

Dialect Comparison Among the Pwo Karen of Central Thailand¹

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1. Introduction

1.1 *The scope of the study*

The Pwo Karen people live along the Thai-Burmese border as well as in the Irrawaddy Delta in Myanmar (Burma). Their language, Pwo Karen, belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Linguistic information for Pwo Karen is limited, especially for the Pwo Karen of Central Thailand. In light of this, a survey of the linguistic variation among of the Pwo Karen of Central Thailand was deemed an appropriate precursor to a more detailed study of the Pwo Karen language. This paper presents the results of that investigation.

The field research for this project took place April-May 1993 and February-May 1994. The results of earlier word list comparison studies, with a total of nine word lists collected in the provinces of Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, Petchaburi and Prachuapkhirikhan, identified two Pwo Karen varieties in Central Thailand: the northern variety in Kanchanaburi province and the southern variety in Ratchaburi, Petchaburi and Prachuapkhirikhan provinces (Andersen 1987; Phillips 1992). For this study word lists were collected in four locations as a means of improving the reliability of the word list data. Autobiographical texts were also tape-recorded in these four locations. The recorded texts were used to assess the intelligibility of the two language varieties by testing the comprehension of texts from other areas.

Based on the findings of the earlier study, the present research project had three goals. The first was to improve the reliability of the word list data through a re-collection of the word lists. The second goal was to assess the comprehension between the northern and southern varieties of Central Thailand Pwo Karen, and the third goal was to discover which variety had the widest acceptance over the largest area. Comprehension was investigated by means of recorded text tests. Native speakers of a particular regional variety were asked to listen to and answer questions about recorded texts from other Central Thailand Pwo Karen regions. Finally, test subjects were asked to evaluate each text as to its perceived differences and similarities to their own speech as a means of discovering attitudes toward the speech of other regions.

The study does not encompass the full extent of the reported Central Pwo Karen area due to limited time and resources. Instead, four testing points were chosen within a smaller area which included the two main varieties of Pwo Karen discovered thus far. With a better idea of the relationship of the known Pwo Karen varieties, further research in other areas can be carried out at a later date.

¹ This research project has benefited greatly from the input of a number of my SIL colleagues. Thanks are also due to the Thai Pwo Karen of Central Thailand and the Thai officials who graciously facilitated my contact with them.

1.2 Linguistic affiliation

Pwo Karen is one of the Karenic languages which form a branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The Tibeto-Burman family, in turn, is one branch and Sinitic languages the other branch of the Sino-Tibetan linguistic stock (Benedict 1972; Matisoff 1978),² diagrammed in Figure 1.

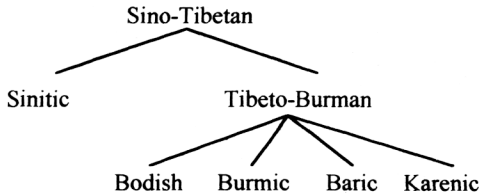


Figure 1 The Sino-Tibetan Linguistic Stock

The Karenic languages can be roughly divided into four groups as diagrammed in Figure 2 (Jones 1961; Bennett 1992). These are the Sgaw (Pakanyau); "Central Karen" which includes the Kayah (Red Karen, Karenni), Kekhu (Padaung), Bre, Yangtalai, Geba, and Zayein; the Pwo (Phlong, Phlou); and the Pa-O (Taungthu).

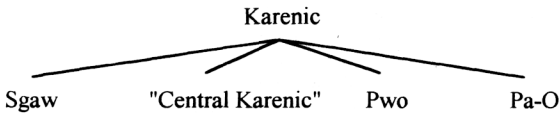


Figure 2 The Karenic Languages

1.3 History of the Central Thailand Pwo Karen

The Pwo Karen of Central Thailand are among the Karenic peoples found along the border between eastern Myanmar and western Thailand. Central Thailand Pwo Karen refer to themselves as Phlou. In Thai, they are designated Kariang (กะเหรี่ยง). The terms Karen and Kariang are sometimes used by Thais and foreigners to refer to Karenic peoples and languages in general.

The Central Thailand Pwo Karen have resided in Thailand for 200 years, having come at the invitation of King Rama I. The first clear references to Karen-Thai relations are found in the Thai annals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is believed that the Karen migrated from China in the early part of the Christian era. By 1785, during the Ayudhaya era, Si Sawat (Kanchanaburi) was a Karen vassal state on an important trade route. During the reign of King Rama I, Karen from Burma settled in Sangkhlaburi, sending a

² Benedict (1972) has proposed a higher-order Tibeto-Karen family within Sino-Tibetan with Karen as one branch and Tibeto-Burman the other, as opposed to the classification of Karen as one of the branches of Tibeto-Burman. The latter classification has been followed in this paper since scholarly opinion appears to be moving toward the classification of Karen as a branch of Tibeto-Burman (DeLancey 1987).

representative to the governor in Kanchanaburi to ask for official permission to live in Thailand. They were given the right to settle by the governor and their Karen representative was named the head of Sangkhlaburi.

In an effort to strengthen the western frontier of Thailand, King Rama I encouraged the immigration of the Mon and Karen from Burma who were already pro-Thai, stockpiling stores of rice on the western frontier for incoming immigrants. As early as 1822, Karen from Sangkhlaburi were serving in the Krom Atamat (Spy Division). Through 1896, the Karen (mostly Pwo) were in charge of border control from Tak south to Phetchaburi. Karen, again mostly Pwo, also supplied an important part of Siam's exports, including eagle wood, rhinoceros horns, and elephant tusks.

King Chulalongkorn made efforts to acquaint himself with his subjects throughout Thailand, visiting the Pwo Karen in Suanpheung in 1873. In 1901, the Ratchaburi Commissioner, Phraya Woradet Sakdawut undertook an inspection tour of the Pwo Karen settlements of Ratchaburi and Phetchaburi in order to formally register the Karen as Thai citizens, set up the collection of taxes, and effect the election by the Pwo Karen of village headmen and sub-district headmen from their number. A quote from Renard (1980:207) sums up the Pwo Karen stance at that time:

Karens in central Thailand, especially Pwos, readily accepted Thai overtures for fuller participation in the Thai government. They eagerly selected headmen, reported on conditions in Karen areas, and paid taxes to the best of their ability. Some even entered the Thai military and police, while others received Thai schooling, and several Pwo leaders found responsible positions in the Thai national administration. Though sometimes unfamiliar with city ways, the Karens made every effort to understand the new Thai system. Thai leaders in the early years of the Chulalongkorn reforms found no more enthusiastic subjects, no more loyal followers than the Pwo Karens along Thailand's western frontier in Kanchanaburi, Ratturi, and Phetburi.

Since the time of King Chulalongkorn, the Karen condition in Thailand has declined due to changes in Thailand and the world. Thailand now exports bulk items such as rice as opposed to luxury items, many of which had been provided by the Karen. The Karen have ceased to play as important a role in the defense of the western frontier as they had in the previous century. They have also lost their political status and are no longer involved in such things as the determination of the western border with Burma or important positions of leadership. The Karen are now described as being "...among the poorest of peoples in the kingdom" (Renard 1980:221).

1.4 Population and geography

Speakers of Karenic languages form a heterogenous group of different languages and customs, with membership based on the fact that they speak a variety of Karen (Keyes 1979:10). They are found in thirteen provinces in Thailand: Prachuapkhirikhan, Phetchaburi, Ratchaburi, Kanchanaburi, Suphanburi, Uthaitani, Tak, Phrae, Chiang Mai, Lampang, Lamphun, Mae Hong Son, and Chiang Rai; with a population of approximately 250,000 (Tribal Research Institute, 1986). Of this total, speakers of Pwo Karen throughout Thailand number approximately 100,000. Finally, speakers of Central Thailand Pwo Karen number approximately 20,000 (Tribal Research Institute 1986).

According to the Pwo Karen themselves, and other sources, the Central Thailand Pwo Karen live in Tak, Uthaithani, Suphanburi, Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, Phetchaburi and Prachuapkhirikhan provinces. Figure 3 shows the approximate range of Central Thailand Pwo Karen habitation.

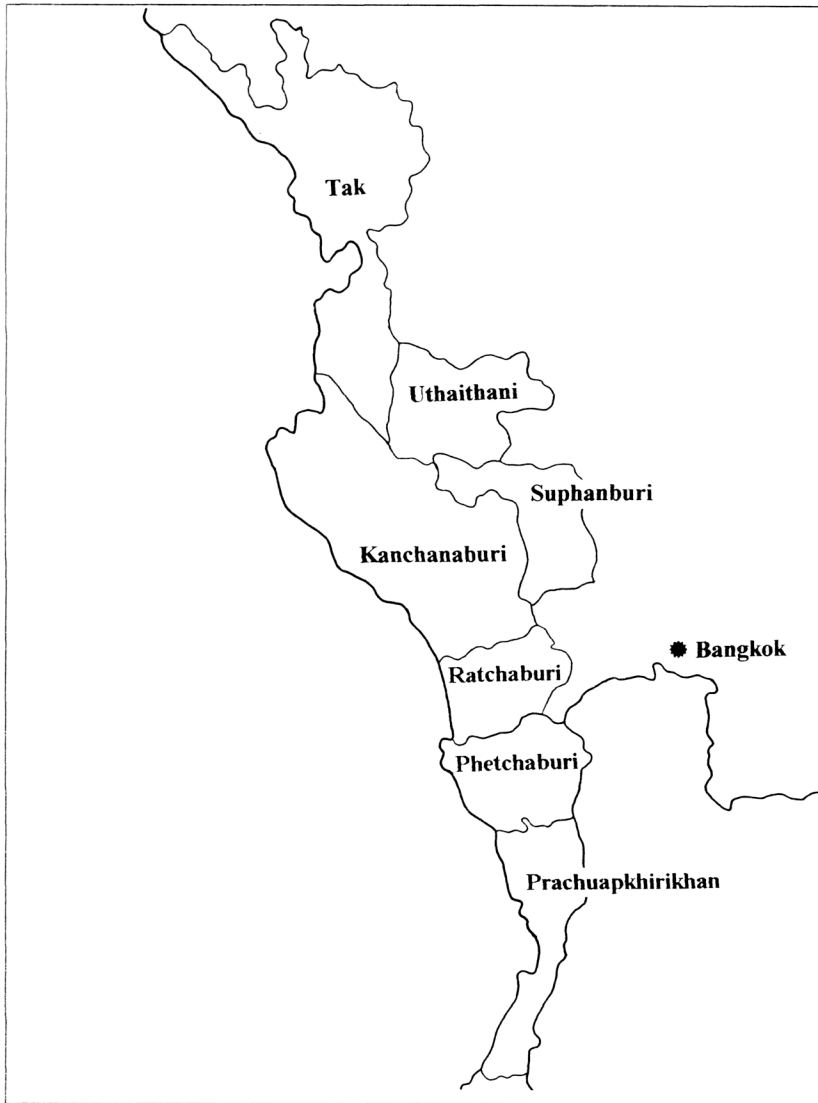


Figure 3. The Central Thailand Pwo Karen Language Area