

Steps Toward Standardization of a Minority Orthography: An Update on Mien (Yao)

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The terms “standard” and “standardization” as applied to a variety of a language which has gained (or which has been accorded) a measure of prestige and power have come under considerable scrutiny and criticism in the last few years (e.g., Bex & Watts 1999, Cheshire & Stein 1997, Milroy & Milroy 1999).¹ They have been linked to prescriptivism and the consequent denigration of other varieties of the language or, worse, to hegemony by elites or those in power over users of what are considered “nonstandard” varieties. This paper is not about such issues. Nor is it about the broader question of whether the very introduction of literacy has actually done harm to minority oral cultures by being used as an instrument of linguistic imperialism (Muhlhausler 1996). Rather, this paper is about the development and use of a recognized writing system by a minority people who are attempting to enhance their status in the competitive arena of both other minorities and the majority cultures within which they find themselves, and in this way to try to preserve their identity through literacy.

The use of the term “standardization” here thus refers to uniformity in the use of graphic conventions which were adopted by representatives of the speech community. That is, in this paper the term refers only to spelling and does not include any reference to the standardization of pronunciation, grammar, or the meaning of words. As used here, the term “standard” is descriptive and carries no pejorative connotation when discussing deviations from the agreed-upon writing conventions.

Conformity to or deviation from spelling norms in Mien is a major part of what this paper will address. Overall, the focus is similar to Milroy & Milroy’s general comments on standardization, though the process in Mien is just at a very early stage.

It is only in the spelling system that full standardisation has been achieved, as deviations from the norm (however logical) are not tolerated there....standardisation does not tolerate variability....Standardisation is motivated in the first place by various social, political, and commercial needs and is promoted in various ways, including the use of the writing system, which is relatively easily standardised... (Milroy & Milroy 1999:18-19)

However, the underlying matters of how the general orthographic conventions were established, and how the use of these orthographic resources has been understood by writers from different segments of the community, will also be examined. That is, conformity or deviation can be understood only in light of what the ethnic community and the specific users understand the writing system and its constraints to be. First, however, it is necessary to situate vernacular literacy in general, and the current standard orthography in particular, within Mien culture.

The Mien Language System

The Mien have a complex core language system comprised of a ritual language (*ziec-waac*), a literary language (*nzung-waac*), and a vernacular (*mienh waac*). The first two of these were borrowed from Chinese some centuries ago, not as specialized lexical additions to the vernacular but as separate functional systems in their own right. Both have long since been fully integrated into the overall Mien system. The ritual language, used for traditional Daoist religious functions, was borrowed together with the manuals for performing such ceremonies (Lemoine 1982). The literary language was borrowed from a somewhat different form of Chinese and is used for a variety of primarily secular purposes, from congratulatory wishes hung by a doorway to a wide range of poetry and song. Along with the literary language, the Mien borrowed the metrical system characteristic of Tang dynasty "Old Style Regulated Verse" (Purnell 1991, 1995, 1998).

Literacy in Mien

For several hundred years, a degree of literacy has been present in Mien culture in that the ritual and literary languages have been written using Chinese characters. Literacy was spread unevenly in the culture, however, being confined solely to males. All men were expected to be able to write the eight characters identifying the year, month, day, and hour of their birth, information needed for ritual purposes, but significant literacy was confined to a relatively small number of men: Daoist priests and their apprentices and men who had been exposed to some literacy instruction in Chinese. However, there was no literacy in the vernacular, and no script had been devised for that purpose.

Since the early 1930s, however, seven orthographies have been devised for the Mien vernacular, the first of these by a Mr. and Mrs. Trung, Vietnamese missionaries working in northern Thailand (Purnell 1987). All seven scripts are listed in Table 1.² As will be noted below, the Mien refugee community in America had the primary role in developing scripts 5 and 7.

Table 1: Mien Vernacular Scripts

1. 1932: Thai-based (nonstandard)
2. 1954: Roman-based (nonstandard)
3. 1956: Thai-based (standard)
4. 1981: Thai-based (simplified)
5. 1982: Roman-based (Western)
- 6: 1982: Chinese-based (bo-po-mo-fo phonetic)
- 7: 1984: Roman-based (pinyin and Western)

In the early 1980s, Mien refugees from Laos now living in the United States, Canada, and France wanted to develop a new orthography so that they could identify themselves as a people distinct from other ethnic groups from Laos (especially the Lao and the Hmong) and could maintain communication among their scattered communities (Purnell 1987).³ None of the

previous scripts were acceptable, either because of their appearance relative to English and French or because of their perceived connection with Christianity (scripts 2 and 3 having been developed within a Christian missionary context).⁴ Accordingly, a new, nonsectarian Roman script with transfer value to English and French was developed and adopted by 30 Mien representatives at a 1982 conference on Mien orthography.

During this period, researchers at the Central Institute (now University) for Nationalities in Beijing, namely Prof. Pan Cheng Qian and his associates, were working on a Romanized script for Mien based on the Chinese pinyin system. Prof. Pan, himself a Mien, saw that the new script of the refugees was similar in many ways to the China script and proposed that there be talks aimed at unifying the two if possible. A small delegation from America went to China in 1984, and held talks with Pan and his colleagues. The negotiations were successful, and a “Unified Script” to be used by Mien in China and the West was agreed to. It is a compromise between a pinyin-based and an English-based alphabet. (Table 2 gives the letters used in the script. Tones are marked by the use of letters at the end of words as in Hmong.)

Table 2: Vernacular Orthography #7 (“Unified Script”)

Initial Consonants ⁵	p	t	c	q	k
	b	d	z	j	g
	mb	nd	nz	nj	nq
	f	s			h
	hm	hn		hny	hng
	m	n		ny	ng
	hu	hl			hi
	w	l			y
Final Consonants ⁶	-p	-t			-k
	-m	-n			-ng