope. Ngwazah 2007 is a modest popular-level work of 254 small pages<sup>2</sup> containing around 11,000 English words with Lisu glosses and almost 80 pages of front and back matter, including an eight-page picture dictionary at the end.

Bradley 1994 is a much more accomplished academic work, with 207 medium-sized pages<sup>3</sup> and perhaps 15,000 Lisu head words (written in the approved Chinese orthography), with many other associated words in many of the head word entries and example sentences. Each is glossed in English, with a word class (i.e. part of speech) associated. At the end of the dictionary, there is a 44-page finding list of English words indexed to the Lisu words with word class and

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: *The Li-Han Cidian* (ed. by Xu Lin et al., Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe, 1984) is a Lisu-Chinese dictionary, available on line: <http://ishare.iask.sina.com.cn/f/7764551.html>.

<sup>2</sup> About 14cm X 20cm.

<sup>3</sup> About 17cm X 25cm.

Lisu gloss from the main part of the dictionary, and a short introduction at the beginning. It is based the language of the Lisu of NW Yunnan.

The third is the present work, which represents another level yet in thoroughness and accessibility for linguists and those who do not know the Lisu alphabet. It contains 346 rather large pages<sup>4</sup> of Lisu head words, each followed by a phonemic transcription, a word class, an English gloss, and usually a few associated Lisu words with glosses.

Each page contains between 10 and 20 headwords, depending on the number of sub-entries. I estimate the total number of head words to be around 6,000, with more than 13,000 lines (representing head words and sub-entries).

It is a little hard to come up with a count of total lexemes in the dictionary. Most of the indented entries are illustrative sentences, but a few of them are clearly headwords, and at least one is a second sense of the non-indented headword. For example,

- p. 94 has 15 indented entries. One is a headword: /ku za tshi/ ‘meteorite’.
- p. 80 has 24 indented entries. One is a second sense: G: /ga/ ‘zigzag’.
  - Headwords are: /a ga/ ‘burial hill’, /ga ga le/ ‘on tiptoes’, /tshi wy ga ga le/ ‘bowlegged’, and /a ga ma/ ‘spider’.

It would have been useful if there were a clearer distinction made between headwords and sub-entries based on lexical criteria, and to have these criteria explained. A fuller explanation of the lexicographical decisions involved in making the dictionary would also have been helpful.

The entries in this dictionary are written in the Lisu alphabet (sometimes called the ‘Fraser script’) and arranged by the Lisu alphabetical order. Each entry is then followed by a phonemic transcription, and all the sub-entries and examples are written in this phonemic script.

A useful feature is that at the bottom of every page there is a line listing the Lisu alphabetic symbols with a phonemic equivalent. This line can save one a lot of time looking back and forth in the dictionary trying to find a word. Since entries are in Lisu alphabetical order, one is constantly and conveniently referring to the list at the bottom of the page to know whether to go forward or backward in the dictionary to find the word one is looking for. This would be a good feature for other dictionaries to emulate.

In many ways, the book is designed to be easy to use. The font is large (perhaps 14 point); this is helpful to those who are new to reading. Entries are laid out in columns, and they are comfortable to access because of a wise use of layout in the white space of a page.

## 2. INTENDED AUDIENCE

The book is intended for research and documentation for those able to understand English; individual scholars in related fields and libraries should have copies. In

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<sup>4</sup> About 22 cm x 28 cm (i.e. 8 ½ x 11 inches), ‘Letter’ size by USA standards.

the Lisu introduction Bradley says, “This book has been made for those who do not know Lisu, [so] I put all the tones in even when not necessary.” The book will serve the research linguist well in looking for cognates and related words. The book also will serve the Thailand Lisu (and other Lisu as well) in searching for English equivalents to Lisu words, as well as in exploring the connections among Lisu words. However, since the sub-entries are written only in phonemic script, Lisu readers (and in fact, most non-linguists) who know only the Lisu alphabet and the Roman English alphabet will have difficulty following related words. However, an industrious learner could learn to read the phonemic script from referring to the alphabet finder line at the bottom of each page.

It will not especially help those who want to translate from English to Lisu. It would be of help to someone wanting to learn to speak Lisu as a tool to browse through related Lisu words. Mixed marriage couples can use the dictionary as a language learning tool (usually for the non-Lisu husband to learn Lisu, also to help the Lisu wife in learning English) and in some cases to help their children to maintain Lisu in a Western country. One of the great ways to learn a language is to have a dictionary like this to browse.

David Bradley comments in a personal correspondence: “The Lisu really love it; it is the first Lisu-English dictionary in Fraser script,” and he says that he regularly receives complementary correspondence from Lisu in several countries. “Because it is in Fraser Lisu alphabetical order and gives the Lisu head entries in Fraser Lisu, [Lisu people] find it easy to use, and it helps them to improve their English.”

The section of the dictionary introduction written in Lisu in the Lisu alphabet has also been helpful to Lisu users.

To make it more useful for the Lisu, the relevant individual entries explain how the normal Book Lisu form differs from Thailand Lisu, and give the usual written form as well. There are also selected Central and Northern Lisu entries, for words that have become current among Thailand Lisu due to contact over the last 30 years, such as Northern Lisu names like *A.-D7*. for second born male, Central Lisu *A:-T.-PH*: for first-born male and so on.

### 3. WHAT DO I MISS?

I would like to see an English-Lisu finding list. The book can’t do everything, but this is a basic tool that would increase the usefulness of the dictionary. This volume is intended for those who want to look up a word in Lisu (or a related TB language) to find the English equivalent.

If you want to go the other way, from English to Lisu, then you need to consult the word lists in Ngwazah 2007 or Bradley 1994, although I tried this without complete success, and there are some gaps in the other works. Looking up ‘moon’ in Ngwazah yielded *V B*, and Bradley 1994 has no entry for ‘moon’ but for month

it has *han* listed.<sup>5</sup> The entry /ǎ ba/ under *V.*, /ǎ/ ‘month, moon’ could then be located in Bradley 2006 using the alphabet key at the bottom.

I tried ‘sun’ in Ngwazah, but there was no entry for it. Bradley 1994 has *metmi* listed. I couldn’t find an entry in the volume under review, but I did find *ME.* /me/ for ‘day’. ‘Rice’ in Ngwazah yielded *Z pU* which was easy to find in Bradley’s entry under *Z.*, /dza/ as a sub-entry glossed as ‘husked rice’. ‘Ear’ in Ngwazah is *N.-PO* and in Bradley’s dictionary is listed as a sub-entry under *N*, which is also glossed as ‘ear’. In doing this exercise I appreciated greatly the alphabet listing at the bottom of each page of Bradley’s dictionary.

#### 4. OTHER OBSERVATIONS

1) Lisu has many onomatopoeic words, but most of them are not in the dictionary. We could only find one, p. 166 /ts<sup>h</sup> tǝ̃ a/ ‘sound in leg’, in a quick search. Possibly the onomatopoeic words were left out because they are of less interest to many historical linguists and most Lisu would not need to find them in a dictionary.

2) We could only find one example of a genus-species label, p. 25 *PO.-VO*, ‘holy basil’. (Unlike the Northern dictionary, which has lots of them.)

3) The dictionary labels all verbs and adjectives with the single label *V.* Hanna’s experience with asking students in both Lexicography class and Typology class is that every language in MSEA has different lexemes for ‘to boil’ v.t. (She boiled the water) and ‘to boil’ v.i. (The water is boiling). They also all have several ‘turn’ and ‘bend’ lexemes, some of which are exclusively transitive, some exclusively intransitive, and some of which have both senses. (She bent the wire. A bent buffalo horn.)

Hanna can find two ‘boil’ words *FU.* and *CU.* By reading the illustrative sentences Hanna guesses both are intransitive and he cannot find a transitive ‘boil’ word. We couldn’t find any ‘bend’ lexemes, but they may very well be there.

#### 5. ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The front matter of the book consists of the following.

1. A Table of Contents that allows readers to locate the various topics in the introduction and the beginning entries for each letter of the Lisu alphabet.
2. The “Series Editor’s Introduction” of 7 pages written by James A. Matisoff. In it, Matisoff testifies that he not only found it helpful to find words (in part because of judicious listing of sub-entries under the appropriate head words), but also that the dictionary provided “intriguing glimpses into Lisu culture” (vii). He comments that he finds it helpful in reconstructing proto-languages as well as being useful in finding cognates to other related languages. He lists some of his serendipitous findings. Matisoff praises “the accuracy of the phonemic transcriptions [which] make possible detailed analyses of ... complex phenomena” (xi). He lists several parallels that he sees between Lisu

<sup>5</sup> Note that the ‘n’ is a tone marker in the Northern Lisu script, and not pronounced.

and Lahu, and comments, “One of the major virtues of this excellent dictionary is the attention paid to recording alternate forms of the same morpheme” (xiii).

3. Bradley’s own introduction. In it he introduces the almost 1 million Lisu people-group and their language in China, India, Myanmar, and Thailand. The Southern Lisu live in Myanmar and Thailand. He describes Lisu phonology in detail, commenting on variability within and among dialects.
4. A one-page table of abbreviations and symbols, followed by an introduction written in Lisu to Lisu readers. The Lisu introduction explains that this is the Thailand dialect, and that it is different from Book Lisu (i.e. Bible Lisu in a common dialect drawing from all three varieties of Lisu), Central Lisu and Northern Lisu.

David Bradley also invites users of the dictionary to contact him with suggestions, and says that he hopes to do another, larger dictionary with Book Lisu and all other Lisu dialects. In the Lisu introduction, he mentions that he “has a big ear” and he is “ready to listen to anyone about any errors they find,” as well as his goal “if time permits to expand the work to other related dialects.” Several Lisu colleagues have since volunteered to help with that.

The rest of the book is the dictionary. Entries within the dictionary itself are arranged alphabetically according to the Lisu orthography of the words. A typical entry includes:

1. the entry itself,
2. the phonemic transcription,
3. the word class,
4. a short definition in English, and
5. other words using this basic root.

Entries are easy to find and understand. It is also easy to follow the references within the entries.

## 6. CONCLUSION

So, getting back to my original thought: Is this dictionary of Southern Lisu relevant to your work? If you are interested in languages and cultures, this dictionary provides an easy pathway into a language and culture of SE Asia.

The dictionary is definitely specialized in its content. Obviously, it is useful primarily to those who want a handy reference to Lisu words. Researchers, users and learners of the Lisu language can benefit directly. In addition, this book would be helpful for Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman scholars as they seek to reconstruct roots and compare vocabulary from their language, since Lisu is a Sino-Tibetan / Tibeto-Burman language.

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