PHONEMES OF THE ALU DIALECT OF AKHA*

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This paper is a portion of the result obtained from one year's investigation of Akha in Northern Thailand.

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The purpose of the investigation was to describe the grammatical structure of Akha; however, this paper deals with the phonemic system only. The morphemes and the syntax and other subjects will be treated on other occasions. This paper is just an interim report and many rectifications and insertions will be added afterwards. For the place

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names appearing in the paper, please refer to the map. [Map not included in the translation.]

0. THE AKHA TRIBE AND THE AKHA LANGUAGE

0.1. In addition to the tribes of Thai, various tribes inhabit Thailand; they are 1) Thai, 2) Tibeto-Burmese, 3) Mon-Khmer, 4) Karen, 5) Mee-Yao; plus the Chinese and Indians.

Among the languages belonging to the group of Tibeto-Burmese mentioned above, Akha, Lahu Na, Lahu Shi, Lahu Ni, Lisu and Bisu are spoken in Thailand. According to the classification by Robert Shafer, all of them are considered to be closely related to the Burmish-Loloish group. Speakers of these languages live mainly in mountainous regions of Northern Thailand and practise slash and burn agricultural techniques.

Besides Thailand, the Akha live in Yunnan Province in China, the Shan States in Burma, and in northern Laos. It is believed that the Akha tribe moved to Thailand from Burma not very long ago; the area of Thailand inhabited by the tribe is very limited. At the present it includes only four districts in the northernmost part of Chiangrai province, namely: Maesaï, Maechan, Chiengsaen and Maesuraï. A small number of them moved to Maesuraï district from Maesaï only recently, during the period of the investigation, and it seems that this district is the southern boundary of the distribution of the Akha tribe. According to Gordon Young, the number of Akha people in Thailand is about 25,200, but it seems that some villages were not included in his statistics, and therefore, the actual number must be slightly larger.

It is said that the number of Akha people in the Shan States in Burma, with Kengtung at its centre, is over 40,000; in Yunnan Province in China there are about 48,700, and in northern Laos about 4500. But I think that the exact number remains unknown, since the Akha prefer to live in very inaccessible, remote areas. They say that the Akha tribe came to Thailand about twenty years ago. But the movement continues even now, and quite a few of my acquaintances said to me that they came from Burma only recently. It was not unusual during my stay to meet small groups of Akha people who had just come over the border. Even when they settle down in Thailand, they cross the border to visit their relations, and their relations do the same.

It is hard to say whether this tendency is the specific reason why they do not move southward from the border area in Northern Thailand; at least there is no sign of such a movement now.

0.2. The Akha language is not subdivided; it has no subclassifications
like the Lahu has, which is divided into Lahu N1 and Lahu Na. Akha is just called Akha everywhere. Because of this, it is apt to be considered as a unitary language. But when you do field work or read the available reports (though there are very few of them), you find that it is not always true. Considering that the Akha live in vast areas and very inaccessible places, it is likely that there are various Akha languages, though they are all just called Akha. But actual classification of groups of dialects would necessitate collection of data in a much wider area. Even if we limit the area to Thailand, it is not too much to say that the language varies a little from one village to another. I collected some samples from several villages, in addition to the two villages where I did my main investigation.

The samples show that the languages spoken in two villages only 10-20 kilometres apart are slightly different. It is impossible to say, at present, what relation exists between them. That is why in this paper the Akha language discussed is only the dialect spoken in Alu village in Northern Thailand.

Alu village is situated in a mountainous area 55 kilometres northwest of Chiengrai City. There are about 400 people in this village, and it must be among the very largest villages of the hill tribes.

I also investigated the Akha dialect of Saenchai village which lies 5 kilometres south of Alu village. The differences between these two dialects will be dealt with briefly in the final part of this paper.

The Akha people can scarcely speak Thai. Even in Saenchai village which is the only village that has a primary school run by the Border Police, few villagers speak Thai. Generally speaking, when they contact Thai people, they speak Shan or the dialect of Northern Thai which is modified to Shan. Among the hill tribes, Lahu Na is the most popular [lingua franca], followed by Shan and the Chinese dialect spoken in Yunnan. Among those who have come from Burma lately, quite a few can speak Burmese.

In Alu village, no Thai, not even the Northern dialect, is spoken, and I had to make my investigation with the help of a young Shan who came from Burma and could speak Akha, Lahu Na, Burmese and English, besides Shan. I was assisted mainly by a nineteen year old informant whose name was Apa. However, I checked the data with other villagers at every opportunity and tried to speak the Akha language myself in order to get natural data.

The Akha language is unwritten as are the languages of the other hill tribe minorities. In Burma, it is reported that Christian missionaries have made an orthography for Akha using Roman letters, and that the Bible has been published. But it seems that very few Akha people, in
limited areas, can use this orthography. Of course, there is no orthography of the Akha language in use in Thailand, and an analysis of Akha has never been done in Thailand. For the Akha in Burma and Laos, several reports have been issued. For the Akha in Yunnan it is supposed that Chinese linguists have carried out investigations, but there is no available data here; therefore this paper is based on the data obtained in my spot survey and does not refer to any other data or articles.

1. PHONEMES OF THE ALU DIALECT OF AKHA

1.1. A RÉSUMÉ

The maximum unit treated in this paper is the syllable. The treatment of the relation of one syllable to another, or of linguistic units bigger than the syllable, will be deferred to other occasions.

I think the most fundamental problem in the process of consolidating data obtained from on-the-spot-investigations is to deduce, firstly, the minimum linguistic unit. A syllable of Akha is a solid form, the same as a syllable of some other familiar languages, and it is also a morpheme. Therefore, it is reasonable that the syllable should be treated as the minimum unit in the explanation of the phonemes of Akha. A syllable of Akha consists of phonemes, which can be subdivided into consonants, vowels and tones. I will explain these in the context of syllables.

1.2. SYLLABIC STRUCTURE

The maximum syllabic structure of Akha is expressed by the following formula:

\[ Sy = \underbrace{\text{T}}_{C_1 (C_2)} \underbrace{\text{V (C_3)}}_{C_1 (C_2)} \]

In this formula, Sy means syllable, T means tone, C means consonant, and V means vowel. Letters in parentheses express "the element which is not indispensable" and letters without parentheses express "inindispensable elements".

When each of these [syllabic positions] is filled by an element we have a syllable of Akha.

For example, \( C_1 = /m/ \); \( C_2 = /j/ \); \( V = /o/ \); \( T = \) Falling tone (this is shown by the symbol '/'). \( Sy = /mj0/ 'monkey'. \)

I will describe the syllabic structures of the Alu dialect of Akha according to this formula and give examples for each.