APPLICATION OF TYPOLOGIES FOR LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND LOSS TO SOUTHEAST ASIAN LINGUISTIC MINORITIES:
The case of the Bru-So and Kadazan-Dusun language continua

Carolyn P. Miller
Summer Institute of Linguistics

0. Introduction

Typologizing, says Johnson, is "a basic human cognitive strategy" (1977:55). While possible typologies are potentially infinite in number, and none are right or wrong, some are more interesting than others. And some are more useful in testing theories and attempting to predict outcomes. The task of the language researcher, then, is to choose those variables which "provide significant insight into cross-language variation" (Comrie 1981:25). Edwards says "the most important point about any typology is that it should be comprehensive" (1992:47).

In the area of linguistic description and classification, much has been done to isolate variables which are significant to the classification and comparison of languages. In the area of sociolinguistics, however, even the significant variables are difficult to determine. Paulston says, "We have at present a very poor understanding of which social variables are germane to ethnic group relations and their consequences" (1994:4). An additional complication is that variables may occur on different levels. Typologies themselves may be attributes in typologies at higher levels (Johnson 1977). And not all variables are equal. The distinction is sometimes made between independent and intervening variables (Paulston 1994:7) or "contextual variables" which modify the effect of the independent variables (Schermerhorn 1970).

This paper will first discuss some of the reasons for the concern about language maintenance. Secondly, it will review some of the typologies which have been devised to categorize language maintenance situations for minority language groups. And thirdly, it will attempt to apply some of the variables which seem most relevant to two minority language situations in Asia in an attempt to evaluate the prospects of language maintenance for these two groups.

The first of these is a language continuum located in Sabah, Malaysia which constitutes one of the largest groups within that state. (See Figure 1) It is one of ten languages classified as Dusunic (Smith 1984). Kadazan-Dusun comprises a group of dialects which include Minokok, Sugut Kadazan, Garo, Kimaragang, Tebilung, and other regionally distinct varieties of the language (Banker 1984). The group population was estimated by the 1970 census to be 183,454, though just who was included in this figure is unclear (Banker 1984). Other closely related language groups such as Rungus, Lotud, Tatana', Bisaya, etc., while linguistically distinct, are considered culturally to belong to the Kadazan-Dusun group.

Historically a group of "close-knit tribal communities" (Kitingan 1989:2), these were during the time of the Brunei Sultanate grouped together on the basis of their being non-Muslim agriculturalists and labelled "Dusun." This term persisted during the control of the British Chartered Company (1880 and following). In 1961 a congress of the United Kadazan National Organization met and agreed that the group as a whole should be called Kadazan. Both terms, however, have continued to be used to the present, Dusun generally by central and Kadazan by coastal groups, though a number of regional labels are also used. Current convention is to combine the names (i.e. Kadazandusun), but for ease in reading for this paper I will use the designation 'Kadazan-Dusun'

The second group is a language continuum which extends from highland areas of central Vietnam across southern Laos and into northeast Thailand. (See Figure 2) This group of closely related languages and dialects is known in its different locations and various varieties as Van Kieu, Mangkong, Galler, Tri, Bru, So, Kataang, and Kha. Population figures for Vietnam are estimated to be 50,000 (Grimes 1992), for Laos 145,000 (unofficial Lao sources) and for Thailand 55,000 (Smalley 1994). For purposes of this paper we will refer to the group as a whole as well as varieties of the language or group as Bru-So, combining two of the more commonly used autonyms.

1. Language maintenance vs. language shift

Language maintenance only becomes a question in situations of prolonged language contact. But since there are very few (if any) minority language groups in the world for whom this is not the case, the issue has become widely relevant. For groups in this situation, Paulston states that only three long-range outcomes are possible (1994:7): 1) They may maintain their own language and resist learning the language of the majority; 2) they may become bilingual in their own language and the language of the majority, or 3) they may shift from their own language to the language of the majority.

The first option involves strong boundary maintenance on the part of either the minority or the majority group. In this case only selected members of the group will learn the majority language and become brokers for the group in contacts with the majority. The second option, unless it leads to a stable diglossic situation where each language has domains of use which complement the other, will eventually result in a shift to the dominant language. The third option leads directly to a process of language shift in which use of the minority language gives place to use of the language of the majority. Shift, says Paulston, is by far the most common outcome of language contact. Sometimes this occurs quickly within one or two generations; sometimes it occurs slowly over the course of many generations.

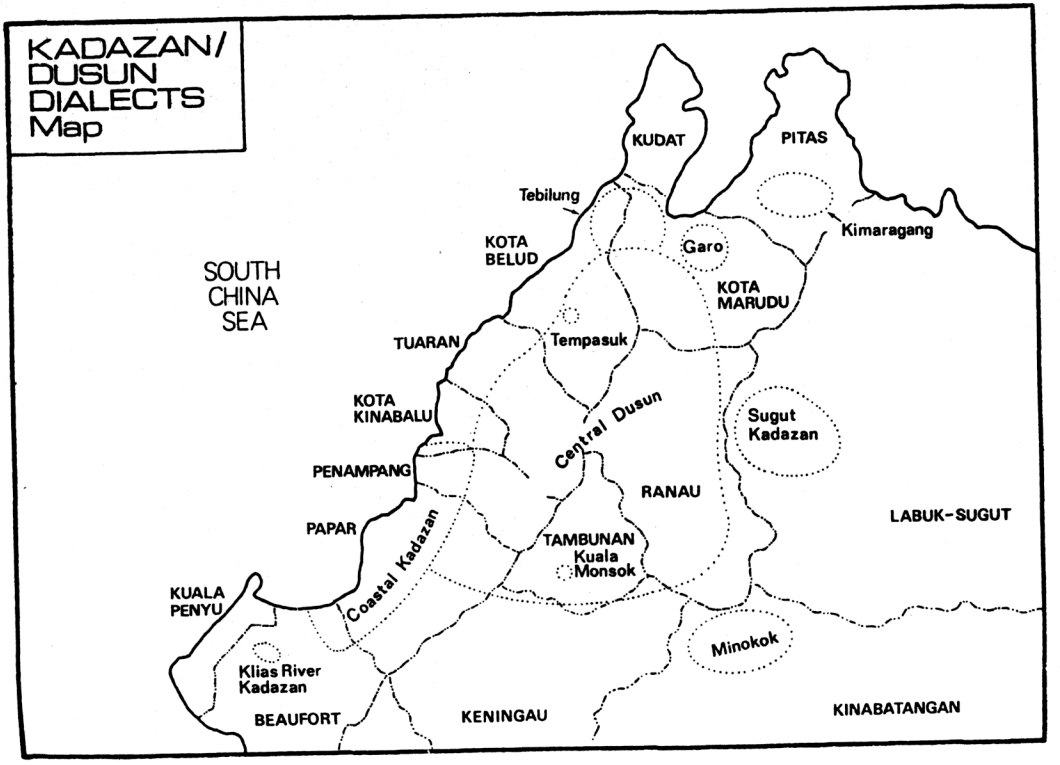

Figure 1: Kadazan-Dusun language area (taken from Banker 1984).

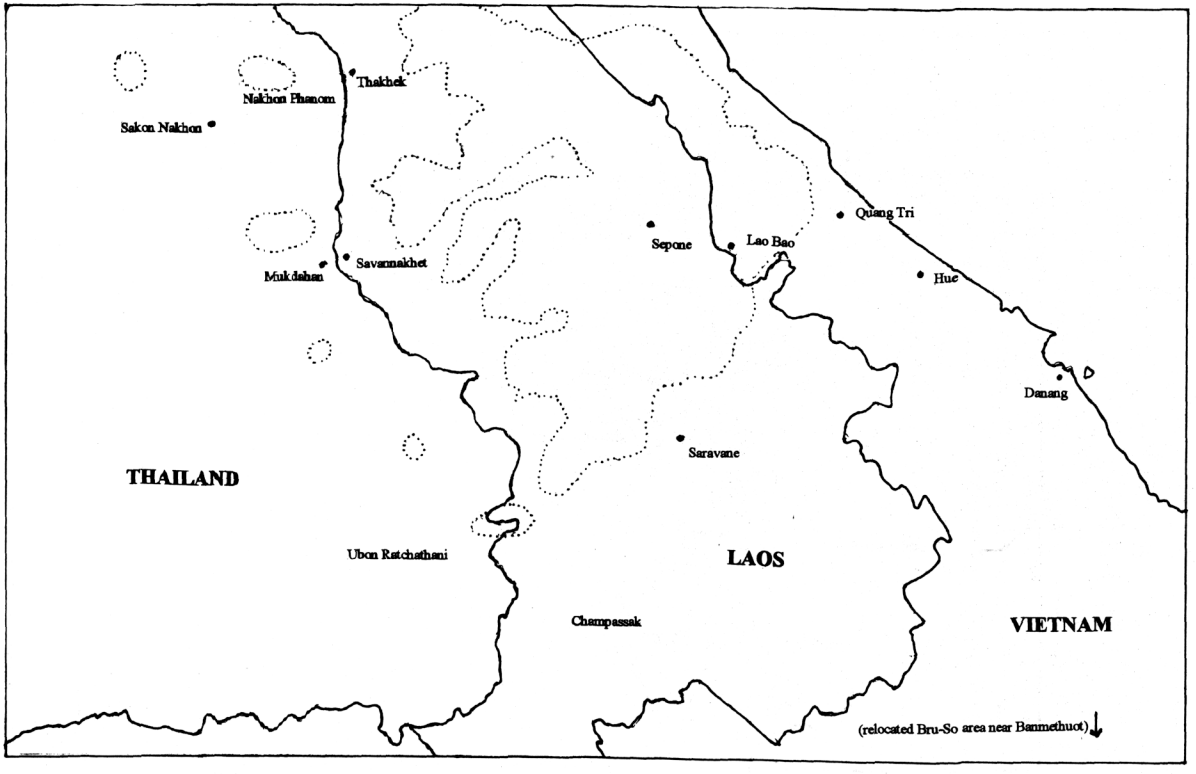

Figure 2: Bru-So language area (adapted from Bradley, Australian Academy of the Humanities).

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