Abstract

Bisu, as spoken in Northern Thailand, boasts fewer than one thousand speakers. The low number of speakers plus constant pressure from the outside world definitely qualifies Bisu as an endangered language. The Bisu themselves recognize this fact and their leadership has requested outside help in preserving their language and culture. This article endeavors to describe the sociolinguistic situation in which the Bisu of Northern Thailand find themselves, chronicle efforts to preserve this endangered language through community involvement in the development of an orthography and basic reading materials, and assess the current progress of the project. Additional challenges that may be encountered in the course of preserving the Bisu language for future generations will also be discussed.

1. Introduction

The plight of endangered languages has received increased attention in the professional and popular press. What is clear is that a great number of the world’s smaller languages may disappear within a generation or two (Crystal 2000). Less clear is what may be done to preserve these languages, both in terms of collecting and archiving data for professional use, and in fostering linguistic appreciation and maintenance among the language communities themselves.

This article has two aims: to describe the sociolinguistic situation in which the Bisu of Northern Thailand find themselves, and to chronicle efforts to preserve this endangered language through community involvement in the development of an orthography and basic reading materials.
2. Linguistic, historical, and sociolinguistic background

Bisu was first documented in the 1960s, as a result of Japanese linguist Tatsuo Nishida’s language survey work in Northern Thailand (Nishida 1973). At that time, Bisu was found to be a language of the Loloish branch of the Tibeto-Burman family.

The Bisu population in Thailand is concentrated in two villages in Chiang Rai Province: Doi Chomphuu (Mae Lao District, Tambon Pong Phrae) and Pui Kham (Muang District, Tambon Sa-a Dong Chai). There are a handful of Bisu speakers, middle aged and older, in Pha Daeng Village (Phan District, Tambon Doi Ngam).1 The Northern Thai refer to the Bisu as Lawa or Lua, a derogatory term applied to a number of smaller, linguistically unrelated groups in Northern Thailand (Numkaew 1987) SIL’s *Ethnologue* (Grimes 1996) estimates that there are fewer than 1000 Bisu speakers in Thailand, a figure the Bisu feel to be accurate.

The *Ethnologue* (Grimes 1996) lists an additional 6000 Bisu in Yunnan Province, China. Those in Lancang and Menglian Counties call themselves Guba (literally ‘our group’), while local Chinese refer to them as Laomian. All Bisu of all ages and genders in Lancang and Menglian Counties speak Lahu as their primary second language, while all men and some women also speak, in descending order of fluency, Yunanese, Wa, and Dai (despite the fact that few Dai people currently live in these areas). The Bisu in Menghai County call themselves Mbisu, while local Chinese call them Laopin. The Bisu in Menghai County claim to speak Lahu as a second language, although they have much more daily interaction with speakers of Dai and Yunnanese (Person et al. forthcoming). For further information about these groups, see Xu’s article in this issue.

While the Bisu in Thailand have had no knowledge of their relatives in China, the village elders tell of a related group in Myanmar. Some fifty years ago, a monk from Burma came into Thailand speaking what the Bisu refer to as “unclear Bisu” and saying he came from the Pin tribe. The Thai Bisu were able to understand this monk with some difficulty. Not long thereafter, a Pin couple came to the Bisu village to elope; they were of the same clan, and therefore their marriage would have been taboo among the Pin. The young man’s father soon came after them and took them home. It is probable that these Pin are the same as the “Pyen” or “Pyin” mentioned in Scott and Hardiman’s Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan States (1900), a work that includes a list of approximately 250 Pyen words, many of which have close Bisu cognates. The Bisu in China claim there are at least four Laomian and three Laopin villages in Burma, with a total population of approximately 3000 people (Person et al. forthcoming).2
Other related groups include the Sinsali (formerly known as Phunoi) of Laos and the Côông of Vietnam. After listening to recorded word lists from one of the Sinsali dialects, the Bisu of Thailand declared that they are “80% the same language” despite the fact that they were unable to understand recorded Sinsali discourses. The immediate reaction to hearing the word lists was one of “We need to rent a taxi and go visit our relatives in Laos!” The revelation that some Sinsali speakers hold high positions in the Lao government lent itself to the exaggeration, verbalized by a middle-aged Bisu woman, that the king of Laos is Bisu!

2.1. Historical setting

Xu (2001) traces the roots of the Bisu in China to the ancient Di and Qiang tribes. While acknowledging that accurate information is necessarily limited by the lack of written records, she connects a first wave of Bisu migration to an unsuccessful local rebellion incited by Lahu leaders Li Wenming and Li Xiaolao.

After the rebellion was crushed in 1801 (6th year of Emperor Jia Qing), the Bisu migrated south taking with them nine horse-loads of cooking pots, cups and iron tripods. Following the Nanku River downstream, they lived for a while at Miema Miemeng (present location unclear), among a group of “big people” with yellow hair, high nose-bridges and long legs. However, the unsuitable climate led them to migrate back, passing through Chongnan Nanshu (which means “pond of hot water,” that is, hot springs) and arriving at Mengjiao Mengdong (present-day Cangyuan in Yunnan Province) to live among the Wa people for another period. Being such a small group, they could not resist harsh treatment and enslavement by tusi [hereditary headmen] from the other minority groups, and their headman, Ya Makan, led them in an overnight escape. Although the tusi managed to recapture and enslave those who fled too late, a hundred households did arrive safely at Mug Mengnuo (present-day Muga Xiang in Lancang County), later moving to Dongzhu (in Zhutang Xiang, Lacang County), where they gradually increased to over 300 households. (Xu 2001)

A more recent rebellion, still quite alive in the memories of elderly Chinese Bisu, led to a second wave of migration.

In 1918 (Year of the Horse) Li Long and Li Hu led the peasants in an armed rebellion in the district of Lancang. With “Kill the Officials; Cancel our Debts” as their slogan, they launched a spirited attack on the tusi system. The Bisu also participated in this conflict. The peasant forces routed most of the armed tusi soldiers and besieged their district headquarters in Lancang. To protect their common interest, the Lahu tusi, Han landlords and local warlords formed an alliance,
and, as a united front, finally defeated the peasants. For fear that their villages would be destroyed and their families killed, groups of Bisu decided to flee, moving to areas such as Menglian, Ximeng and Menghai. (Xu 2001)

It is thus entirely plausible to contend that the forebears of the Thai Bisu left China under some sort of social distress, following the Mekong River south into Northern Thailand. It is also possible that the Bisu arrived in Thailand as prisoners of war; the rulers of the Lanna kingdom, centered in Chiang Mai but with tributary city-states across contemporary northern Thailand, routinely enslaved occupants of rival city-states in present-day Yunnan Province (China) and the Shan States (Myanmar) in a series of small-scale wars, forcing these people to relocate in northern Thailand (Wyatt 1984: 155).

The first reference to Bisu in Thailand dates from British railway engineer Holt S. Hallett’s 1876 journey through Northern Thailand. Hallett (1988 [1890]) describes a group of “Lolo” people he encountered in what is now Chiang Rai Province. Although the local Northern Thai called these people Lawa, Hallett correctly determined that they bore no linguistic relation to the more numerous Lawa tribe of Chiang Mai. As these people told Hallett that they had frequent visits from relatives who lived near Kiang Tung, Burma, he dubbed them Kiang Tung Lawa. That these people were actually Bisu 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, anatomy (“better developed noses” than the Northern Thai; contemporary Bisu boast of their larger nose bridges). At the time of Hallett’s visit, the Kiang Tung Lawa occupied five villages in the Mae Lao area, including the village of Takaw visited by Bradley in the 1970s (Bradley 1988).

The Thai Bisu themselves have preserved relatively little of their history. This, claims one elder, is because the lives of their forbearers were so difficult that they were ashamed to pass on their experiences.

What remains of the collective consciousness of the Thai Bisu tells of a time when they cared for large numbers of cattle and water buffalo. Wherever they settled, they soon encountered problems with the Northern Thai, who felt free to steal livestock and cheat the Bisu out of their land. Approximately eighty years ago, the entire group moved to the lower slopes of Doi Chompuu Mountain. As this area lacked land suitable for paddy (wet) rice cultivation, the Bisu felt that they would be left alone. Still, a bamboo palisade was erected around the village as protection against human, animal, and spiritual foes. The village became known in Bisu as kʰɔŋšt²₁ hloŋš³ kʰɔŋš³ ‘big village,’ a name still used among Bisu today.
Life at $k\hat{\omega}\eta^{21}$ hlo$n^{33}$ $k\hat{\omega}\eta^{33}$ was not all that the Bisu had anticipated. Thieves from other ethnic groups still occasionally victimized the village, as did a small contingent of Japanese soldiers during the Second World War. The Bisu planted dry (hill) rice (but no irrigated rice, as appropriate fields were lacking), with little success. A great deal of time and energy was spent foraging for food in the nearby forest. The Bisu were able to trade some of these forest products with the Northern Thai for rice. Nonetheless, many were reduced to begging for rice and clothing in Northern Thai villages, a situation that continued into the 1980s and contributed to local Northern Thai prejudice towards the Bisu.$^3$

The population at $k\hat{\omega}\eta^{21}$ hlo$n^{33}$ $k\hat{\omega}\eta^{33}$ expanded to the point that, sometime in the 1940s, a large group of Bisu left and established the village of Pui Kham, some thirty miles to the northeast, along the slopes of Doi Pui Mountain. Again, the main criterion for the choice of location was how undesirable the area would appear to the Northern Thai. The Bisu were able to plant some wet (paddy) rice here, although a lack of water limited their harvests. While the Bisu of Doi Chompnu gradually became more accepting of intermarriage with the Northern Thai, the people of Pui Kham came to the conclusion that they were the last outpost of ‘true Bisu’ in the world, preferring to marry within the group and forcing mixed couples to live outside the village proper. This statute was tested as recently as 1999, when an HIV positive Southern Thai man married to a Bisu woman attempted, unsuccessfully, to spend his final months in Pui Kham.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the overall situation for the Bisu improved somewhat. The Thai government worked to extend more educational opportunities to both villages, and the Bisu were able to take advantage of government clinics in neighboring Northern Thai villages. In addition, the Thai forestry department allowed the Bisu of Doi Chompnu to develop irrigated rice terraces, providing heavy machinery to assist in the process. Electricity came to both villages in the 1990s, as well as rudimentary tap water systems drawing from mountain streams.$^4$

With this progress, however, came difficulties. Probably the greatest source of continued frustration for the Bisu are the Northern Thai loan sharks upon whom the Bisu depend for short term capital for fertilizer and seed, as well as long-term capital for motorcycles, televisions and refrigerators. Interest rates are extremely steep, revenge swift and harsh upon default. Consequently, many Bisu young women have been forced into prostitution, generally being sent to Bangkok under the guise of ‘working at a restaurant.’ The AIDS epidemic of the 1990s has significantly impacted the Bisu, as it has the entire country of Thailand; at least six residents of Doi Chompnu Village (population 200) have succumbed
to the disease in the past three years, and a number of young women who left the village five to ten years ago never returned and are presumed dead.

3. Sociolinguistic situation

In his 1994 study, William Smalley groups the eighty languages spoken in Thailand into a hierarchy, as shown in Table 1.

Standard Thai, the national language, occupies the highest level of the hierarchy. This is the language of education, government, and the media, reflecting Central Thai as spoken in Bangkok. It is second in prestige only to English, the global language whose mastery indicates a truly elite position in Thai society. On the next level are the four ‘regional’ languages, Central, Northeastern, Northern, and Southern Thai. These all see vigorous oral use in their respective regions, on the village and household level, and sometimes in the markets, with a small amount of use in the local media. The regional languages are less prestigious than Standard Thai, despite the fact that many speakers consider their regional tongues superior to the national language in expressing deep thoughts and emotions. The regional languages often serve as the language of wider communication for the sub-regional languages. Enclave languages include most of the northern hill tribes, which represent islands of Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman speakers amidst a Tai sea. Town and city languages include several Chinese dialects and Vietnamese, while displaced Tai languages include Phuan and Song, whose speakers were brought into Thailand during military campaigns. The marginal languages are those whose main population is located outside of Thailand, thus including groups like So and Northern Khmer.

Loan words and grammatical influences necessarily work their way down through the hierarchy. Thus, Standard Thai words are continually making inroads into the regional languages, while the sub-regional languages are impacted by both Standard Thai and their respective regional language.

While Bisu could be considered a marginal language (since the majority of speakers are in China), Smalley classifies it as an enclave language. This is appropriate, given the fact that the Thai Bisu have no contact with their Chinese cousins who, in turn, live in a vastly different sociolinguistic context. Older Bisu people have a basic grasp of Northern Thai, but often speak with a noticeable accent — for which they were mocked in the ‘bad old days.’ Those in the twenty-five to fifty age bracket are bilingual in Northern Thai, with native speaker competence. Nonetheless,
Table 1. The linguistic hierarchy in Thailand (from Smalley 1994: 69)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National language</th>
<th>Regional languages</th>
<th>Sub-regional languages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard Thai</td>
<td>Lao</td>
<td>Town and city</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(Central Thai)</td>
<td>Displaced Tai</td>
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<td>(Northeastern Thai)</td>
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<td>Pakty (Southern Thai)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kammuay (Northern Thai)</td>
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these individuals often do not have a very firm hold on Standard Thai, frequently using Northern Thai lexical items and tone patterns when trying to express themselves in Standard Thai. Most Bisu under twenty-five have spent at least six years in the Thai school system (which, in theory, uses only Standard Thai, although in practice teachers often lecture in the regional language) and have been impacted by radio and television. The younger generation is thus able to interact with confidence in Standard Thai, Northern Thai, and Bisu.

3.1. Contexts of use

Bisu is used in the home, in the village community, and in the fields with other Bisu people. If Northern Thai people are present (such as those who have married Bisu), a group of Bisu conversants will often switch to Northern Thai. Village meetings in Doi Chompuuu village are usually carried out in Northern Thai for the benefit of Northern Thai men married to Bisu women. Nonetheless, meeting participants have been observed to switch to Bisu when problems with Northern Thai people are discussed (land swindles, efforts by a Northern Thai temple to “steal” the village’s sole adult Buddhist monk, etc.). Some Bisu switch to Northern Thai, even in speaking to other Bisu, in Northern Thai villages or cities, while others enjoy the puzzled expressions of Northern Thai passers-bys trying to figure out what language they are speaking. The Bisu draw particular satisfaction from having Northern Thai people speculate they are speaking English or French!

Children are taught both Bisu and Northern Thai from birth. Children may be scolded in either language, although particularly harsh reprimands are often delivered in Northern Thai. It is not uncommon to hear
children and parents discussing the day’s events at school in Northern Thai (the most spoken language at school, despite government policy), then switching to Bisu to discuss non-school matters. School-aged children use Bisu on the soccer field. Nonetheless, there is a growing concern about the Bisu abilities of children under age five; whereas previous generations of young children were cared for by their grandparents while the parents worked the fields, contemporary pre-school aged Bisu children from Doi Chompuu village are being sent to a rudimentary day care center staffed by Northern Thai speakers.

The numerical weakness of the Bisu and the ongoing linguistic pressures of the larger Thai world place the language in a state of endangerment. The question thus becomes one of how long Bisu will remain viable.

Factors that would seem to limit the long-term viability of Bisu include the following (adapted from Premsrirat 1995, as cited in Migliazza 1998: 22).

*Language policy of the Thai government:* The school curriculum is in Standard Thai, and students are discouraged from using minority languages at school for fear of factionalism and general trouble making.

*Employment outside the language area:* Frustrated by the hard economic realities of village life, many Bisu young people spend at least several years in unskilled jobs in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, or other cities. Most hope to eventually return to the village, although it is difficult to forecast how many actually will.

*Marriage outside their language community:* As mentioned earlier, intermarriage with non-Bisu speakers is increasing; especially as more young people seek educational and occupational opportunities outside of the village. It is nonetheless interesting to note that offspring of such unions are likely to learn Bisu if they spend the bulk of their childhood in a Bisu village.

*Pervasive influence of mass media:* Since the arrival of electricity in the Bisu villages in the mid-1990s, Standard Thai radio and television broadcasts have become quite influential.

Nonetheless, several other factors indicate that Bisu has a good chance of remaining viable for at least a few more generations. These include

*Interest of the Thai Royal Family:* For many years, the Thai Royal Family has taken an active interest in enhancing the lives of various ethnic minorities, primarily through agricultural projects and the promotion of local crafts. During his younger days, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the ‘Lord of Life,’ frequently visited remote hill tribe villages, working with the villagers to solve local
Language revitalization or dying gasp?

The Bisu had not been part of prior Royal Projects, primarily because of their small numbers and lack of readily identifiable ethnic dress. In 1999, however, a unit of Royal Project medical workers began visiting Doi Chompuu Village on a regular basis. In addition, the author and his wife had the honor of presenting the first Bisu books to Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, an event that was broadcast nationwide. The Bisu enjoy telling their Northern Thai neighbors, ‘The Crown Princess has our words!’ That one of the most beloved and revered figures in the kingdom values their language and culture has been a significant source of inspiration for the Bisu.

Growing appreciation of ethnic diversity: The Thai government has taken some steps toward encouraging the unique cultures of the ethnic minorities. Much of this began in the late 1980s, as Thailand became a popular tourist destination. The Tourism Authority of Thailand has sponsored a number of hill tribe fairs, festivals, and sporting events, some of which have been broadcast on national television. The Bisu would like to become involved in these activities, and there has been discussion of reviving their ethnic dress to draw the attention of Thai officials.

Language attitude: Although there is some individual variation, most Bisu value their language. This is manifest by the fact that they still teach it to their children, and that they have requested assistance from Thai government and the academic community to preserve their language and culture.

Development of a written language: In December 1998 some thirty Bisu of all ages gathered in the Doi Chompuu village temple to reach a consensus on how Bisu should be written using the Thai script (Person 2001). Since then, Bisu authors trained in joint Payap University–SIL International workshops have produced some 131 short books, including folktales, a Bisu-Thai-English picture dictionary, and basic literacy materials, as discussed further below.

Awareness of a larger Bisu community: As mentioned earlier, the Thai Bisu were not aware of the existence of the Bisu communities in China, or the Bisu-like Sinsali in Laos. News of these relatives has been a source of encouragement and pride. Many Thai Bisu have expressed a desire to visit these areas, partly to learn more about their own heritage and customs, which may have been better preserved in those more remote regions.

4. Writing Bisu: can a monkey language be written?

We first came into contact with Bisu in 1996, while studying Northern Thai in Huay San Phlap Plaa Village, Amphoe Mae Lao, Chiang Rai, when our Northern Thai hostess hired a Bisu man, Noi Tong Wongluwa, to serve as our Northern Thai language assistant. Our initial shock at finding out that we were not working with a native speaker was tempered...
with curiosity as to what language he actually spoke. Noi Tong said that he spoke Lawa, a language we knew to be more concentrated in Chiang Mai Province. He said that his type of Lawa was confined to two or three villages in Chiang Rai Province and that they actually called themselves Bisu.\(^5\)

As time passed, Noi Tong told us more about his language and culture, including the fact that he had been trying for many years to figure out how to write Bisu. He was very concerned about language loss and felt that having written materials would help to preserve the language for his children and grandchildren. The Standard Thai script, however, lacked appropriate symbols for many Bisu sounds. Perhaps it was as many Northern Thai people claimed: Bisu was just a “monkey language” (as manifest by its SOV word order!), not a “real human language,” and therefore incapable of being written! When we told Noi Tong that one of the things we linguists were trained to do was to help develop scripts for unwritten languages, he enthusiastically invited us to come study his language and help him develop a writing system. We moved into Noi Tong’s home village of Doi Chomphu in November 1997.\(^6\)

4.1. **Toward a Bisu orthography: underlying principles and practices**

In his 1976 book, the late William Smalley outlined five criteria to which orthographies should aspire. As condensed by Malone and Malone (1998) and listed in descending order of importance, these criteria are:

1) Maximum motivation for the learner, and acceptance by his society and controlling groups such as the government: For whatever reasons, will the orthography stimulate the people to want to read and write?

2) Maximum (optimum) representation: Does the orthography accurately represent the language as it is spoken?

3) Maximum ease of learning: If the orthography is being developed so that speakers of the language can learn to read and write it, can they learn it with ease?

4) Maximum (optimum) transfer: Does the orthography facilitate an easy transfer of reading skills to and from the dominant language?

5) Maximum reproduction: Can the orthography be easily reproduced with the available publishing and printing technology?

Smalley also alludes to what we have termed a “sixth maximum”: “maximum participation and ownership.” By this we mean that, when-
ever possible, the language community should be actively involved in all orthography decisions. Linguists can play a vital role in this process by helping the language community become aware of the various challenges involved and provide options for dealing with some of the problems whose answers might not be immediately obvious to the language community. In the end, however, the interests of “maximum motivation” will be best served if the community feels true ownership of the orthography.

With these six criteria in mind, the Bisu leadership was approached with the idea of convening a workshop to reach a consensus on how Bisu might be written. The workshop would be sponsored by the Foundation for Applied Linguistics (FAL) in cooperation with Payap University’s Applied Linguistics Training Program (PYU-ALTP) and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). These organizations would act as consultants, serving as informed resources able to help the Bisu work through various orthography and literacy issues.

The FAL and SIL linguists involved met with SIL International Literacy Consultants Drs. Dennis and Susan Malone, as well as SIL-Mainland Southeast Asia Group Literacy Committee chair Mary Peterson, for pre-workshop consultation. At that time, the linguists devised a set of suggestions for writing Bisu sounds that have no clear equivalents in the Thai script with the understanding that ultimate orthography decision-making power belonged solely to the Bisu themselves.

4.2. The “Project for preserving the language of the three villages” orthography workshop

The orthography workshop was held on Monday 7 December 1998. This date was chosen because many youth would be in the village during this time (all schools were closed for the duration of the Asian Games). In addition, this was a public holiday (His Royal Majesty the King’s birthday being Saturday 5 December), thus allowing FAL members working in Bangkok and PYU-ALTP staff in Chiang Mai time to make the trip north.

All three Bisu villages agreed to send representatives and the Bisu themselves decided to call the workshop ‘Project for Preserving the Bisu Language of the Three Villages.’ Pui Kham Village agreed to prepare the sticky rice, while the Housewives’ Association from Doi Chomphu Village was asked to prepare additional food, including the uniquely Bisu dish, laap prik. FAL sent invitations to several government offices, including the Social Welfare Department, the Department of Education,
and the Department of Tribal Welfare, as well as the local Nai Amphoe, Kamnaan, and elementary school principal.\(^8\)

The workshop was held at the Doi Chompuu Village temple. Approximately twenty Bisu participants attended, including middle-aged males (literate in Standard Thai), middle-aged females (literate and nonliterate), several elderly males and females (nonliterate), and several teenagers (literate) — all in all, a reasonably representative group.\(^9\) Non-Bisu attendees included the Deputy District Head of Mae Lao District (on behalf of the District Head), the nearby elementary school principal, a representative from the Department of Tribal Welfare, and the editor of a local cultural newsmagazine. FAL Director Acharn Wanna Tienmee attended, along with FAL member Makio Katsura. Jeff German, Florence Lau, Henry Lau, my wife Suzanne Person, and I attended on behalf of PYU-ALTP and SIL, assisted by ALTP staff member Nara Rithma.

Several individuals were involved in the opening ceremony. Duang Jetsadaakaisri, village headman of Doi Chomphuu Village, welcomed the guests. FAL director Acharn Wanna Tienmee spoke of the goals of her organization and of the workshop. FAL member Makio Katsura, a former student of Tatsuo Nishida, spoke of how he had known about the Bisu for some thirty years and how happy he was that the Bisu themselves were keen to develop an alphabet and create books in order to preserve their language. Finally, the Deputy District Head, Ongaat Muangosai, on behalf of the District Head, expressed how interested he was to learn more about the Bisu, having never before heard about this group, and declared the workshop officially opened.

Thereafter, a packet of pictures designed to elicit the initial consonants found in Bisu was distributed to each participant. These pictures had been prepared in advance in consultation between myself and a young Bisu artist, Ploy Wonglua. The fact that these pictures were drawn by a member of their own group was a point of pride for the Bisu. In addition, Ploy’s emic view of the Bisu environment enabled him to craft pictures whose content was immediately obvious to other Bisu. When confronted with the problem of drawing a red ant (color printing not being an option), Ploy drew a picture of that particular type of ant’s rather unique nest, something that is immediately recognizable to most Bisu.

The Bisu attendees discussed how to write the word featured by each picture, their suggestions being noted on a large whiteboard by the late Thon Taajaan, security coordinator of Doi Chomphuu Village. I moderated the first few words, with Thon naturally taking leadership of the discussion once he understood the process. On the suggestion of one of the Thai linguists, Thon initially tried to get people to vote on alternate spellings by a show of hands; this failed, as no one would raise their hand for
anything when the time came. Thereafter, Thon used more traditional means to arrive at group consensus on most of the words. This seemed to entail putting various suggested spellings on the board, then asking which the group would prefer. Some discussion on the merits of each suggestion followed. Sometimes the superior spelling would be obvious, sometimes less so. When things came to an impasse, Thon would usually pick his favorite, then say “How about this one?” He then seemed to read the audiences’ faces, looking for reactions one way or another. If he deemed the reaction positive, we went on to the next word. If the reaction seemed less decisive, Thon would repeat the question another time or two, sometimes giving his preference in a sentence culminating with a mild imperative particle. Thon’s suggestions usually won out, unless people expressed strong feelings to the contrary.10

The major orthography decisions were thus all made by the Bisu, contributing to their sense of ownership. In addition, the orthography to have tapped some of their innate feelings about how their language should be represented. At several junctures, the opinions of the outside linguists and the native speakers differed on the nature and appropriate representation of some sounds. For example, many words which every linguist who has ever studied Bisu transcribed as [s] were perceived as [ʃ] by the Bisu. In addition, the idea, presented in Smalley (1976), that archaic or seldom used letters in Thai be assigned new phonetic values in new Thai-based orthographies, was wholeheartedly rejected by the Bisu. Rather, Thon invented the delightfully elegant “silent ɹ”: whenever a Bisu initial consonant has no exact equivalent in Thai, the nearest-sounding Thai letter is used, followed by a silent “ɹ.”11

At the conclusion of the orthography workshop, the pictures and their agreed-upon spellings were assembled into an alphabet book entitled kɔ kɔŋkup “K is for Owl”. As the first Bisu book, this small volume has been a source of pride for the entire community, with people often showing the book to Northern Thai visitors in order to laugh at their attempts to pronounce Bisu words.

4.3. Producing a Bisu corpus

The test of any orthography is in the writing. Once an orthography has been at least tentatively established, it must be used and, potentially, revised in accordance with issues that only reveal themselves once the orthography is experiencing vigorous use.

Since 1991, Payap University and SIL International have organized training workshops for minority language speakers through the Applied
Linguistics Training Program (PYU-ALTP). The PYU-ALTP staff has prepared curriculums for a variety of short courses, ranging from one to four weeks in length. These include workshops for writing down folktales, planning a community-based literacy program, translating basic health care materials, developing primers, training teachers, gaining basic computer skills, etc. Normally, members of several different ethnic groups attend each workshop, giving them the opportunity to interact with others who share similar backgrounds and experiences.

Since the formation of the Bisu orthography in December of 1998, 14 Bisu individuals ranging in age from 15 to 56 years have attended six PYU-ALTP workshops. These have included two writers workshops, a literacy materials workshop, a transitional primer workshop, a basic translation principles workshop, and a ‘discover your language’ grammar workshop. All of these workshops involve some sort of literature production. This usually takes the form of slim volumes produced with desktop publishing programs, illustrated by workshop participants, duplicated on a photocopier, and soft bound with staples. Workshop participants play an active role in each step of the process, with ALTP staff assisting in some of the more technical aspects of computer usage, etc.

Bisu participants in these workshops have written short books about traditional agriculture, the reasons why children should obey their parents, and why people should not walk on busy highways while intoxicated (the Bisu came within inches of hitting a drunk on the way to one workshop!). A 150 word trilingual picture dictionary, with Bisu alongside Thai and English, has proven one of the most popular volumes; the Bisu were exited to show copies to local school principals, as well as local government officials and their Northern Thai neighbors. Dozens of traditional and invented folktales have been written down. These materials are typically rated for readability on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing beginning materials (one picture per page, large type, no more than one phrase or simple sentence per page) and five advanced (few or no pictures, ordinary size type, long chunks of continuous text). Thus, Bisu writers have been encouraged to produce adequate numbers of titles at each level.

After a lecture on how traditional poetry can be useful in teaching people how to read, the Bisu discussed the fact that Bisu does not currently have poetry — they may have had it in the past, but it was not passed down to current generations. Thus, a middle aged man named Moon Taajaan decided to invent Bisu poetry, based on the Northern Thai ‘Khao’ style. Along with short, simple poems intended for beginning readers, Moon crafted an inspiring poem in honor of the Bisu language.
guu³³ bi²¹suu³³ kʰoɔŋ²¹ nii⁵³ mlaaŋ²¹ laaj³³ pii³³
we Bisu village this long.time many year
‘Our Bisu village has been established for many years.’
guu³³ aj⁳³pii³³ aj⁳²huu²¹ suuºº⁵⁵ luuºº⁵³tfʰii³³
we grandmother grandfather carry.on PERF
‘Our grandmothers and grandfathers have carried on.’
guu³³ bi²¹suu³³ kʰoɔŋ²¹ ti³³ taaj²¹ laaj³³ nii⁵⁵
we Bisu village place all this
‘Our village is the place of all our people.’
jaᵃ²⁴maŋ²¹ ?ii²¹kee³³ aj⁳³heɛ³³ ka³³ ?e²¹ pa⁵³
old.person child know completely DEC
‘The old people and children know everything [about the village].’
?aa³³müu⁵⁵ bi²¹suu³³ kʰoɔŋ²¹ saam³³ ti³³ nii⁵³
now Bisu village three place this
‘Now, the three Bisu villages,’
guu³³ ?ii²¹ kee³³ baa²¹ gaa³³ luu³³ ka³³kʰa³³
we child NEG can forget TOGETHER
‘Our children, do not forget,’
kʰoɔŋ²¹ saam³³ kʰoɔŋ²¹ nii⁵³ jaa²¹ pii²¹nɔɔŋ³³ kaʔ³³
village three village this TOP relative DEC
‘These three villages — we’re all brothers and sisters.’
jaw²¹ guu³³ ja³³ kam²²ʔuu³⁵ʔa³³ luu³³ tf³³oo³³
THEN we TOP language NEGIMP forger NEGIMP
‘And let’s not forget our language.’
plɔŋ²¹ kaa³³ kɔɔŋ³³ kep³³ tfʰii³³ ?uu³³ kan³³nɔɔ⁵⁵
help gather put keep speak URGE
‘Help to speak the language and preserve it!’
kam²¹ ?uu³⁵ kʰoo³³ ŋεε²¹ neʔ²¹ baa²¹ tfʔaa³³ pee²¹
language complete STATIVE with NEG exist IMP
‘[So that] our language does not die out completely.’
guu³³ baa²¹ tfʰan³⁵ taŋ⁵⁵laaj³³ ne³³ ?ii²¹ kee³³
we group person all with child
‘All our people and our children,’
baa²¹ ?uuʔ⁵⁵ kʰee²¹ ka³³jaw⁵⁵ʔa³³ saŋ³³ ?uu³³
NEG speak follow THEN who speak
‘If we do not continue speaking [Bisu], who will?’

Some of the younger workshop participants have become quite adept at desktop publishing. Our colleague, SIL literacy specialist Liz Braun, has employed a number of these teenagers in the village during school breaks. Working on an antiquated Apple Macintosh and a somewhat dated Windows laptop, these teenagers have produced numerous small
books. Many of these target new readers, featuring clear illustrations, large type, and blank spaces between words (something not done in typical Thai writing). In addition, Liz Braun and the teenagers have chronicled many household and agricultural activities, scanning photos into the computer and adding appropriate descriptions. These, along with videotapes of various traditional activities, will help preserve something of current Bisu heritage for future generations.

4.4. The committee for the preservation of Bisu language and culture

Despite an enthusiastic beginning, the Bisu language preservation project still faced a number of challenges. Although some 62 Bisu books had been produced, spelling often varied greatly, and distribution was limited. In addition, there was the question of sustainability: up to that point, the costs of the workshops, including book production, had been absorbed by SIL International. The production of books essentially halted in mid-2000, at a time when all the SIL personnel — and their computers — returned to the United States. Finally, there was the question of the many Bisu who remained illiterate in both Thai and Bisu.

In January 2002, my family and I resumed full-time residence in Doi Chompuu Village. Shortly thereafter, Noi Tong, our original Bisu language assistant, offered to resume teaching us conversational Bisu. This was remarkable, in that it marked the first time in four years that Noi Tong had expressed anything resembling his original enthusiasm for the project — an enthusiasm that he had deliberately suppressed, lest other villagers think that he was acquiring a vast amount of cash in return for teaching the foreigners Bisu. Noi Tong himself told us that, since it had been four years since we first moved to the village, both he and the villagers were more comfortable with our presence and our motivations, so he felt free to resume our formerly close relationship.

One Friday morning in February 2002, Noi Tong closed our language session with a lengthy monologue on the topic of what was really needed to make the Bisu Language and Culture Preservation Project a success. First and foremost, he said, a working committee was needed. All the committee members should have reputations for hard work and honesty, and their involvement in the committee should be the result of their deep love of and commitment toward their language and culture. The committee should not, however, draw in those who had other leadership responsibilities, nor should it involve older individuals who, despite their love of the language and culture, would not be really be capable of making the kinds of visionary plans that were needed. The village leaders and elders
should rather be assigned to a larger “Honorary Oversight Committee.” Noi Tong thus selected three working committee members each from Doi Chompuu and Pui Kham Villages. Five of the six original working committee members were in their mid-thirties, with one man in his early twenties. Only one woman was chosen to serve on the committee, due to the fact that adult female illiteracy is higher than male illiteracy; most of the men on the committee learned to read Thai while in the Buddhist monkhood.

During their first meeting, the working committee articulated the following goals and activities.

Goals:
1. To preserve the Bisu language and culture
2. To facilitate literacy in the Bisu language
3. To encourage members of the Bisu tribe to have pride in their ethnic identity
4. To revive traditional Bisu dress
5. To seek financial support for the project from both government and private sectors.

Activities to reach the goals
1. Critically analyze the current situation
2. Arrange training for Bisu individuals to become literacy teachers
3. Produce graded reading materials, from an easy level to a more difficult level
4. Impact the larger group by working intensively with smaller groups
5. Critically analyze the results of the literacy classes
6. Prepare budgets for all activities
7. Seek to acquire examples of Bisu clothing from China, or, if available, Thailand
8. Interview older villagers about how Bisu dressed in the past
9. Find a skilled tailor to reproduce traditional Bisu clothing

4.5. **Toward spelling standardization**

The committee agreed with the SIL staff that spelling standardization was a necessary step to the fulfillment of their goals. Nonetheless, there were differences of opinion as to how standardization might be accomplished.

SIL Literacy Specialist Liz Braun designed a number of instruments intended to test current spelling trends and relate those trends to general intelligibility. From those instruments, it became quite obvious that the spelling of individual committee members varied greatly. One such
instrument contained a series of Thai words, with instructions to translate those words into Bisu; it was not unusual to have six different spellings for each word, with vowel length and tone the most frequent sources of disagreement. A second instrument contained a few paragraphs excerpted from Bisu folktales, with instructions to find and correct any misspellings; again, some committee members found a handful of misspelled words, while others found as many as thirty! Yet a third instrument contained folktales written in different ways (with and without spaces between words, with and without spaces between phrases, etc.), with instructions to determine the “easiest to read” passage; the mixed responses indicated that, while certain conventions definitely made a passage easier to read, they were nonetheless “incorrect” in other regards, and thus should be rejected.\(^{14}\)

In a sense, the SIL staff had ulterior motives in the testing; we hoped that the instruments would prove to the Bisu that our proposals for spelling standardization would be beneficial. Our ideas included eliminating the Thai short vowels from the Bisu alphabet (vowel length is contrastive in Thai, but not in Bisu), disallowing use of many of the “redundant” Thai initial consonants (fossils of Thai history and tonology, not applicable to Bisu), and not marking tone (which seems to have a relatively low functional load).\(^{15}\)

The working committee members were not responsive to any of these proposals. Moreover, some began to manifest frustration over the fact that they had spent three days working through these odd survey instruments, with no tangible results.

Rather, the working committee felt it was necessary to immediately begin working on a Bisu dictionary. The committee would work to achieve consensus on how a given word should be spelt; that spelling would be entered into the dictionary, and anyone wanting to write Bisu would be compelled to memorize the dictionary spellings.

Accordingly, I provided the committee with a printout of the 1700 word Bisu-Thai-English lexicon I had compiled while using SIL’s Shoebox program to interlinearize the Bisu folktales used in my doctoral dissertation. To this was added Xu Shixuan’s 2000-item Bisu-Chinese-English lexicon, as published in Xu (2001).

As the dictionary progressed, frustration levels increased. Consensus was eventually reached on a number of spellings, but not without extensive discussions on the many legitimate variants that might exist. The SIL staff repeatedly tried to explain that a standardized spelling is one that should not take intonation into account; that the way you spell a word when a story character is angry should generally be the same way you would spell it if s/he is happy. Several examples from Thai in which the
spelling of a word does not always correspond to its pronunciation were submitted, to no avail. Moreover, it was not unusual for the consensus on a given word to be forgotten 30 minutes later, when a phonetically similar word was being discussed. Some committee members wondered whether naysayers’ claims to the effect that a language like Bisu can never be written were indeed true.

Several frustrating days and more than 300 frustrating words later, the linguists and the committee members suddenly began to understand one another. The linguists’ repeated pleas for vowel reduction were finally understood; the Bisu themselves suddenly became excited about how this simplified spelling. Twenty of the thirty-two Thai vowels and diphthongs were summarily excluded from the Bisu vocalic inventory.

In a similar vein, the committee quickly agreed to a dramatic reduction in the number of permissible initial consonants, from the forty-four in standard Thai to twenty-seven. The linguists had hoped to reduce that number further, to twenty-two, but the committee was unbending in their assertion that tone needed to be marked, and that the best was to do that was as Thai does it; through several orthographically distinct but phonetically identical “redundant” consonants. While agreeing that having only twenty-two consonants would make learning Bisu easier for new readers, the committee was very concerned that young people educated in Thai would feel that the orthography was “incorrect” if the “redundant” tone indicating letters were not employed. This, the committee feared, would make young people ashamed of their language, frustrating their language maintenance efforts.

Similarly, the committee was unanimous in their opinion that Bisu indeed has a rising tone, despite the linguists’ claim that such a tone, if ever present, is phonetic not phonemic. In the end, the rising tone, indicated by the Thai maj catthawa tone mark, was retained.

The resolution of these spelling issues resulted in a dramatic increase in the pace at which dictionary entries were added. It would also serve as a boon to efforts to edit new and previously printed Bisu books. The tremendous intellectual effort expended by all the committee members over the course of February to April 2002 created a sense of trust and respect within the group, something that would be crucial to the future.

4.6. Toward a self-sustaining project

With a preliminary printout of the Bisu-Thai-English dictionary in hand, the working committee felt the time was right to hold a meeting of the larger, honorary committee. Up to this point, the working committee
had toiled in secrecy, some members not even telling their spouses why they were spending days on end with the foreigners. This appeared to be something of a self-defense mechanism; the committee members wanted to have something to show for their efforts before placing their intentions before a potentially skeptical public eye.17

On 8 April 2002, the meeting of the honorary committee was convened in Doi Chompuu Village. The fifteen honorary committee members included the headmen and assistant headmen of Doi Chompuu and Pui Kham Villages, as well as a number of elders and other individuals with an interest in the project. As expected, many of honorary committee members were skeptical of the working committee’s spelling decisions, taking exception with scattered individual words. Such discussions had to be curtailed in the interests of time, with the working committee members exchanging knowing glances!18

After the presentation of the preliminary dictionary, SIL International Literacy Consultant Dr. Susan Malone addressed the gathering. Dr. Malone explained how Bisu efforts toward linguistic and cultural preservation were similar to those of many other groups world-wide.

A large portion of Dr. Malone’s address was given to explaining Fishman’s (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale, as adapted in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.</th>
<th>Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (adapted from Fishman 1991)</th>
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</table>
| **Weak side**   | Stage 8  
|                 | So few fluent speakers that community needs to re-establish language norms; requires outside experts (e.g. linguists).  
|                 | Stage 7  
|                 | Older generation uses language enthusiastically but not children.  
|                 | Stage 6  
|                 | Language and identity socialization of children takes place in the home and community.  
|                 | Stage 5  
|                 | Language socialization involves extensive literacy, usually including L1 schooling.  
| **Strong side** | Stage 4  
|                 | L1 used in children’s formal education in conjunction with national or official language.  
|                 | Stage 3  
|                 | L1 used in workplaces in wider society, beyond normal L1 boundaries.  
|                 | Stage 2  
|                 | Lower governmental services and local mass media are open to L1.  
|                 | Stage 1  
|                 | L1 used at upper government level.  |
The Fishman scale proved an outstanding way of initiating a focused discussion on the current state of Bisu. The attendees determined that Pui Kham and Doi Chompuu Villages where at Stage 6, while Pha Daeng Village was at Stage 7, soon to progress into Stage 8. This proved a sobering experience, inasmuch as the attendees realized how truly endangered their language is. Simultaneously, however, this realization led them to be more resolute in their insistence that they were willing to take the steps necessary to ensure that their children and grandchildren do not lose their language — in Fishman’s terms, that they move up to at least Stage 5, if not Stage 4.19

Dr. Malone also shared about her experiences in the Kaugel language project in Papua New Guinea. Remarkably, that project has become financially self-sustaining, through a small bakery, consisting of oil drum ovens set over fires. Profits generated from the bakery are used to fund the literacy project.

Dr. Malone’s report inspired the working committee to do some hard thinking about how their work could likewise become self-sustaining. Without any input from the foreign linguists, the committee decided to open an agricultural co-op, selling fertilizer, insecticide, and other products for which there was a definite market. Inasmuch as Dr. Malone had mentioned that the Kaugel had formed their own nongovernmental organization (NGO), and thus successfully applied for a number of grants, the working committee concluded that they needed to make moves toward becoming an NGO. In consultation with the SIL staff, they began preparing a $4000 grant proposal. These funds became available in June 2002, just in time for the beginning of the planting season. Prices were set at going market rates, with interest on credit purchases slightly below market rates.20 There is thus a net financial benefit to the villagers, as well as the committee. Once the initial investment is recovered, all profits will be used for the literacy program. As was the case with the dictionary, however, the working committee members have not yet informed the village leadership of the destination of the proceeds; again, they want to prove that the co-op is viable before announcing any grand plans for the future.21

5. Future challenges

The story of Bisu linguistic and cultural preservation is a work in progress. Many significant challenges have already been met: the creation of an orthography, the preparation of Bisu books, the formation of a group of leaders able to critically assess the present and look toward the future.
Other challenges loom in the not-so-distant horizon: Will the fertilizer co-op yield the hoped-for profits — enough to support literacy teachers, the printing and distribution of Bisu books, and, potentially, the costs of computer acquisition and maintenance? How will the committee members fare as literacy teachers? How will the villagers respond to the literacy program?\textsuperscript{22} How can an appropriate number of books be made available at moderate cost to the greatest number of readers? And what of the other cultural materials, such as photographs, videos, and tape recordings of the elders, which have been gathered by the linguists? How could these materials be archived in the villages in a manner that would be both easily accessible and well-protected from the ravages of tropical weather and eager users?

Will they do it? Will the Bisu continue to be Bisu? Will they be able to maintain their language? Only time will tell. We hope that they have received a little encouragement, and a little bit of enablement, such that they themselves will be able to make educated choices in this matter for, as Moon Tacaan’s poem says, if the Bisu do not keep speaking Bisu, who will?

\textit{Payap University, Thailand and SIL International}

Notes

1. In the 1970s, David Bradley found several Bisu speakers in the Northern Thai village of Takaw (1988). As of this writing, Bisu is no longer spoken in that village; one elderly Bisu resident of Takaw recently told the author that she has been using Northern Thai for so long that she is embarrassed to even try to speak Bisu. There is no significant interaction between residents of Takaw and the rest of the group.

2. The Chinese Bisu noted that their Burmese cousins typically had larger families (seven to twelve children), due to a lack of birth control products.

3. Even today, parents in Northern Thai villages adjacent to Bisu villages can often be heard telling their children to stop playing in the dirt, lest they look like the “filthy hill people.”

4. Unlike many other Thai hill tribes, the Bisu have had Thai citizenship cards for many years. Nonetheless, many Bisu have claimed that they were not allowed to serve in the Thai military if they carried the surname “Wonglua” — the surname assigned to all the Bisu of Doi Chompuu Village. Many Bisu have officially changed their surnames to avoid this prejudice.

5. All of this led to our rediscovery of the fact that there are a number of groups in Northern Thailand who are called “Lawa” by the Northern Thai but, in fact, are not at all related to the Lawa or Wa of Chiang Mai and Myanmar. Indeed, Vacharee Nuamkaew, in her 1987 Mahidol University MA thesis on Bisu phonology, lists six groups that fall into this category! The Bisu consider “Lawa” a derogatory term, and chafe at the mere mention of it.
6. From the beginning of this project, we have had the pleasure of interacting with Makio Katsura, a student of Nishida’s currently working in a Japanese corporation in Bangkok. Mr. Katsura’s long-term contact with the Bisu and his keen linguistic mind were crucial to all these efforts. As a member of the Bangkok-based Foundation for Applied Linguistics, Mr. Katsura was able to encourage Thai linguists Acharn Wanna Tiemnee and Dr. Apiluck Tumtavitikul, both of Kasertsart University, to become involved in the project.

7. This, of course, assumes availability of speakers who are reasonably literate in the national language, something that is not always the case. Some of the Thai-based orthographies contained in the volume Smalley (1976) edited are not actively used today. Part of this may relate to the fact that many of those groups already had Roman-based orthographies which had been used for some time. In addition, while the Thai alphabet is wonderfully suited to Thai, efforts to write these Mon-Khmer and Sino-Tibetan languages in the Thai script necessitated some very complicated modifications of “ordinary” Thai conventions, such that the mental gymnastics involved may have seemed daunting to potential readers/writers. The fact that these orthographies sometimes seem to reflect more linguistic opinion than true language community consensus may also factor into their current lack of popularity. One of those orthographies, Northern Khmer, has since been extensively revised in a community-based forum with very encouraging results in terms of language community acceptance and vigorous use (Thomas 1989). Additional research would be very helpful here.

8. The Thai Amphoe or District, the level of administration below the Changwat or Province, has a government official as head, the Nai Amphoe. His deputy, also a government official, is the Palat Amphoe. The Kamnan is the elected headman for the Tambon, a cluster of several villages.

9. An exact number of Bisu attendees is difficult to determine, since a number of people came and went during the course of the workshop. Additionally, the nonliterals did not sign the registration sheet. Nonetheless, a core group of at least twenty was present for the entirety of the workshop.

10. I have observed this same method of building consensus at work in Bisu village meetings.

11. In Thai, the “silent r” occurs in many words of Indic origin, which are predominantly found in high-register (royal/religious) discourse. Thus, the frequent use of the “silent r” in Bisu writing may make the language appear more prestigious to casual Thai observers, something that has been a source of concern to the Bisu. Indeed, the Bisu rejected Smalley’s idea of assigning new values to seldom used/archaic Thai letters out of a fear that Thai people would mock such “ignorant, incorrect” usage.

12. One Bisu man asked, “Is legal to have Bisu words on the same page as Thai and English?” Such is the perceived prestige gap between the languages.

13. The emphasis on reviving the traditional dress had several motivations, including ethnic pride, a desire for greater recognition from the Thai government, and the hope that tourists would take greater note of their village (and a nearby waterfall) if more local culture (including, clothing and, possibly, a small museum) was visible.

14. Thus obliterating the “whatever is easiest to read is the best” thinking of the non-Bisu linguists!

15. Vacharhee’s analysis (1987) of 1512 major syllables found that 66.6% of Bisu syllables are mid-tone, 27.9% are low tone, and a mere 5.4% are high tone (1987: 115). Liz Braun’s literacy tutoring work with one middle-aged Bisu woman found that tone markings tended to confuse, rather than clarify, pronunciation. As Ursula Wiesemann (1989) notes:
What kind of tone needs to be written in an orthography that is easy to read and to write? By experience, we now know that if all the tone nuances were to be written, the result would be too difficult both to read and to write. If, on the other hand, tone is not part of the orthography at all, the result is guesswork, since the words and sentences will not be unambiguously written. It is, therefore, necessary to discover a minimal way of writing tone. This minimal way has to be written systematically.

16. After spelling standardization, committee members wrote an additional 69 short volumes, bringing the total number of Bisu books to 131.

17. Through conversations with a number of Bisu individuals, it has become apparent to us that the village as a whole values a certain sense of equality. Those thought to be striving to raise themselves or the village as a whole beyond the status quo are rewarded with skepticism and rumor-mongering. As one particularly progressive-minded village leader explained, “Most of the villagers just live by their karma [believing that actions from past reincarnations have pre-determined their destiny], unwilling to try new things, and quick to criticize those who do.”

18. The overall tone of those criticisms was such that the foreign linguists feared the entire project would collapse; the cultural insiders, however, claimed that all was well, and that there was great support for the project!

19. Stage 4 involves the use of the language in education. Thai educators have traditionally been opposed to any form of bilingual education. This attitude may be changing, however, at least where the current leadership of the Thai Nonformal Education Department is concerned. High level planning is now underway to provide a bilingual nonformal curriculum for the Sgaw Karen, one of the larger hill tribe groups. A pilot project toward this effect is being funded by a foundation under the patronage of Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

20. Virtually all Northern Thai farmers buy such agricultural products on credit, to be paid after the rice is harvested at the end of the year.

21. It is important to note that three of the six working committee members had prior financial experience in helping the village headman prepare budget proposals for local government, as well as in operating a village credit union. Without this type of experience, the start-up of the co-op would have been significantly more complicated.

22. Most of the many illiterate or semi-literate Bisu are over the age of thirty. The conventional wisdom of the Bisu community is that these people are too old to ever learn to read, a view reinforced by a government continuing education instructor who, during a well-attended Thai literacy classes held in Doi Chompuu Village in 1998, repeatedly told her frustrated students, “Old wood can’t bend; old people can’t learn.” After that experience, it has been difficult to convince many potential readers that they can indeed master the skill!

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