

DEVELOPING PRACTICAL ORTHOGRAPHIES
FOR THE LU MIEN (YAO), 1932-1986: A CASE STUDY¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

On the fringe of that field known as applied linguistics, there is a rather small area called "orthography." It is so small, in fact, that it has been overlooked in most descriptions of the field (e.g., Kaplan, 1980:58). Nevertheless, there *are* people working there. Many of them are linguists concerned with Bible translation (Nida, 1947, 1954; Pike, 1947; Smalley, 1963, 1976) and missionaries, but there are also a few sociolinguists (Berry, 1958; Sjoberg, 1966; Stubbs, 1980), and researchers (such as those from the Central Institute for Nationalities in Beijing), plus an occasional visitor or two examining writing systems in general or attempting to reform spellings.

Although orthography is not a large area, it is very much a part of applied linguistics since it attempts to solve, in Kaplan's words, "human problems stemming from various uses of language" (1980:63). The problem addressed is a society's lack of a writing system or its use of an inadequate one. The fact that a writing system should ideally be based on a thorough linguistic analysis can sometimes lead one to imagine that devising an orthography is *primarily* a linguistic problem. It is thus useful to have periodic reminders that a variety of *human* factors are the prime determinants in the acceptance or failure of practical orthographies (Berry, 1958; Sjoberg, 1966; Stubbs, 1980). In Stubbs' blunt words, "it does not matter how elegant, rigorous, or systematic your linguistic analysis is, if the native speakers do not like it, then it is a waste of time" (1980:71). Orthography, therefore, must look to several disciplines for insights, not only to linguistics but also to sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, anthropology, history, and others.

To illustrate an applied linguistics approach to orthography design and modification, this paper will first review some of the main factors involved in such an undertaking. It will then briefly look at seven orthographies designed for the Lu Mien over the past 54 years and discuss some of the reasons why, until recently, none of them had received broad enough support to be fully accepted as the "official" Lu Mien script.

II. CONSIDERATIONS IN PRODUCING OR MODIFYING PRACTICAL ORTHOGRAPHIES

The following list of factors to be taken into consideration during orthography design draws heavily on Berry (1958), Smalley (1976), and Stubbs (1980). This list is not complete by any means, and the factors noted will not be further elaborated. The ordering of factors in the list is not significant for the purposes of this paper, since all have an important role to play. Nevertheless, those called "sociolinguistic" and "cultural" will receive greater emphasis in the case study which follows.

¹ This is a revised and updated version of a paper read at the 18th Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, Bangkok, Thailand. I would like to thank Christopher Court and David Solnit for their comments on it.

A. LINGUISTIC FACTORS

1. Is the phonological representation optimal with respect to economy, consistency, and unambiguous differentiation?
2. Is the phonological analysis supplemented by grammatical information on morpheme structure, grammatically conditioned tone change, etc.?

B. SOCIOLINGUISTIC FACTORS

1. Is the orthography maximally adaptive with respect to internal social and regional dialects?
2. Does the orthography accurately reflect the attitude of the people toward
 - a. their own language in its oral and written forms?
 - b. other writing systems for their language already in use?
 - c. the trade and/or national language (i.e., how similar to or different from these languages do they want their script to be)?

C. CULTURAL FACTORS

1. What is the attitude of the leaders toward the orthography?
2. Are the people motivated to read it?
3. Are there tensions in the culture which are being reduced or aggravated by the orthography?

D. PSYCHOLINGUISTIC FACTORS

1. Do the symbols fit the way that people feel about their language and the way it should be represented?
2. Does the orthography respect the psychological processes involved in reading and writing?

E. PEDAGOGICAL FACTORS

1. Are the symbols patterned in a culturally appropriate way?
2. How easy is it for adults to learn to read?

F. PRACTICAL FACTORS

1. Are all the special symbols or diacritics used really necessary?
2. Can the orthography be easily printed locally?

III. THE IU MIEN

The Iu Mien (also known simply as Mien) are one of the major branches of the peoples known as "Yao." They are found primarily in the upland areas of southern China and northern Southeast Asia. The total Iu Mien population is estimated to be 350,000 or more (Cushman, 1975). Beginning in the late 1970s, Iu Mien refugees began to arrive in Western countries (Canada, France, and especially the United States) where they now number approximately 12,000.²

The ancestral homeland of the Iu Mien is thought to have been either near Nanjing in Jiangsu (Lemoine, 1982) or further south around Dongting Lake in Hunan, largely on the basis of their legend about crossing the sea. Contacts with Chinese have had considerable effect on their language and culture (Cushman, 1975; Lemoine, 1982). For example, the Iu Mien have, in addition to their vernacular, a literary language and a ritual language, both of which were

² There are some 10,000 Mien in the United States, over 50% of whom live in California.

borrowed as separate systems written in characters, from two types of Cantonese but are now fully integrated into their complex language system (Purnell, 1975, 1986). Characters, on the other hand, were not used to write the vernacular which was left unwritten. A list of Iu Mien phonemes is given in Figure 1 found on page 138.

IV. THE THAI SYSTEM OF WRITING

Because three of the orthographies to be discussed below have used the Thai script, some general and highly simplified remarks on the major features of that script are necessary. Figure 2 lists the Thai phonemes in Roman script for typographical convenience. Note that in Thai (a) there are three classes of consonant symbols, two of which (High and Low) are used to symbolize the same set of phonemes; (b) tone marks are linked to consonant symbols, not to vowels as in many other systems; and (c) vowel symbols may occur in various satellite positions around the initial consonant(s).

V. EIGHT IU MIEN ORTHOGRAPHIES

A. ORTHOGRAPHY 1: THAI SCRIPT (1932)

To my knowledge, the first practical orthography for the vernacular language of the Iu Mien of Thailand/Laos³ was devised by a missionary couple, Mr. and Mrs. Trung, some time prior to 1932.⁴ In February of that year, the Gospel of Mark using this orthography was printed by the American Bible Society (Trung, 1932). This slim volume is the only extant specimen of the orthography.⁵ A one-page key to some of the nonstandard symbols used is found at the end of the book.

Much of the Trungs' orthography is a radical departure from the standard Thai writing system in a number of respects, affecting not only individual symbols but also general constitutive principles. For example, High Class consonants were eliminated, and the tone marks used with the Mid Class were used with fixed values for all consonants, though not always with the standard values; vowel symbols normally written to the left of initial consonants were put to the right of them, etc.

Orthography 1 is difficult to read even for someone who reads both Thai and Iu Mien, not only because of its odd choice of symbolization and the way it altered several fundamental rules of the system, but also because it failed to meet the criteria for a successful script: its linguistic base was inadequate, it had very little transfer value to the national language, it was not aesthetically pleasing, and it must have been very difficult for a typesetter to produce.

³ An earlier, Vietnamese-based orthography used to transcribe Yao is found in Savina's dictionary of the Kim Mun language (Savina, 1926) which is related to Iu Mien. In his introduction to the dictionary proper, Savina included an extensive wordlist comparing the two languages (pp. 14-25). Whether this orthography was ever used by Catholic missionaries in Vietnam to produce materials for the Kim Mun or Iu Mien is not known. In any case, Savina's work has had no effect on the development of Iu Mien practical orthographies and thus will not be considered further here.

⁴ Smalley (1976:8) gives the name as C. K. Trang. I follow the insert to the Gospel of Mark (Trung, 1932) which reads, in part, as follows: Friends of the Bible Society, We take pleasure in presenting you with this copy of the Gospel of Mark in Yao, just off the press. This is the first tangible result of a decade of prayer and labor on the part of the Agency Secretary and of nearly two years of agonizing residence among the Miao of Mr. and Mrs. Trung.

⁵ It also appears to be the first portion of the Bible translated into Mien.

ORTHOGRAPHIES 2 AND 3

The following two orthographies were developed by missionaries in northern Thailand at about the same time, one by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship using Romanized script, the other by the American Churches of Christ using Thai script. They were both based on essentially the same phonological analysis and are linguistically adequate.

To date, much of the literature produced in vernacular Iu Mien has been for the relatively small Christian population (numbering probably not much more than 5% of the roughly 35,000 Iu Mien in Thailand and, as refugees, in Western countries). Much of it has been printed in both orthographies to reduce the divisive effect which the presence of two scripts has had on the Christian community. The reasons why two orthographies were developed in the first place will be discussed next.

B. ORTHOGRAPHY 2: ROMANIZED SCRIPT (1954-PRESENT)

The Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) and the American Churches of Christ (ACC) both began their work among the Iu Mien in Chiangrai province early in the 1950s, the OMF in the western part around Maechan and the ACC in the eastern section near Chiangkham (now part of Phayao province). Those in the OMF area were recent immigrants from Laos and, given the loose control exercised in the mountainous border regions by the Thai government at that time, they owed little allegiance to Thailand. Before long, the influential headman of the village of Maesalong and many of the villagers became Christians. The OMF missionaries began to learn the language and analyze it in preparation for developing a practical orthography.

C. ORTHOGRAPHY 3: THAI SCRIPT (1956-PRESENT)

As was mentioned above, the American Churches of Christ opened their work among the Iu Mien in what was then eastern Chiangrai. The ACC started off using the OMF Romanized script but soon switched to a Thai script when it became apparent that the Iu Mien themselves preferred it. Unlike those in western Chiangrai, the Iu Mien in the east had lived in Thailand for about a hundred years and, by the 1950s, saw their future as being there. Thus, to them, a Romanized script was not in their best interests. Instead, they preferred a transfer value Thai script. Accordingly, in 1956, the ACC missionaries began to develop a Thai orthography, staying as close to the standard Thai rules and symbol patterns as possible.

Orthography 3 is certainly more complex than Orthography 2, both because it is based on a more complex writing system and also because it aims for a high transfer product.

There is no question that the presence of two scripts for the Iu Mien in Thailand has been a source of tension within the Christian community. At least two factors contributed to this. First, a Christian community emerged sooner and grew much more rapidly in the OMF area than in the ACC area. This put pressure on the OMF workers to develop an orthography for Bible translation, etc. while they were still learning the language. Within a few years the amount of literature produced was sufficient to legitimize the script. A second factor was that although the script was never restricted along religious lines, only Christians were motivated to read it since Mien traditional ritual manuals are written with Chinese characters and used by specialists literate in that writing system. These factors, together with the western Chiangrai group's lack of