

**The Role of Endangered Mon-Khmer Languages of  
Xekong Province  
Southern Laos in the Reconstruction of Proto-Katuic**

**Theraphan L-Thongkum**

Chulalongkorn University

**INTRODUCTION**

The Katuic languages spoken in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia have been classified into two sub-branches, East and West Katuic (Thomas, 1976; Diffloth, 1992 and 1996). According to Diffloth (1996), West Katuic comprises a few languages which can be divided into two complexes namely Kuay and Bru, East Katuic comprises many more languages: Pacoh, Katu, Phu'o'ng, Kantu, Ngkriang, Katang, Ong, Yir and Ta'oih. Proto-East-Katuic was reconstructed by D.M. Thomas (1976) based on the Brou, Pacoh and Katu data collected by *SIL members working in Vietnam. A lack of data in the past* and the Romanized-Vietnamese-script transcription make her Proto-East-Katuic phonological reconstruction and comparative lexicon (667 items) look less impressive. Even though there are some weaknesses, we still feel thankful for her pioneer work; this first attempt is a good start for the rest to come. From 1976 to the present, there have been three more works on Proto-Katuic: Diffloth (1982), Efimov (1983), and Peiros (1996). The book *Katuic Comparative Dictionary* by Peiros appeared in 1996 with short phonological descriptions of Bru, Kui, Pacoh, Katu, and Proto-Katuic phonological reconstruction in the introductory section, followed by 1,241 reconstructed forms and the index of Proto-Katuic roots respectively. The dictionaries of Katuic languages: Bru (L-Thongkum and Puengpa, 1980), Brou (J.Miller and C.Miller, 1976), Kui (Srivises, 1978), Pacoh (R.Watson, S.Watson and Cubuat, 1979), and Katu (Costello, 1971) were his major sources of data.

From January 1997-December 1999, I had the opportunity to do field research on six Katuic and seven Bahnaric languages

in the four districts (Lamam, Thataeng, Dakchueng, Kaluem) of Xekong province, southern Laos. Nine field trips were conducted, about two-three weeks for each trip.<sup>1</sup> Based on the *Kui (Suai)-Thai-English Dictionary* by Srivises (1978), a wordlist of 2,228 lexical items had been prepared to be used as a guideline for data collection in Xekong. For each of the six Katuic languages: Kantu, Dakkang, Triw, Ta-oi', Chatong, Kriang, about 2,500-3,000 items were obtained depending upon the efficiency of the informants. The data from my fieldnotes together with information extracted from the other available publications, mentioned above, enabled me to classify and reconstruct another version of Proto-Katuic. One aim of this study was to test the validity and accuracy of the works done by professional comparativists, especially Peiros' Proto-Katuic, which is the most extensive. It is noticeable that there are a lot of discrepancies between his version and this study due to the fact that the reconstructions are based on different sets of data. Some of the differences may have been caused by the selection of daughter languages to represent the whole branch of the family. The linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the comparativists, themselves, are also important, especially for an interpretation of the language data transcribed by other linguists and field workers. The selection of cognates can also be a problem. A large number of words with cultural significance may not be taken into consideration due to a lack of SEA cultural knowledge, in general, and the cultures of the people who speak the languages used for a reconstruction, in particular. An opportunity to hear the languages spoken in everyday life is also useful. Even though our works were done only four years apart, and the same Bru and Kui dictionaries were used extensively as references for cognates, the differences between Peiros' version and this study's are quite major. See examples in the next sections.

### SUB-GROUPING OF KATUIC LANGUAGES

From the data in the wordlists of the six Katuic languages spoken in Xekong province collected solely by me: Ta-oi', Kriang, Chatong, Kantu, Dakkang and Triw, and data from the

other sources on Kui (Srivises, 1978; Gainey, 1985), Bru (L-Thongkum and Puengpa, 1980; Gainey, 1985), So (Gainey, 1985), Brou (Miller, 1976), Pacoh (Watson, 1979), and Katu (Costello, 1971 and 1991; Sulavan et al, 1998), about 1,650 cognates could be found; however, only 1,500 were selected for this Proto-Katuic reconstruction.

According to the Katuic family tree drawn by Diffloth (1989), cited in Chazée (1999) with no other details, there are three sub-branches of the Katuic languages, East (Katu, Pacoh, Ngkriang), Central (Ta'oy, Ong, Katang), and West (Brou-so, Kuay-Yoe), see Figure 1. Based on research results, the speakers of the Kui-Kuai or Kuay-Yoe sub-group of the West Katuic sub-branch separated themselves from the rest of the Katuic peoples by migrating to the west (Thailand and Cambodia) earlier than the Bru-So sub-group. Among those that remain in the east (Laos and Vietnam), their languages may be classified into three sub-groups: North (Brou, Pacoh, So, etc.), Central (Ta-oi', Kriang, Chatong, etc.), and South (Kantu, Katu, Dakkang, Triw, etc.)<sup>2</sup> See the diagram showing the sub-grouping and relationship of the Katuic languages in Figure 2.

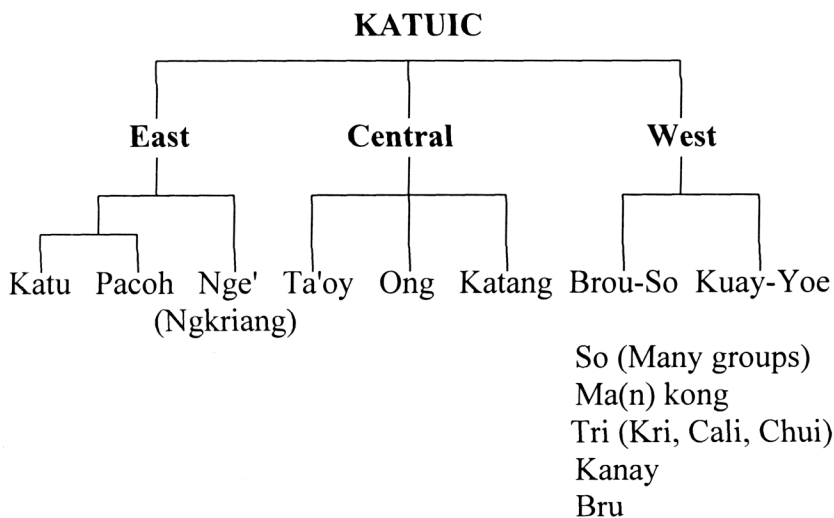


Figure 1. The Katuic branch of Eastern Mon-Khmer (Diffloth, 1989) as cited in Chazée (1999)

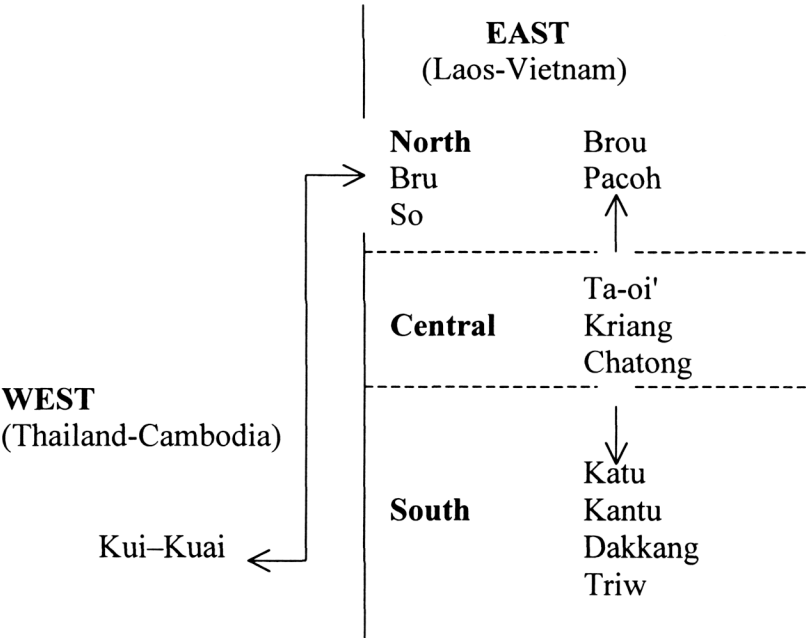


Figure 2. Sub-grouping of Katuic languages (L-Thongkum, 2000)

Some examples from the comparative lexicon below are evidence that proves the hypothesis that the Katuic languages can be classified into four major sub-groups: West Katuic, North East Katuic, Central East Katuic, and South East Katuic.

- (1)        **\*(s/h)ərʔmaŋ/\*(k/ʔ)ərʔmaŋ** (East) เขม่าไฟ หยากไย่  
             soot Peiros: \*sərmhaŋ~\*kəmhaŋ  
             West: kə:m (Kui)  
             East: samaŋ (Bru Brou So) kamaŋ (Pacoh)  
                      karmaŋ (Ta-oi') harmaŋ (Chatong  
                      Kriang) ʔarmaŋ (Kantu Triw) ramaŋ  
                      (Katu) tamaŋ (Dakkang)
- (2)        **\*(k/ʔ)əta:w** (East) 'อ้อย sugarcane'  
             Peiros: \*kəta:w~\*ʔəta:w  
             West: katu:m (Kui)