

U

Jan-Olof Svantesson
University of Lund

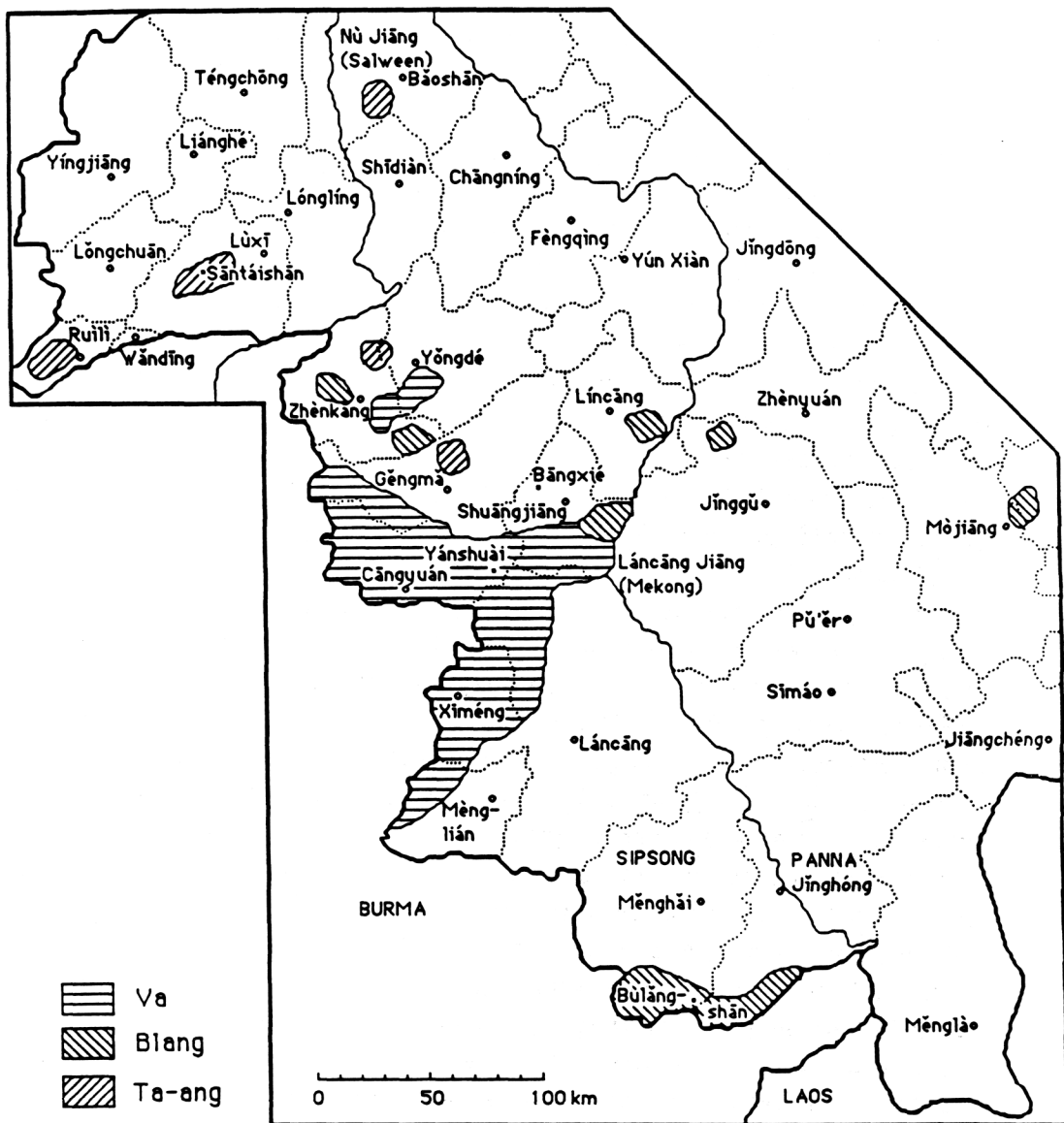
In this article, the name U is proposed for a group of closely related Austroasiatic languages. One of the U languages, spoken in the village Pǎ Xep in Yúnnán province in China, is the main subject of this article. U belongs to the little-known Angkuic group in the Palaungic branch of Mon-Khmer. Its synchronic phonology is described in some detail, as well as the phonological processes that relate it to Proto-Angkuic and Proto-Palaungic. A vocabulary and a short text are given. U tonogenesis is of particular interest since it utilizes unusual mechanisms, such as vowel height and vowel length neutralization.

1. Background

Among the 55 officially recognized minority peoples in China there are four whose languages belong to the Austroasiatic language family. One of them is Gin (京 Jīng), i.e. Vietnamese, who live in Guǎngxī near the Vietnamese border. The other three, Va (佤 Wǎ), Blang (布朗 Bùlǎng) and Ta-ang (德昂 Dé'áng; until 1985 called Bēnglóng 崩龙) are found in the southwestern part of Yúnnán province, as are some other Austroasiatic groups (Kammu, Phsin, Mang, Man Mit and Hu), which are not officially recognized as minority peoples.

The map on the next page shows the distribution of the Va, Blang and Ta-ang according to a map of Chinese nationalities issued by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1981. None of these three peoples is linguistically homogeneous, although the different languages spoken by one people are generally referred to as "dialects" by Chinese linguists.

The Va (Zhōu and Yán 1984) speak at least three mutually incomprehensible languages, Paràuk (Barāog), Lava (Rvīa?), and Va proper (Vɔʔ). The written language is based on Paràuk as spoken in the village Yaong Soi (翁帅 Yánshuài) in Cāngyuán 沧源 county.



Map of Mon-Khmer peoples in Yúnnán

The Ta-ang (Palaung; Chén, Wáng and Lài 1986) consist of several rather small groups, who speak different languages, such as Ta-ang (Ang, Palaung), Pale and Rumai.

The majority of the Blang (Lǐ, Niè and Qiū 1986) live in and around Bùlǎngshān 布朗山 commune in Měnghǎi 勐海 county in Sipsong Panna (西双版纳 Xīshuāng Bǎnnà) autonomous prefecture. Their language (Blang or Plàng, also known as Samtau) belongs to the Waic subbranch of the Palaungic branch of Mon-Khmer (see Diffloth 1980, forthc.). For some reason, several scattered groups, who live much further to the north in Yúnnán, are also included among the Blang. The languages of two of these groups have been mentioned briefly in Chinese sources: Wáng and Chén 1982a, 1982b, and also Svantesson, Wáng and Chén 1981 describe the "Blang dialect" spoken in Pèngpàn 碰拏 in Dàfèngshān 大风山 commune in Shuāngjiāng 双江 county, and Zhōu and Yán 1983 describe the "Blang dialect" of Pàngpǐn 胖品 in Yǒnggē 永革 commune in Shuāngjiāng. Zhōu and Yán use the name U (Wú 乌) for the language described by them, and this name is used for some of these groups in other Chinese sources as well (see *Zhōngguó shǎoshù mínzú*, p. 393 and *Yúnnán shǎoshù mínzú*, p. 203). I will use the names Pèngpàn U and Pàngpǐn U for these two languages. The name Puman (濮曼, 蒲满 or 蒲蛮) is or has been used by the Chinese for these (and for other) minority groups.

The language described here is spoken in the village Pǎ Xep /pǎǎ xèp/ (邦协, Bāngxié in Chinese) in Shāhé 沙河 commune in Shuāngjiāng county, and in one neighbouring village. According to my informant, they have no real ethnonym, but refer to themselves simply as ʔú ʔè "our people". The language shares certain characteristics with the two U languages mentioned above, such as denasalization of final nasals in certain positions. These features are also found in two Angkuic languages described in older sources, namely Pou Ma of Henri d'Orléans 1898 and P'u-man of Davies 1909. (I am very grateful to Gérard Diffloth who called my attention to these older sources and told me that U was related to the languages described in them and to the other Angkuic languages.) In these languages, the word ʔu means "human being", and some of these peoples refer to themselves by this term, so it seems appropriate to use the name U for these languages as well. In all, some 3000-5000 people speak U languages; Pǎ Xep U is spoken by

about 700.

I had the opportunity to work with an informant for this language during a short visit to the Central Institute for Nationalities in Běijīng in May 1982. The informant, Ay Tit Saw, was a 28-year old male native of Pǎ Xep, and a fourth-year student at the institute. A vocabulary was recorded and discussed briefly with Ay Tit. The text given in Section 4, (together with a Chinese translation) was also recorded by him, and was re-recorded with him by Lǐ Dàoyǒng, who also helped me with the transcription and translation of it.

A general description of Shuāngjiāng Blang society and history is given by Liú et al. 1981.