

# Preserving the Bisu Language: Progress to Date and Future Directions

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Payap Research and Development Institute  
&  
SIL International

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## ABSTRACT

Bisu, as spoken in Northern Thailand, boasts fewer than 1000 speakers. The low number of speakers plus constant pressure from the outside world 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 paper has three aims: 1. To describe the sociolinguistic situation in which the Bisu of Northern Thailand find themselves; 2. To chronicle efforts to preserve this endangered language through community involvement in the development of an orthography and basic reading materials; and 3. To assess the current progress of the project, highlighting future challenges that may be encountered in the course of preserving the Bisu language for future generations.

## บทคัดย่อ

ภาษาบีซูซึ่งใช้พูดกันในกลุ่มชาวเขาเผ่าบีซูซึ่งพบอยู่บริเวณทางภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย บ่งชี้ให้เห็นถึงจำนวนผู้พูดที่มีจำนวนน้อยกว่า 1,000 คน ด้วยจำนวนผู้พูดที่มีอยู่น้อย บวกกับความเจริญทางสังคม จึงเป็นเหตุผลักดันให้ภาษาบีซูกลายเป็นภาษาที่ใกล้จะสูญพันธุ์ ชาวเขาเผ่าบีซูเองก็ได้ตระหนักถึงปัญหานี้ด้วยเหตุนี้ หัวหน้าชาวเขาเผ่าบีซูจึงได้ร้องขอบุคคลนอกเผ่าให้เข้ามาช่วยเหลือในการอนุรักษ์ภาษาของพวกเขา

วัตถุประสงค์ในการทำการศึกษานี้มีดังนี้

1. เพื่ออธิบายเหตุการณ์ที่ได้จากการตระหนักถึงปัญหาในกลุ่มของชาวเขาเผ่าบีซูเองในเชิงภาษาศาสตร์สังคม
2. เพื่อแถลงขั้นตอนในการพยายามที่จะอนุรักษ์ภาษาบีซู โดยผ่านทางการให้ความร่วมมือในกลุ่มชาวเขาเผ่าบีซูเอง ในการที่จะพัฒนาระบบการเขียนและสื่อการอ่าน
3. เพื่อประเมินผลการศึกษาครั้งนี้และคาดคะเนแนวทางในอนาคต เพื่อที่จะอนุรักษ์ภาษาบีซูให้คงอยู่และสืบทอดไปสู่รุ่นอื่นๆ อีกต่อไป

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# **Preserving Bisu: Progress to Date and Directions for the Future**

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## **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 paper has two aims: 1. To describe the sociolinguistic situation in which the Bisu of Northern Thailand find themselves; and 2. 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**

### **2.1 Location and related languages**

Bisu was first 'discovered' 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 determined to be a language of the Loloish/Yiphoish branch of the Tibeto-Burman family.<sup>1</sup>

The Bisu population in Thailand is concentrated in two villages in Chiang Rai Province: Doi Chomphuu (Amphoe Mae Lao, Tambon Pong Phrae) and Doi Pui (Amphoe Muang, Tambon Sa-a Dong Chai). There are a handful of Bisu speakers, middle aged and older, in Pha Daeng Village (Amphoe Phan, Tambon Doi Ngam).<sup>2</sup> 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* lists an additional 6000 Bisu in Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China, where they are called Lao Mien ('Old Burmese' in Yunnanese) or Laopin. From the viewpoint of the Chinese government, these are classified as Lahu due to the fact that they live in close proximity to the Lahu and have Lahu-like dress (Bradley 1998). It was only in 1991 that Li Yongsui identified these people as Bisu (Grimes 1996).

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 50 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 has been used in more recent publications as a more acceptable term (Hale, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> 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 me 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.

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.

Other related groups include the Phu Noi of Laos and the Coong of Vietnam. After listening to recorded word lists from one of the Phu Noi dialects, the Bisu of Thailand declared that they are '80% the same language' despite the fact that they were unable to understand recorded Phu Noi 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 Phu Noi 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!

## 2.2 Historical setting

### 2.2.1 The Bisu in China

Xu Shixuan 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 (6<sup>th</sup> 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,' i.e., 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 re-capture and enslave those who fled too late, a hundred household 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 (Shixuan forthcoming: 4).

A second rebellion, in the early twentieth century, led to a second wave of Bisu 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 (Shixuan forthcoming: 4–5).

Whether the Bisu entered Thailand as a result of either of these rebellions is difficult to ascertain; the Thai Bisu collective historical consciousness is quite limited. Nonetheless, it is entirely plausible to contend that the forebearers 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 involuntarily; 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 (Wyatt 1984: 155).

### 2.2.2 The Bisu in Thailand

The Thai Bisu have preserved relatively little of their history. This, claims one elder, is because the lives of their forebearers 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 *k<sup>h</sup>ḁṇhlṇkṇ*, a name still used among Bisu today.

Life at *k<sup>h</sup>ḁṇhlṇkṇ* 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, and a limited amount of wet (paddy) rice, 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.<sup>3</sup>

The population at *k<sup>h</sup>ḁṇhlṇkṇ* expanded to the point that, sometime in the 1940s, a large group of Bisu left and established the village of Doi Pui, some thirty miles to the northeast. 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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.'

Chompuu gradually became more accepting of intermarriage with the Northern Thai, the people of Doi Pui 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 late as 1999, when an HIV positive Southern Thai man married to a Bisu woman attempted, unsuccessfully, to spend his final months in Doi Pui.

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 Chompuu to develop wet (paddy) rice terraces, providing heavy machinery to assist in the process. The Bisu received Thai citizenship cards, a vital prerequisite to meaningful educational and employment opportunities in Thailand. Electricity came to both villages in the 1990s, as well as rudimentary tap water systems drawing from mountain springs.

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 Chompuu Village

(population 200) have succumbed to the disease in the past three years, and a number of young women who left the village 5-10 years ago never returned and are presumed dead.

## 2.3 Sociolinguistic situation

### 2.3.1 Multilingualism

In his 1994 study, *Linguistic diversity and national unity: language ecology in Thailand*, William Smalley groups the eighty languages spoken in Thailand into a hierarchy, as shown in figure 1:

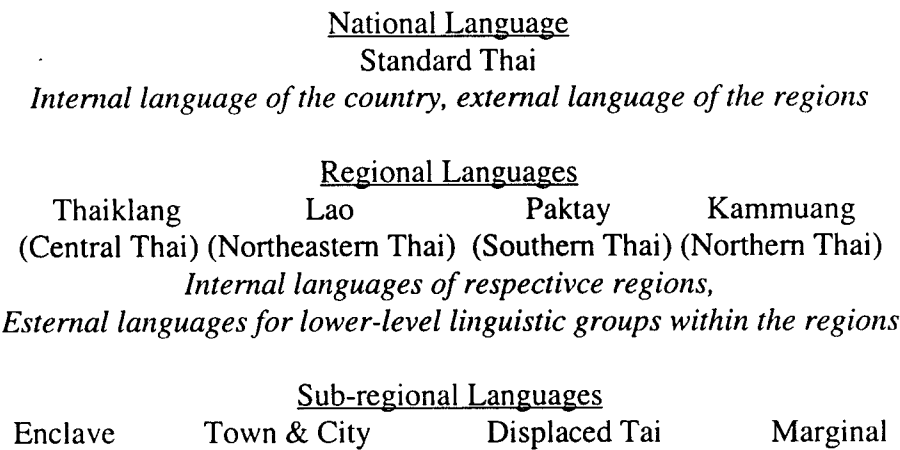


Figure 1. The linguistic hierarchy in Thailand.  
(adapted from Smalley 1994: 69)

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 25–50 age bracket are bilingual in Northern Thai, with native speaker competence. Nonetheless, 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 25 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.

### **2.3.2 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 conversants will often switch to Northern Thai. Village meetings in Doi Chompoo 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 passerbys 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.

### 2.3.3 Language viability

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 mitigate against the long term viability of Bisu include the following (adapted from Suwilai 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:

1. **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 hilltribe villages, working with the villagers to solve local dilemmas. 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 Chompoo 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.

2. **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 hilltribe 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.

3. **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.

4. **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 nearly forty short books, including folktales, a Bisu–Thai–English picture dictionary, and basic literacy materials.<sup>4</sup>

5. **Awareness of a larger Bisu community:** As mentioned earlier, the Northern Thai Bisu were not aware of the existence of the Bisu communities in China, or the Bisu-like Pho Noi 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.

### 3. Writing Bisu

#### 3.1 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

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<sup>4</sup> This process will be discussed in greater detail in the second half of this paper.

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.<sup>5</sup>

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 Chomphuu in November, 1997.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> From the beginning of this project, we have had the pleasure of interacting with Mr. Makkio 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 Tienmee and Dr. Apiluck Tumtavitikul, both of Kasertsart University, to become involved in the project.

### 3.2 Toward a Bisu orthography: underlying principles and practices

In his *Phonemes and Orthography: Language Planning in Ten Minority*

*Languages of Thailand* (1976), 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, whenever possible, the language

community should be actively involved in all orthography decisions.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

With these six ‘maximums’ 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 which have no

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<sup>7</sup> This, of course, assumes availability of speakers who are reasonably literate in the national language--something that is not always the case.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the Thai-based orthographies contained in the volume Smalley (1976) edited are not actively used today (Bradley 1998). 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.

clear equivalents in the Thai script with the understanding that ultimate orthography decision-making power belonged solely to the Bisu themselves.

### 3.3 The ‘Project for Preserving the Language of the Three Villages’ orthography workshop

The orthography workshop was held on Monday, December 7, 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, December 5), 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.’ The Doi Pui Village agreed to prepare the sticky rice, while the Housewives’ Association from Doi Chomphuu 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 Hilltribe Welfare, as well as the local Nai Amphoe, Kamnaan, and elementary school principal.<sup>9</sup>

The workshop was held at the Doi Chomphuu Village temple. Approximately twenty Bisu participants attended, including middle-aged males (literate in Standard

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<sup>9</sup> Nai Amphoe: government appointed officer over the local amphoe unit, sometimes translated ‘district officer.’

Palat Amphoe: government appointed officer directly under the Nai Amphoe.

Kamnaan: elected official over several villages.

Thai), middle-aged females (literate and non-literate), several elderly males and females (non-literate), and several teenagers (literate)--all in all, a reasonably representative group.<sup>10</sup> Non-Bisu attendees included the Palat Amphoe of Amphoe Mae Lao (on behalf of the Nai Amphoe), the nearby elementary school principal, a representative from the Department of Hilltribe Welfare, and the editor of a local cultural newsmagazine. FAL Director Acharn Wanna Tienmee attended, along with FAL member Mr. Makkio Katsura. Mr. Jeff German, Mrs. Florence Lau, Mr. Henry Lau, my wife Mrs. Suzanne Person, and I attended on behalf of PYU-ALTP and SIL, assisted by ALTP staff member Khun Nara Rithma.

Several individuals were involved in the opening ceremony. Mr. 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 Mr. Makkio 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 Palat Amphoe, Mr. Ongaat Muangosai, on behalf of the Nai Amphoe, 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, Mr. Ploy Wongluwa. The fact that these pictures were drawn by a member of their own group was a point of pride for the

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<sup>10</sup> 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 non-literates did not sign the registration sheet. Nonetheless, a core group of twenty was present for the entirety of the workshop.

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 (Figure 2), something that is immediately recognizable to most Bisu:



Figure 2. Elicitation poster for *ùu kjaŋ* ‘red ant’ (reduced size)

The Bisu attendees discussed how to write the word featured by each picture, their suggestions being noted on a large whiteboard by the late Mr. 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.<sup>11</sup>

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

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<sup>11</sup> I have observed this same method of building consensus at work in Bisu village meetings.

‘silent r’: whenever a Bisu initial consonant has no exact equivalent in Thai, the nearest-sounding Thai letter is used, followed by a silent ‘r.’<sup>12</sup>

At the conclusion of the orthography workshop, the pictures and their agreed-upon spellings were assembled into an alphabet book entitled *කො කොඟ්කුප් 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.

### 3.4 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.

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<sup>12</sup> 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.

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 excited to show copies to local school principals, as well as local government officials and their Northern Thai neighbors.<sup>13</sup> 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 5 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.

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<sup>13</sup> One Bisu man asked, ‘Is it legal to have Bisu words on the same page as Thai and English?’ Such is the perceived prestige gap between the languages.

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:

*guu bìsu k<sup>h</sup>òŋ nī mlàaŋ laaj pii*  
 'Our Bisu village has been established for many years.'

*guu aŋp<sup>h</sup>ii aŋhùu súp luutʃ<sup>h</sup>ii*  
 'Our grandmothers and grandfathers have carried on.'

*guu bìsuu k<sup>h</sup>òŋ tii tàaŋlaajníi*  
 'Our village is the place of all our people.'

*jàamàŋ ʔiikee aŋbæ kaaʔænŋa*  
 'The old people and children know everything [about the village].'

*ʔaamúu bìsuu k<sup>h</sup>òŋ saam tii nī*  
 'At this time, the three Bisu villages--'

*guu ʔiikee bàa gaa luum kak<sup>h</sup>aa*  
 'Our children, do not forget--'

*k<sup>h</sup>òŋ saam k<sup>h</sup>òŋ nī jàa piinooŋ kaʔ*  
 'These three villages--we're all brothers and sisters.'

*jào guu ja kàmʔũu ʔa luum coo*  
 'And let's not forget our language.'

*plòŋkaa kooŋ kep tʃ<sup>h</sup>ii ʔuu kannóo*  
 'Help to speak the language and preserve it!'

*kàmʔũu k<sup>h</sup>oo ŋæ nèʔ bàa caa pèe*  
 '[Then] Our language and our speaking will not die out.'

*guu bàa tʃ<sup>h</sup>ǎŋ táŋlaaj næ ʔiikee*  
 'Our people and all of our children--'

*bàa ʔũuj k<sup>h</sup>èe kajáo ʔasaŋ ʔuu*  
 'If we don't 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.

Since the formation of the orthography in December of 1998, then, some 62 Bisu books have been produced. The entire process of developing an orthography and implementing a literacy production has had a positive impact on language pride--a vital factor in sociolinguistic viability.

#### **4. Future challenges**

Despite an enthusiastic beginning, the Bisu language preservation project faces a number of challenges. Beyond the fact that the ultimate fate of Bisu as a living language is in the hands of the Bisu themselves, several project-level factors need to be addressed.

Perhaps of greatest importance is the question of how to make the project self-sustaining. To date, the costs of the workshops, including the book production, have been absorbed by SIL International. Although more and more Bisu young people are

becoming computer literate, the high costs of computer equipment and, perhaps more vital, computer maintenance are far beyond the economic grasp of the group.

A related question is that of distribution. Most of the books which have been written have been published in limited quantities. Part of this is deliberate; to flood the villages with free books could decrease the value of the books in some people's minds. Copies of all the books have been stored at the homes of the village headmen, as well as in our residence, as informal libraries; nonetheless, many of the books have 'walked away', or, in the case of the headmen, been given away to non-Bisu visitors. 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?

Finally, there is the issue of the many illiterate or semi-literate people over the age of 30. 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! It is our hope that several literate Bisu individuals would eventually be trained as literacy teachers.

## 5. Conclusion

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 don't keep speaking Bisu, who will?

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