Nahsi and Proto-Burmese-Lolo

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Abstract

Nahsi (Na-khi in Rock's transcription, formerly called Moso by the Chinese) has been classified as a Loloish language by Shafer and others. Better Nahsi data, from the published works of Rock and of Fu, and further data which clarify Rock's transcription, and elucidate the orthography now used for Nahsi in China, do not support this grouping. While a large proportion of Nahsi vocabulary is plausibly cognate to Proto-Burmese-Lolo (*BL) and Proto-Loloish (*L) forms reconstructed in Bradley 1975, there is only limited systematic regularity of correspondence. Moreover, the tonal and other developments postulated for *BL and *L by Matisoff are not reflected in Nahsi. It thus seems that Nahsi is very close to *BL within Proto-Tibeto-Burman (*TB), but should not be included within *L. In fact, some similarities between Nahsi and Loloish languages may be due to areal convergence, e.g. the prenasalized stops, which occur now in adjacent Tibetan, Loloish, and Nahsi languages, but not in other Tibetan or Loloish languages.
Introduction

Nahsi is spoken by at least 150,000 people in northwestern Yunnan, China. The Chinese administrative center has been at Li-ch'iang, according to local chronicles for as long as 1200 years - though this may be exaggerated. Nahsi live mainly to the north and west of Li-ch'iang, which is a largely Chinese town. Most Nahsi live to the south of the Yangtze, in a Nahsi autonomous district; those living to the west have come under Tibetan influence, while those living to the northeast, around Yungning, may have come under less Chinese influence. There are considerable dialect differences within Nahsi; in fact, the name [na̰²¹ ça³³] or 'black people' is sometimes applied only to the Nahsi living around Li-ch'iang, while the Yungning Nahsi call themselves [li³³, ca³³].

Rock¹ suggests that these two groups were originally distinct, but have been confused by the Chinese under the name 'Moso' - which, like most Chinese names, is underspecific and derogatory, and is not officially used in China now.

Some French sources confuse the Nahsi with the Lahu, far to the south, because the Chinese name for the Nahsi and the Shan name for the Lahu ('Muso') are similarly transliterated. The Nahsi should also not be confused with the far more numerous Nasu or Nosu, called by the Chinese 'Lolo' formerly, and 'Yi' now; nor should the [li³³, ca³³] be confused with the Lisu. It is interesting, though, that the most prestigious, central subgroup of all these groups is 'black', and that Nasu/Nosu also means 'black people'.

Nahsi tradition, according to Rock², suggests that the Nahsi were driven southwestwards into their present area by Chinese expansion. He thinks that the Nahsi and Ch'iang, pastoralists in Szechwan, were formerly one group. On the other hand, there has been considerable friction between the Nahsi and the adjacent Nasu/Nosu, with bandit raids
and destruction of forests in the Nahsi area by slash-and-burn Nasu/Nosu agriculture. By contrast, there are harmonious relationships, feelings of kinship, and intermarriage among many Loloish groups.

There is a large Nahsi literature, mostly religious, which is written in a pictographic script completely independent of the Chinese and Nasu/Nosu scripts. This literature has been very extensively studied, beginning with the work of "cot". The most numerous studies of Nahsi literature are those of Rock; a great deal of work has also been done by Li Lin-ts'an, Chang K'un, and Ho Tshii. Wen has also done some work on Nahsi writing, comparing the pictographic system with a syllabic system which Rock also provides information on. Both Nahsi writing systems are now going out of use, as the Nahsi religious practitioners, the main users, are not encouraged by the present Chinese administration.

**Dialects and Data**

Voluminous data on several varieties of the 'standard' Nahsi as spoken near Li-ch'iang are available. Rock provides a massive dictionary of what he takes to be the 'purest' Nahsi, as spoken to the north and west of Li-ch'iang. Fu provides considerable material on Weihsi 'Moso', the same dialect as Li/Chang/Ilo's informant, as spoken in an area about 100 miles WNW of Li-ch'iang, very near the border of Tibet. I was fortunate to meet, in 1973, a cadre who had worked in the Nahsi literacy program for a number of years, Chan Pook-chuen; he was able to provide information on the new orthography used for Nahsi in China, and a large number of forms were elicited from him. In addition, a small number of forms are cited in Hu/Tai 1964 in this orthography. Rock suggests that Li's data shows strong Tibetan influence; and that the Nahsi spoken in Li-ch'iang town, as by Chan, shows considerable Chinese influence. He also provides fifty forms in the Yungning dialect, called 'Li-2-khin by the Nahsi ('Na-2-khi in his transcription), and [li³⁵tʰi³³] by the speakers, which seem to show that that dialect is much more divergent, but still certainly Nahsi; as opposed to 'Kaifan' as spoken in Muli, which in some cases shows more similarities to Loloish in its vocabulary. These forms from Rock, and the forms from Hu/Tai 1964, are cited in an appendix; forms from Rock 1963a, Fu 1943, and Bradley/Chan 1973 are cited in a wordlist drawn from Bradley 1975, along with *BL and *L forms, in order to provide data for comparison. Bradley/Chan 1973 elucidates the rather idiosyncratic transcription used by Rock, as well as filling some gaps in Rock's data.

There are various dialectal differences between Weihsi, Li-ch'iang town, Li-ch'iang district, and orthographic forms. Most notably, Fu's Weihsi data shows a number of instances of a low-to-high rising tone, [15], in lexical items that have the low-falling
tone, [21], elsewhere; e.g. 'pig' (21) [pʊ 15]. A somewhat larger number of instances occur with Weihsi high-to-low falling tone, [51], in lexical items that have the mid-level tone, [33], elsewhere; e.g. 'horse' (6) [qua 51]. Far more numerous examples show mid-level tone, or low-falling tone, in both Weihsi and other dialects of Nahsi. The conditioning factors for these tonal splits are not clear; they result in the occurrence of native lexical material in the Weihsi rising tone, and of an additional high-to-low falling tone in Weihsi that does not occur elsewhere.

Another striking dialectal difference is that lexical items showing the rhyme [ua], which are thus realized in Fu's and Rock's material, and thus written in the orthograph are normally realized with [ɔ] instead in Li-ch'iang town, according to Chan. Rock says that Li-ch'iang town speakers do not make all of the distinctions made in 'pure' Nahsi; there are also apparently differences in the phonetic realizations of some phonological units between different dialects. For example, Rock's kh or [ç], which is also thus transcribed in Fu's materials, is written [ç] in the orthography, and thus pronounced by Chan.

Rock's transcription is rather idiosyncratic, using combinations of roman letters rather than phonetic symbols; for example, t-sk'y represents orthographic [tç], or Fu's [ç]. It also seems that Rock's transcription is too narrow, making distinctions that are not phonologically contrastive. The orthography, and Chan's pronunciation, can be used to elucidate some of the more obscure combinations that Rock uses. Fu's transcription, which uses IPA symbols and Chao tone-letters, also appears to be too narrow. The orthography, like most modern orthographies in China, uses IPA symbols; like some other orthographies in Yunnan, it may be underspecific, although it is intended as a broad transcription. The three systems are presented successively below; the charts are arranged so that corresponding symbols are in the same position. In Rock's transcription tones are indicated by a superscript number (1 to 4) to the left of the syllable, while Fu and the orthography use Chao's tone-letters following the syllable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rock</th>
<th>Fu</th>
<th>orthography</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 -</td>
<td>ɔ (or -ʌ)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 -</td>
<td>ɔ (or -ʌ)</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 -</td>
<td>ʌ</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 -</td>
<td>ʌ</td>
<td>(13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted above, the rising tone occurs only in a loanword secondary system in dialects other than Weihsi. There are thus three-tone (high, mid, and low) systems for native vocabulary in Li-ch'iang dialects, and a five-tone system in Weihsi: high, mid, low, rising, and falling tones.