

# A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF THE BISU LANGUAGE - A LANGUAGE OF NORTHERN THAILAND, RECENTLY DISCOVERED BY US

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From September 1964 to February 1965, I investigated several languages belonging to the Burmese-Lolo group in Chiang Rai Province and Tak Province, Northern Thailand.<sup>1</sup>

Some languages of this group are found in this region, especially in the mountainous area, along with various dialects of the Thai language.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the region was very important for our investigations.

In Chiang Rai and Tak Province, the languages of Akha, Lahu Shi, Lahu Na, Lahu Ni and Lisu are spoken in many villages, and there are some variants of the same language from one village to another. These languages are considerably different, of course, from those of the tribes of Lahu, Lisu and Akha in the Shan States and Kachin States in Burma, and also quite different from the languages of the same tribes scattered in Yünnan Province in China.

During the investigation, I was able to study the languages of Akha, Lahu Na, Lahu Shi and Lisu out of the group mentioned above. It was in the last stage of the investigation that I encountered the Bisu language, which is the subject of this paper.<sup>3</sup>

## DISTRIBUTION OF BISU LANGUAGE

1. To the best of my knowledge, the existence of the Bisu tribe and Bisu language has never been reported. At least, so far as the name is concerned, it would not be an error to say that the language and tribe are new discoveries. Naming the language as the Bisu language and the tribe as the Bisu tribe, must be proper, too, because that is the way they call themselves.

The Bisu language, which I am going to take up in this paper, is spoken at Ban Lua village, situated 10 kilometres west of Ban Huai San, which lies 23 kilometres south of Chiang Rai City in Chiang Rai Province. I shall call it the Ban Lua Bisu language of Ban Huai San, and for short, the Ban Lua Bisu language.

According to a report from Mr Mitani,<sup>4</sup> a similar language, though it is almost dead as a spoken language, is remembered by old villagers at Ban Tha Ko, situated 45 kilometres southwest of Ban Huai San. I shall call this the Bisu language of Ban Tha Ko.

There was some information on some forms of the same language being spoken in another place, but it has not been verified yet. It is quite possible that the Bisu language is still spoken in some other villages in Thailand, but this must be left to further investigation.

The Bisu tribe is called the "Lawa tribe" (Lua in the Thai language) by neighbouring Thai tribes, but the reason for it is not clear. It is, I assume, probably because the Bisu tribe was originally of the Lawa tribe and through the process of time came to speak a Burmese-Lolo language, or probably because they were originally a Burmese-Lolo tribe and yet came to identify themselves as the Lawa tribe for one reason or another. There is no basis for making a conclusion. Of the Lawa tribe itself, for that matter, no details have been discovered yet. What is almost certain about the tribe is that they used to be an influential group of people in some parts of Thailand and Burma. It is conceivable that some of the people, called the Lawa tribe in Thailand, still speak a language of the Burmese-Lolo group.

2. It is certain that the Ban Lua Bisu language has never been reported before, but languages similar to it have been reported as the language group of the Lawa in Thailand,<sup>5</sup> under the name of the Phunoi language in Laos,<sup>6</sup> and the Pyen or Pyin language in Kengtung, Shan State, in Burma.<sup>7</sup>

The Phunoi and Pyen languages are the closest to the Bisu language; however, the available data for these languages are so poor that it will hardly make any sense if one tries to compare them with the Bisu language.

But the Bisu, the Pyen and Phunoi languages are undoubtedly closely related sister languages, and as a group they are in an intermediate position between the Burmese language and the Akha language. Therefore, I may be right to treat the Bisu language as a representative language of this new group which is composed of the Bisu, Pyen and Phunoi languages. The subject of the system of the Bisu shall be dealt with in another paper.<sup>8</sup>

3. The following account is based on the data obtained from an informant, Mr X, who lived in Ban Lua in February 1965. No details of his personal history are available, but he has not been outside Ban Lua and Chiang Rai City. He understood and spoke the Northern Thai language as well as the Bisu language, and was a good informant.

The investigation was made through the Thai language. The Bisu tribe has many contacts with the Thai people, but surprisingly the informant scarcely replaced Bisu words with Thai words from my questions.

This paper is intended as a preliminary study of the Bisu language. The final report will be published with the studies of the languages of Akha, Lahu and Lisu, by the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, by the end of 1968.

#### PHONEMIC SYSTEM OF BAN LUA BISU LANGUAGE

The following is a rough sketch of the phonemic system of Ban Lua Bisu. A morpheme of Ban Lua Bisu in most cases is a single monosyllable, and monosyllables have either CV# or CVC forms (C stands for consonant and V for vowel) accompanied by a toneme.

#### 4. TONEME

The tonemes of Bisu are in a register tone system, based on high, mid and low level type tones. The basic identity of these can be seen from the following examples.

[hja:55]	<i>rice field</i>	[ʔaŋ33 ʔu:55]	<i>gut</i>
[hja̰.33]	<i>fowl</i>	[hja:33 ʔṵ.33]	<i>egg</i>
[hja:11 ɲɛ̃i]	<i>to itch</i>	[ʔu:22 hiɔŋ21]	<i>pot</i>

From this data, we can recognise the existence in Bisu of three tonemes based on the opposition of high-level 55, mid-level 33, and low-level 11, which are given the following signs:

1) high level tone: á; 2) mid level tone: a; 3) low level tone à.

Tonemes of the form shown in the example above are inscribed as in: hjá: hja: hjà, ú; u: ù.

In a syllable with mid level tone, the vowel has the distinctive feature of being sounded with laryngeal tension (laryngeal-tensed vowels are written as a̰, ṵ, ḛ). The same phenomenon is observed in the falling tone of Burmese in which the vowel has laryngeal tenseness. These three kinds of tone occur in the syllable form CVC (nasal), in addition to CV#. In syllables of the CVC (stop) type, only high and low level tones are found; the mid level tone is missing.

In syllables of the CVC (stop) type, a high level type tone is

uttered slightly lower [ $\widehat{44}$ ]-[ $\widehat{33}$ ], and is distinguished from mid level by the laryngal tenseness of vowels.

[bi <sub>11</sub> khit <sup>1</sup> $\widehat{44}$ ]	'match'	[ha <sub>33</sub> mit <sup>1</sup> $\widehat{21}$ ]	'bamboo sprout'
[tu <sub>22</sub> kap <sup>1</sup> $\widehat{44}$ ]	'a cover'	[tok <sup>1</sup> $\widehat{11}$ tɔ: <sub>21</sub> ]	'house lizard'
[ʔaŋ <sub>33</sub> jit <sup>1</sup> $\widehat{44}$ ]	'few'		

Syllables of CVC (stop) type are chiefly found in words borrowed from the Thai language. The low level tone [<sub>11</sub>] sometimes is freely replaced by the falling tone [<sub>21</sub>] in Bisu, for example, [lan<sub>11</sub>] does not contrast with [lan<sub>21</sub>] 'earring', and [muŋ<sub>11</sub>] does not contrast with [muŋ<sub>21</sub>] 'sky'.

This falling tone appears in a syllable preceding pause; and a syllable affixed with the morpheme -ŋɛ takes the falling tone in many cases.

[ʔaŋ kɛŋ <sub>21</sub> ]	'hard'	[kɛŋ <sub>21</sub> ŋɛ $\widehat{11}$ ]	'to be hard'
[ʔaŋ vɣ: <sub>21</sub> ]	'far'	[vɣ: <sub>21</sub> ŋɛ $\widehat{11}$ ]	'to be far'
[ʔaŋ <sup>h</sup> dw: <sub>21</sub> ]	'near'	[ <sup>h</sup> dw: <sub>21</sub> ŋɛ $\widehat{11}$ ]	'to be near'

These words are not pronounced [kɛŋ<sub>11</sub> ŋɛ] [vɣ:<sub>11</sub> ŋɛ] [<sup>h</sup>dw:<sub>11</sub> ŋɛ], but always in the falling tone. However, since in addition to the fact that [<sub>11</sub>] is freely replaced by [<sub>21</sub>], [<sub>11</sub>.  $\widehat{11}$ ] and [<sub>21</sub>.  $\widehat{11}$ ] do not appear as contrastive continuant morphemes. The falling tone may be regarded as a variation of the low level tone.

Besides three basic tones, i.e. high, mid, low level tones, a rising tone is observed in Bisu as gliding sounds, and in numerals and in the twelve zodiacal signs, borrowed from Thai.

1) [na:<sub>11</sub> swŋ<sub>15</sub> hən<sub>55</sub>] 'hole of the ear' is an example of the gliding tone. Comparing this rising tone with [na:<sub>11</sub> swŋ<sub>11</sub>] 'ear', we can see that it is a variation of the low level tone which appeared next to the high level tone [<sub>11</sub>. <sub>11</sub>] → [<sub>11</sub>. <sub>15</sub>. <sub>55</sub>].

2) Such numerals as [sam<sub>35</sub>] 'three', [sɔŋ<sub>35</sub>] 'two' and such zodiacal signs as [si<sub>35</sub>] 'dragon (cycle of year)', [sa·n<sub>35</sub>] 'monkey (cycle of year)' are examples of borrowed words with rising tones. Since they do not especially contrast with the high level tone [<sub>55</sub>], we can regard them as a variation of the high level tone.

#### Usual pronunciation and careful pronunciation

Subordinate morphemes following another syllable have a specific tone when they are pronounced carefully, but in normal pronunciation, so-called weak utterances are observed. For example, 'boiled rice' is [haŋ<sub>11</sub> tsa:<sub>55</sub>] in careful pronunciation, but usually it is uttered [haŋ<sub>11</sub> tsa<sub>5</sub>]; 'to be salty' is uttered [jaŋ<sub>55</sub> ts'a:<sub>55</sub>] in careful pronunciation, but usually is [jaŋ<sub>55</sub> ts'a<sub>5</sub>]; and 'heard' is uttered