Nasality in Bisu and Bisoid

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Abstract

Diachronically, Bisu and closely related languages provide an example of consonant denasalization relevant to those discussed in Haudricourt 1970. Synchronously, this development is reflected in variation within and between dialects of Bisu. The complete lack of similarity between syllable-initial and syllable-final nasal consonant developments shows the relevance of the rhyme in historical processes.

Introduction

Bisu is a language spoken by about 400 people in Northern Thailand; most live in Huai Chumphu and Doi Pui villages, Myang District of Chiangrai Province. There are a few speakers left at Takaw in Mae Sruai District of Chiangrai, and at Phadaeng in Phan District of Phayao Province; the language is in the process of being replaced by Northern Thai at these two places.

Nishida was the first linguist to find the Bisu, and he has written several articles about their language and its historical linguistic position: Nishida 1966a, 1966b and 1967. In 1977-78,
I conducted fieldwork on the dialects of all four villages; Bradley 1978 contains some preliminary observations on the dialect differences and the process of language replacement.

Bisu is a Tibeto-Burman language, though the Thai authorities classify the group as Lawa, along with several groups who speak Northern Mon-Khmer languages. Within Tibeto-Burman, it is one of the numerous Loloish languages. Nishida 1966b groups it with two other languages, Pyen and Phunoi, which form a subgroup of Loloish. Matisoff 1972 coined the term Bisoid to refer to this subgroup; according to Nishida 1966b, Bisu is more closely related to Pyen.

Pyen was spoken by about 800 people at three locations in the southern part of Kengtung State in 1900, according to Scott and Hardiman 1900; they provide a short wordlist (p. 718-719), which is the only linguistic data on this group. The Bisu report that there are Bisu in Burma, and the similarity of Bisu and Pyen suggests that Pyen is a dialect of Bisu. However, the Bisu are not in contact with their counterparts in Burma; and even in 1900, the Pyen were reported to be losing their language and becoming Shan.

Phunoi is spoken by about 20,000 people in northern Laos, around the town of Phongsaly. Roux 1924 contained the first description of this group and its language; Ferlus 1975 and 1977 describes another dialect; and Bradley 1977b describes a third. Phunoi informants report that there are five subgroups of the Phunoi, and thus presumably
five dialects; there are many more than five Phunoi villages in Laos, of course. Roux reported that there was one Phunoi village in China in 1924; and Chinese scholars (personal communication) report that there are indeed speakers of Bisoid languages in China.

The Cōọng national minority of some 11,000 in northwestern Vietnam also speaks a Bisoid language; in fact, a short vocabulary was provided in Lefèvre-Pontalis 1892 (Kha Khong), so this was the first variety of Bisoid to be documented. Judging from this material, Cōọng is probably a dialect of Phunoi under another name, just as Pyen is probably a dialect of Bisu.

When I played tapes of Phunoi to Bisu speakers, they found it unintelligible; despite what seemed to me to be rather small differences. Unfortunately, I did not have tapes of Bisu when I was working with a Phunoi speaker, but I suspect the result would have been the same. The two groups are separated by the Mekhong River and a substantial distance, and were unaware of each other's existence (until I talked about the Phunoi with the Bisu). However, the Phunoi have a tradition that they came from the west, leaving some people behind; while the Bisu have a tradition that they are autochthonous where they live now.

The major phonological characteristic of the Bisoid languages is the development of voiced stop initials in some cognates with nasal initials in other Loloish languages.
Nishida 1966b and 1967, Matisoff 1972, and Bradley 1979 all cite this correspondence pattern. Bradley 1979 cites other characteristics of Bisoid languages, such as the absence of final glottal stops or laryngealization in forms reconstructed as having final *stops; the development of voiceless nasals from *s or *2 prefixed *nasals; the loss of medial *r in clusters after a *bilabial initial; and so on. There are also various conservative characteristics, such as the retention of final *t as /t/; and of final *p as /p/ in Phunoi and the conservative Takaw dialect of Bisu; the retention of all final *nasals, *m *n *ŋ, as such in Bisu /m/ /n/ /ŋ/, with Phunoi final *ŋ reflected by nasalized vowels; the absence of various tonal developments that characterize the Central and Northern Loloish groups; and so on.

Thus, on the grounds of historical phonology, the Bisoid languages form a close-knit subgroup of the Southern Loloish languages, according to Bradley 1977a and 1979. They are fairly closely related to such languages as Mpi and Akha. On lexical grounds Bisoid also forms a subgroup, having a number of cognates found in Bisu and Phunoi but not elsewhere; and showing some unique shared developments in the forms of particular lexical items, such as the addition of final /ŋ/ to some words with initial nasals (e.g. 17 113 142 288 317 321 675 and some further examples in the Appendix below).