

Languages of the Ethnic Corridor in Western Sichuan¹

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In recent years, scholars in China devoted to the ethnohistory, ethnology, and minority language studies of southwestern China have often used the term "*Ethnic Corridor*" to refer to the strip of territory extending from southern Gansu and eastern Qinghai down through western Sichuan and southeastern Tibet to western Yunnan and the northern Burmese and Indian frontiers.

Characterized geographically by lofty and steep north-to-south oriented mountain chains and a multitude of huge rivers (including the Min, Dadu, Yalong, Jinsha, Lancang, and Nu), this area has historically had a complex ethnic makeup. For over a century, Chinese and foreign scholars in ethnology, history, and linguistics have written about the intricate ethnic and linguistic situations in the Corridor. To this day, the area still presents many unsolved puzzles. Professor Fei Xiaotong gave the following analyses:

"This corridor, a borderland of Sino-Tibetan and Yi-Tibetan contact, has been an arena of political tug-of-war. This is also the area in history where the so-called Qiang, Di, and Rong ethnic groups lived and thrived and where many local governments of varying power and duration have appeared. At present, this corridor is inhabited by the Chinese in the east and the Tibetans in the west ... there seem to be, nevertheless, some substrate languages that survived the overwhelming influence of either *lingua franca* ... in this corridor are

¹ **Translator's note:** This is a translation of one of the most important recent articles by Sun Hongkai: "Chuanxi Minzu Zoulang Diqiu de Yuyan". It originally appeared in the anthology *Xinan Minzu Yanjiu* (*Studies of the Ethnic Groups of Southwestern China*) Chengdu: Sichuan People's Press, 1983, pp. 429-454. I amalgamate Sun Hongkai's original notes with my supplementary ones into a single sequence; the latter are distinguished from the former by carrying a **TN** mark, short for *translator's note*. For new language names, I use Pinyin renditions of the Chinese names given by the author without the tone marks (except to avoid potential confusion, e.g. footnote 2). In the Chinese original, the last two note numbers (13 and 14) in the text have no corresponding entries in the endnotes. Cordial thanks are due to Randy J. LaPolla for meticulously proofreading earlier versions of this translation and providing helpful suggestions for improvements.

to be found many living historical relics; this area should be fertile ground for exploration by historians as well as linguists." (Fel, 1980:158)

Within the past few years, the present writer has carried on extensive fieldwork in western Sichuan, one of the core areas of the Corridor, and has come to a preliminary understanding of the linguistic situation of the area: the number and distribution of the various languages, the sociolinguistic contexts of their use, and their basic characteristics.

The inhabitants of this area are found to speak, aside from the now well-known Tibetan, Yi, Qiang, Primi, and rGyarong languages, many "historical relic languages" previously little understood by the outside world. Speakers of these languages, besides using their respective vernaculars at home and in their villages, can converse also in Chinese, Tibetan, or Yi, when so required by communicative need and discourse situation.

This article aims to give a brief synopsis of the distribution, extent of use, and basic characteristics of these languages, as well as their general affiliations with the surrounding minority languages.

1. Sketches of the corridor languages

1.1 ÈRSŪ 尔苏 (Including Tosu 多苏 and Lisu 栗苏²⁾)

The Ersu language is spoken mainly in Ganluo, Yuexi, Mianning, and Mull counties of the Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture of the Yi Nationality, and Shimian and Hanyuan counties of the Ganzi Autonomous Prefecture of the Tibetan Nationality. The speakers number about twenty thousand.³ Ersu speakers at different localities have different autonyms: those living at Ganluo, Yuexi, and Hanyuan call themselves "Ersu", "Buerzi" or "Ersubuerzi"; those living at eastern Mianning call themselves "Duoxu (Tosu)"; those living at Shimian use "Lusu", and those living at Mull, Jiulong, and western Mianning "Lisu". These different autonyms are dialectal variants of the same word, originally meaning "white people".

The Ersu language exhibits considerable internal diversification: different dialects are almost mutually unintelligible. In matters of basic vocabulary and syntactic structures, however, they are still quite similar. There are three main dialects: the eastern or Ersu dialect spoken by about 13,000 self-termed Ersus or Lusus, the central or Tosu dialect spoken by

² To be distinguished from the Yipho (Lolo-Burmese) language Lisu 俅俅.

³ The population figures given in this article are approximate statistics arrived at by adding up rough population numbers gathered at each locality before 1980.

about 3,000 self-termed Tosus, and the western or Lisu dialect spoken by about 4,000 self-termed Lisus. We made a detailed investigation of the central dialect spoken around Mianning, Sichuan, and after double-checking our data with those contained in Nishida Tatsuo's *Tazoku Yakugo Kenkyū* (*Study of a Chinese-Tosu Vocabulary*),⁴ we found that this vocabulary records an earlier form of the same Tosu dialect of the Mianning area. The pronunciation of most basic items of that vocabulary are still consistent with that of the living Tosu speech, even though a number of the words in the *Vocabulary* have disappeared from modern spoken Tosu.

Outside of the villages and communities where their own vernacular is used, the Ersu people also speak Chinese, Yi, and (around Jiulong) Tibetan. In places like Shimian, Hanyuan, and Mianning, the use of Ersu is already becoming restricted. At certain localities near highways or cities, middle-aged people and young adults are losing their command of the language. In the following I give a brief account of the main characteristics of Ersu, based on a variety spoken at Zeluo Commune, Ganluo County, Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture of the Yi Nationality.

1.1.1 Phonology

There are 42 single-consonant initials in the following series: bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveolar⁵, apicodomal, alveopalatal, prepalatal, velar, and glottal. In some Ersu dialects, uvular stops and spirants are found as well. There are 32 initial consonant clusters; 21 of them are two-place clusters composed of a basic initial plus a post-initial (a spirant), and the remaining five are three-place clusters. Vowels do not contrast in length or vowel tensivity⁶, but a few retroflexed vowels are found. Rising diphthongs abound; falling ones, which are very few, occur infrequently. There are no consonantal codas. A few nasalized vowels occur in the native vocabulary; Chinese loanwords with nasal codas are rendered as nasalized vowels with

⁴ TN: This work is based on a Chinese-Tosu vocabulary, which is part of the *Xifan Yiyu* (*Sino-Xifan Bilingual Vocabularies*) compiled during the Qing Dynasty under imperial decree.

⁵ TN: These points of articulation refer to phonetic realizations rather than phonemic contrasts. As a matter of fact, the bilabial and labiodental series are presumably always in complementary distribution in any of the languages reported in this article. I tentatively use "dental" and "alveolar" to translate Sun's "*shejian qian*" (front-apex) and "*shejian zhong*" (mid-apex). These places of articulation are most probably also always in complementary distribution in any of these languages. It is doubtful that the practice of many mainland Chinese scholars to mechanically assign dental/alveolar spirants and affricates to the "front-apex" category and dental/alveolar stops, nasals, and liquids to the "mid-apex" category is always empirically founded.

⁶ TN: Mainland Chinese linguists have been using this term to refer to laryngealization. For phonetic details, see Maddieson and Ladefoged 1985.

the nasal endings dropped. Even though two tonemes, one high and one low, can be established, few words are distinguished by pitch alone.

1.1.2 *Lexicon*

The Ersu lexicon is richly diversified; word-formation rules are very productive. The sericulture formerly practiced by the Ersu people leaves the language heavily endowed with technical terms related to silkworm farming. The lexicon also contains a number of early and some recent (technical) loanwords from Chinese; a few Yi borrowings connected with general livelihood, and some Tibetan ones dealing with religion are also found. Loanwords, however, do not constitute a large percentage of the lexicon; those from Chinese count less than 10%, and those from either Yi or Tibetan less than 2%. The major word-formation device is compounding; some nouns, verbs, and adjectives are formed by prefixation or suffixation. Four-syllable elaborate expressions⁷ abound.

1.1.3 *Grammar*

In Ersu, word order, particles, and morphology are all indispensable grammatical coding devices. Nominal plurality is conveyed by suffixation. Expressions of orientation are characteristically rich: besides those universal to all languages, there are others which denote the orientation relative to the position of mountains and riverflow, each of which is further distinguished along an axis of proximity: general reference, proximal, mediate, and distal. This system of orientation (or path) terms plays a role even in the naming of a new-born baby according to the mother's age at the time of childbirth. The system of classifiers is also highly developed. In a numeral phrase with a classifier, the word order is *head noun-numeral-classifier*. Personal pronouns are case-inflected by means of ablaut, yielding agentive, genitive, and patient case forms. Reduced forms of the personal pronouns are prefixed to kinterms to mark the category of possession.⁸ Pronouns can be reduplicated; when reduplicated, personal pronouns become reflexive, and interrogative pronouns become plural. Verbs

⁷ **TN:** The existence of such tetrasyllabic expressions is an important Southeast Asian areal feature. [See Mattioli (in prep.)]

⁸ **TN:** This refers to the head-marking device where the possessed noun head (usually restricted to inalienable ones) is marked to agree in person (sometimes also in number) with the modifying possessor, i.e. of the schematic formula:

Noun₁ ^HNoun₂ + ^MPronominal Affix (Nichols 1986:59)

This category of possession is reported in some other Corridor languages not treated in this article, e.g. rGyarong and the Nunglish languages Trung and Anong. See Sun 1984, 1988.