

A PRELIMINARY PHONOLOGICAL SKETCH OF PYEN, WITH COMPARISON TO BISU

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1 Introduction

The first mention of the Pyen (Sino–Tibetan, Tibeto–Burman, Burmese–Yiphoish/Loloish,¹Yiphoish/Loloish, Southern Yiphoish/Loloish, Bisoid) in western literature is quite indirect. In his *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States* (1890), British railway engineer Holt S. Hallet noted an 1876 encounter with a “Loloish” group outside Mae Sui District, Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. Local Northern Thai referred to these people as “Lawa,” a designation which Hallet correctly deduced to be incorrect, inasmuch as the language bore no genetic relation whatsoever to Lawa as spoken in the Chiang Mai (“Siand he,” to Hallet) region. Inasmuch as these people reported that they regularly hosted visiting relatives from the area of Keng Tung, Burma, Hallet dubbed the group “Keng Tung Lawa”.

The “Keng Tung Lawa” Hallet encountered were, in fact, Bisu. This can be deduced from location (just south of the current Bisu area), lexicon (four words listed, all corresponding directly to contemporary Bisu), and, oddly enough, perhaps even anatomy (“better developed noses” than the Northern Thai; contemporary Bisu boast of their larger nose bridges).

The relatives said to live in the Keng Tung region are doubtless those now identified as the Pyen. Validation of this stems from two sources: Scott and Hardiman’s 1902 *Gazetteer of Upper Burma*, which contains a list of 250 words from the “‘Pyen’ or ‘Pin’ of Southern Shan State,” and the memories of Bisu elders, who tell of visits from the “Pin” as recently as fifty years ago.²

Additional linguistic, cultural, or historical information about the Pyen has not been forthcoming, causing some to speculate that the group may have become extinct. In late 2002, however, contact between the Bisu of Thailand and the Pyen of Myanmar was briefly reestablished, yielding additional information on this minority group.

Contemporary Pyen refer to themselves as “Bisu”. Their exonym is said to stem from a partial exodus, generations ago, from Laos to Burma. Fleeing their former Lao masters, these people took refuge with the Plang tribe. In return for protection, they agreed to be adopted as the “younger siblings” of the Plang. As such, they were not allowed to intermarry with the Plang (a ban which still stands), and were also compelled to exchange their traditional clothing for Plang clothing. Thus, when the pursuing Laos arrived at the Plang village, they were informed that no Bisu were present, only Pyen (*p^hen* and its vari-

¹ The term “Loloish” has been applied to this branch for many years, but has fallen out of favor recently because the word itself is Chinese in origin and has derogatory connotations. Yiphoish is a more acceptable alternative (Hale 1998).

² While Scott and Hardiman provided basic ethnographic information on a number of the minority groups they encountered, their coverage of Pyen was limited to a wordlist.

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ants meaning ‘to change clothes’ in a variety of Asian languages).³ Those who remained in Laos, the story claims, became known as *p^hu noi* ‘little people’; they did not escape with the rest of the group, because the *pu noi* ‘little crabs’ they were boiling for dinner were not done in time.

The Pyen⁴ currently live in two villages near Mong Yang, Shan State (north of Keng Tung), with a combined population of 700. Language vitality is high; most women are monolingual in Pyen, while most men also speak Lahu and Shan. Despite some dialect differences, Pyen and Bisu are mostly mutually intelligible—although the Pyen say the Bisu have been overly influenced by Thai, while the Bisu charge the Pyen with having borrowed heavily from Lahu.⁵

2 Syllable structure

Both native Bisu and native Pyen syllables (as opposed to Daic loan words) have the canonical form C1 (C2) V T (C3), where C1 represents an obligatory initial consonant, C2 an optional second element in a consonant cluster, V an obligatory vowel, T an obligatory tone, and C3 an optional final consonant. The following words illustrate these syllable types in Pyen:

Pyen (Phonemic transcription)	English gloss	Pyen (Phonemic transcription)	English gloss
và	pig	k ^h ǝmp ^h u	owl
nan	you (sg)	p ^h æhǝŋ	bag
t ^h áŋ	sword	jampaj	grasshopper

3 Consonants

3.1 Initial consonants

Pyen has 23 initial consonants, while Bisu has 29 initial consonants. The chief difference stems from Pyen’s merger of what Bradley termed “partially voiced” nasals /*hm*, /*hn*, /*hp*, /*hŋ*/ with their respective fully-voiced counterparts, a phenomenon also observed among some younger Bisu speakers. Oddly enough, the Bisu lateral /*hl*/ has been maintained in Pyen. In addition, Bisu’s alveolar affricates /*ts^h*/ and /*ts*/ merge with /*tʃ^h*/ and /*c*/, respectively, in Pyen. Similarly, Bisu’s velar /*w*/ becomes /*v*/ in Pyen.

³ I am indebted to Graham Thurgood for pointing out the permutations of “pyen” in Chinese, Thai, and a number of other languages, differing in pronunciation but identical in meaning.

⁴ For purposes of this paper, the word “Pyen” will be used to designate the Burmese Bisu, and “Bisu” to designate Thai Bisu.

⁵ Other close relatives of Pyen and Bisu include the Lao Mian and Lao Pin of China (Shixuan, 2001), the Phu Noi/Singsalii of Laos (Wright, 2003), and the Coong of Vietnam (Edmondson, 2001).

		Labial	Alveol.	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
stops	Vl	p	t	c	k	ʔ
	VlAsp	p ^h	t ^h		k ^h	
	Vd	b	d		g	
fricatives	Vl		s	ʃ		h
affricates	Vl		ts			
	VlAsp		ts ^h	tʃ ^h		
laterals	Vd			l		
	Vl			hl		
nasals	Vd	m	n	ɲ	ŋ	
	Vl	hm	hn	hɲ	hŋ	
approx.	Vd	v		j	w	
	Vl					

Figure 1. Initial consonants in Bisu and Pyen. (Lightly shaded elements are present in Bisu but absent in Pyen; darkly shaded elements are present in Pyen but absent in Bisu.)

The following words illustrate each of the initial consonants of Bisu and Pyen, respectively:

Initial Cons.	Bisu (phonemic transcription)	Pyen (phonemic transcription)	English Gloss
p	pɔŋ hna	pɔŋ na	water buffalo
t	tɔlɔ	tɔlɔ	butterfly
c	cɪkù	cɪkù	thorn
k	kiba	kába	road, path
ʔ	ʔù hlòŋ	ʔi hlòŋ	pot
p ^h	p ^h æ̀lòŋ	p ^h eh̀òŋ	bag
t ^h	t ^h àŋ	t ^h áŋ	sword
tʃ ^h	tʃ ^h ɔhmasə̀	tʃ ^h ala	B yawn/P tiger
k ^h	k ^h àlaw	k ^h àlaw	shirt
b	bæ	bæ	to know
d	dèjà	dèjà	ghost
g	ga	gaʔ	1ps
ts	tsà	ca	to eat
ts ^h	ts ^h alà	tʃ ^h ala	tiger
m	mækà	mekà	face
n	naŋ	nan	2ps
ɲ	ɲàmpàj	ɲi	B grasshopper/P two

ŋ	ŋè	ŋè	B to be struck by a falling tree/P leech
hm	hmja	mja	knife
hn	hnàw	naw	mucus
hɲ	hɲaŋ	ɲa	fishing pole
hɲ	hɲè	ɲè	leech
s	sot ^h à	sot ^h aʔ	morning
j	jàbǐ	jabi	young woman
h	hɔtàm	hɔtàm	rat
ʃ	ʃǐ	ʃǐ	blood
w/v	wà	và	pig
l	lɔba	lɔba	stone
hl	ʔù hlòŋ	ʔǐ hlòŋ	pot

3.2 Final Consonants

Both Bisu and Pyen feature six final consonants: /*p, t, k, m, n, ŋ*/. The presence of these final consonants is notable; many other languages of the Southern Yiphoish/Loloish branch no longer have final consonants.

The following words illustrate each of the final consonants of Bisu and Pyen, respectively:

Final Cons.	Bisu (phonemic transcription)	Pyen (phonemic transcription)	English Gloss
p	hmùŋ blàp	bɲ blap	lightning
t	suŋ nat	nat	gun
k	k ^h lək	k ^h lók	to be broken
m	hɔtàm	hɔtàm	rat
n	haŋ man	hɔ mán	wind
ŋ	t ^h àŋ	t ^h áŋ	sword

3.3 Consonant clusters

Various researchers have come to different conclusions as to the exact number of consonant clusters in Bisu. The Bisu orthography currently recognizes fifteen, eleven of which are also found in Pyen, as shown in figure 2.⁶

⁶ Nishida and Beaudouin describe some of these as labialized or palatalized sounds, while Nuamkaew terms them clusters. In terms of the Bisu orthography (which utilizes Thai script), all are interpreted as clusters.

C1 \ C2	l	j	w/v
p	x	x	
p ^h	x	x	
b	x	x	
k	x	x	x
k ^h	x	x	x
hm/m	x	x	
h		x	

Figure 2: Consonant clusters in Bisu and Pyen.
(Lightly shaded elements are present in Bisu but absent in Pyen)

Consonant clusters only occur in syllable initial position. The following words illustrate each of the consonant clusters:

Cons. cluster	Bisu (phonemic transcription)	Pyen (phonemic transcription)	English Gloss
pl	nàmplaʔ	NA	round cucumber
pj	pjà	pjà	bee
p ^h l	p ^h lu	→p ^h ú	silver, money
p ^h j	p ^h ja	p ^h ja	to tear down
bl	blà	blà	arrow
bj	bjá	bjá	to clear a field
kl	kla	kla	to fall
kj	kjàŋ	kjaŋ	to hear
kw/v	kwà	kva	to hunt
k ^h l	k ^h lək	k ^h lək	to be broken
k ^h j	ʔùu k ^h jà	k ^h ja	field crab
k ^h w	k ^h wát	NA	water channel
hml	hmlàaŋ	NA	long time
hmj/mj	lɔŋ hmja	→lɔŋ mjáŋ	shrimp
hj	hjá	hjá	hill field

4 Vowels and diphthongs

Bisu and Pyen both have nine phonemic vowels, as shown in figure 3. Phonetic vowel length differences are present, but not contrastive, in both.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	ɪ	u
Mid	e	ə	o
Low	æ	a	ɔ

Figure 3: *Bisu and Pyen vowels.*

Two diphthongs, /aw/ and /aj/, occur frequently in both Bisu and Pyen.⁷ The following words illustrate each of the vowels and diphthongs:

Vowel	Bisu (phonemic transcription)	Pyen (phonemic transcription)	English Gloss
i	ʃi	ʃi	blood
e	ŋèe	nen	to be struck by a falling tree
æ	bæ	bæ	to know
ɪ	nàʃɪŋ	lasɪŋ	ear
ə	tsàkəŋ	cakəŋ	dish eaten with rice
a	naŋ	nan	you (sg)
u	cǐkù	cǐkù	thorn
o	joʔ	hon	yonder (intermediate distance)
ɔ	tɔlɔ	tɔlɔ	butterfly
aw	hnàw	naw	mucus
aj	ŋàmpàj	campaj	grasshopper

Although Bisu and Pyen embrace identical vocalic inventories, some vocalic variation occurs, as shown in the following words:

Variation	Bisu (phonemic transcription)	Pyen (phonemic transcription)	English Gloss
i→a	kiba	kába	road, path
æ→e	mækà	mekà	face
	p ^h ælɔŋ	p ^h ehɔŋ	bag
a→ɔ	kasəj	kəsəj	monkey

⁷ Additional Bisu diphthongs are mentioned by Beaudouin in STEDT (Namkung 1996). These would seem to be very rare, sometimes the result of borrowing. Only two diphthongs are recognized in the current Bisu orthography. No additional diphthongs were detected in Pyen.

a→u	ʔawam	ʔuwám	bear
u→o	ʔù hong	ʔo hòŋ	turtle
	ʔù kɪ	ʔo kɪ	star
u→i	ʔù hlòŋ	ʔi hlòŋ	pot
ɔ→o	sɔt ^h à	sot ^h aʔ	morning
	ʔù hlòŋ	ʔi hlòŋ	pot
	tòŋŋĩ	tòŋmĩ	tail

Nonetheless, counter examples can be found for the changes cited above, indicating that further analysis is required.

5 Tone

Pyen and Bisu have three contrastive tones, low, mid, and high, as illustrated in the following words (Vacharee 1987: 110):

Bisu (phonemic transcription)	Pyen (phonemic transcription)	English Gloss
hjá	hjá	hill field
hja	hja	chicken
hjà	hjà	to itch

Vacharee's analysis of 1,512 major syllables in Bisu found 422 low-tone syllables, 1,008 mid-tone syllables, and a mere 82 high-tone syllables (1987:115). This dramatic distribution curve accounts for the dearth of examples of three-way tonal contrast in the native lexicons of both Bisu and Pyen.⁸

6 Conclusion

This paper has provided a preliminary analysis of the phonology of Pyen, with comparison to the more widely known Bisu. Although the data is limited to a 400 token word list, some general conclusions may be drawn.

It is found that, while Pyen and Bisu are very closely related, certain systematic changes have occurred in Pyen that have either not yet occurred, or are just beginning to occur, in Bisu. As such, Bisu's reputation, mentioned by Matisoff (1976) and Bradley (1979), as one of the most phonologically conservative languages of its branch remains intact.

The phonological features which divide Pyen and Bisu include Pyen's loss of "partially voiced" nasals, as well as Pyen's use of /v/ where Bisu utilizes /w/. Because of these changes, Bisu has a larger inventory of consonants and consonant clusters than Pyen. Some vocalic variation is evident, but rarely dramatic. Recent loan words negatively impact

⁸ Bisu authors typically have a very difficult time determining whether a given word should be written as a mid or low tone.

communication more than phonology: Pyen borrows from Shan and Lahu, while Bisu makes use of Northern Thai, Thai, and, increasingly, English (via Thai loans).⁹

Nonetheless, the high percentage of cognates, as well as the fact that Pyen and Bisu speakers can understand one another relatively easily, indicate that they should be viewed as varieties of the same language, members of a dialect chain that includes the Lao Mian and Lao Pin of China, as well as some varieties of Phu Noi in Laos.

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⁹ Older Daic loans, particularly those related to rice cultivation, are identical in both varieties.

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