

Writing Bisu: A Community-Based Approach to Orthography Development

Kirk R. Person

Payap University and Summer Institute of Linguistics

1.0 Introduction

This paper presents a tentative orthography for Bisu as spoken in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. The orthography itself is the fruit of a workshop in which linguists, Thai government officials, and members of the language community came together to reach a consensus on how to write Bisu using the Thai script. This process revealed some interesting points about how the Bisu perceive their language and how it relates to the Thai writing system.

2.0 Background

Bisu was first “discovered” in the 1960s, as a result of Japanese linguist Tatsuo Nishida’s language survey work in Northern Thailand (Nishida 1973). At that time, Bisu was determined to be a language of the Loloish/Yiphoish branch of the Tibeto-Burman family.¹

The Bisu population in Thailand is concentrated in two villages in Chiang Rai Province: Doi Chomphuu (Amphoe Mae Lao, Tambon Pong Phrae) and Doi Pui (Amphoe Muang, Tambon Sa-a Dong Chai). There are a handful of Bisu speakers, middle aged and older, in Pha Daeng Village (Amphoe Phan, Tambon Doi Ngam). SIL’s *Ethnologue* (Grimes 1996)

¹ The term “Loloish” has been applied to this branch for many years, but has fallen out of favor recently because the word itself is Chinese in origin and has derogatory connotations. Yiphoish has been used in more recent publications as a more acceptable term (Hale, 1998).

estimates that there are less than 1000 Bisu speakers in Thailand, a figure the Bisu feel to be accurate.

The *Ethnologue* lists an additional 6000 Bisu in China where they are called Lao Mien, 'Old Burmese' in Yunnanese. From the viewpoint of the Chinese government, these are classified as Lahu due to the fact that they live in close proximity to the Lahu and have Lahu-like dress (Bradley 1998). It was only in 1991 that Chinese scholar Li Yongsui positively identified these people as Bisu (Grimes 1996).

While the Bisu in Thailand have had no knowledge of their relatives in China, the village elders tell of a related group in Myanmar. Some 50 years ago, a monk from Burma came into Thailand speaking what the Bisu refer to as "unclear Bisu" and saying he came from the "Pin" tribe. The Thai Bisu were able to understand this monk with some difficulty. Not long thereafter, a Pin couple came to the Bisu village to elope; they were of the same clan, and therefore their marriage would have been taboo among the Pin. The young man's father soon came after them and took them home. We suspect that these Pin are the same as the "Pyen" or "Pyin" mentioned in Scott and Hardiman's *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States* (1900), a work that includes a list of approximately 250 Pyen words, many of which have close Bisu cognates.

Other related groups include the Phu Noi of Laos and the Coong of Vietnam. After listening to recorded word lists from one of the Phu Noi dialects, the Bisu of Thailand declared that they are "80% the same language" despite the fact that they were unable to understand recorded Phu Noi discourses. The immediate reaction to hearing the word lists was one of "We need to rent a taxi and go visit our relatives in Laos!"

We first came into contact with Bisu in 1996, while studying Northern Thai in Huay San Phlap Plaa Village, Amphoe Mae Lao, Chiang Rai, when our Northern Thai hostess hired a Bisu man, Noi Tong

Wongluwa, to serve as our Northern Thai language assistant.² Our initial shock at finding out that we were not working with a native speaker was tempered with curiosity as to what language he actually spoke. Noi Tong said that he spoke Lawa, a language we knew to be more concentrated in Chiang Mai Province. He said that his type of Lawa was confined to two or three villages in Chiang Rai Province and that they actually called themselves Bisu.

All of this led to our rediscovery of the fact that there are a number of groups in Northern Thailand who are called “Lawa” by the Northern Thai but, in fact, are not at all related to the Lawa or Wa of Chiang Mai and Myanmar. Indeed, Vacharee Nuamkaew, in her 1987 Mahidol University MA thesis on Bisu phonology, lists six groups that fall into this category!

As time passed, Noi Tong told us more about his language and culture, including the fact that he had been trying for many years to figure out how to write Bisu. He was very concerned about language loss and felt that having written materials would help to preserve the language for his children and grandchildren. The Standard Thai script, however, lacked appropriate symbols for many Bisu sounds. When we told him that one of the things we linguists were trained to do was to help develop scripts for unwritten languages, he enthusiastically invited us to come study his language and help him develop a writing system. We moved into Noi Tong’s home village of Doi Chomphuu in November, 1997 to begin learning the Bisu language.

Background research for this project was carried out in the libraries of Mahidol and Payap Universities, as well as SIL’s Bangkok-based David

² Most of the Bisu, especially those under 40, are fully bilingual in Northern Thai, and are almost always perceived as native speakers. This process begins in early childhood, with the parents using both languages with the children. Shame is part of the motivation behind this; in the past, outsiders made fun of the Bisu for their unclear Northern Thai. Now the Bisu boast that their Northern Thai abilities are far superior to those of other hilltribe groups they have encountered!

Thomas Library. Previous works by Nishida (1973), Bradley (1979, 1985, 1988), and Vacharee (1987) were particularly helpful for understanding Bisu phonology as well as Bisu's historical connections to the wider context of the Yiphoish family.

From the beginning of this project, we have had the pleasure of interacting with Mr. Makkio Katsura, a student of Nishida's currently working in a Japanese corporation in Bangkok. Mr. Katsura's long-term contact with the Bisu and his keen linguistic mind were crucial to all these efforts. As a member of the Bangkok-based Foundation for Applied Linguistics, Mr. Katsura was able to encourage Thai linguists Acharn Wanna Tienmee and Dr. Apiluck Tumtavitikul, both of Kasertsart University, to become involved in the project.

Through these prior studies, as well as our observations and language learning experiences in the village, key orthography-related issues arose. In particular, it became apparent that Bisu had several sounds which technically could not be written with "normal" Thai spelling conventions.

3.0 Underlying principles and practices

In his *Phonemes and Orthography: Language Planning in Ten Minority Languages of Thailand* (1976), the late William Smalley outlined five criteria to which orthographies should aspire. As condensed by Malone and Malone (1998) and listed in descending order of importance, these criteria are:

1. Maximum motivation for the learner, and acceptance by his society and controlling groups such as the government: For whatever reasons, will the orthography stimulate the people to want to read and write?
2. Maximum (optimum) representation: Does the orthography accurately represent the language as it is spoken?