

1. Introduction

The term "Karen" is used as a designation for several ethnic groups which share similar languages and cultures. The Pwo Karen are the second largest of the Karenic groups, numbering more than 1,000,000. The majority of these live in Burma, but there are over 100,000 living in Thailand as well.¹ Very little in-depth research has been done on the Pwo Karen. The noticeable exceptions include Jones (1961), Cooke, et al, (1976), Hamilton (1976), and a variety of publications by Renard. Only the former two, however, deal with linguistic issues. Jones focuses on two of the dialects of Pwo Karen spoken in Burma, while Cooke, et al, deal with one of the dialects spoken in Northern Thailand.

Cooke, et al, provide a useful chart (p. 188) that divides the Pwo Karen of Thailand into three groups which represent different geographic areas and corresponding dialectal variations. The provinces included in each of the three groups are:

Group 1 -- Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son

Group 2 -- Lamphun and Lampang

Group 3 -- Chiang Rai, Phrae, Tak and Kanchanaburi²

The implicit claim in such a grouping is that there are three major dialects of Pwo Karen spoken in Thailand. How intelligible these dialects are is not stated. It is interesting to note that according to Cooke, et al, each of the three groups includes two of the six northern provinces. This would seem to indicate that all three major dialectal variants of Pwo Karen are spoken in northern Thailand. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the northern provinces of Chiang Rai and Phrae are grouped with the province of Tak, which is the southeasternmost province in the North, and the central

¹The actual figure, including Pwo Karen who are not registered, is probably much higher than this.

²Today, Pwo Karen are also found in the following provinces: Uthai Thani, Suphanburi, Phetchaburi, and Ratchaburi.

province of Kanchanaburi, which borders Tak to the south.³

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the dialectal situation among the Pwo Karen living in northern Thailand. Particular focus will be given to identifying dialect groupings. The analysis is based on data that was collected between May 1991 and August 1992. Extensive research was carried out in five of the seven northern provinces where Pwo Karen villages are found: Lamphun, Lampang, Phrae, Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. Research in the sixth province, Mae Hong Son, was limited to two word lists and a limited number of interviews with Pwo Karen from the area and various expatriates who have worked among the Pwo Karen in Mae Hong Son. Research in the seventh province, Tak, was not possible due to time limitations.

In each of these six northern provinces, bilingualism in Northern Thai among the Pwo Karen ranges from low to very high. In most villages a majority of the inhabitants are reportedly capable of communicating in Northern Thai at least well enough to purchase goods at the market. This is particularly true in villages that are located near Thai villages or towns. In Lamphun, Lampang, Phrae and Chiang Rai there are a very limited number of villages where Northern Thai is not spoken by the majority, at least to some degree. In Chiang Mai and eastward into Mae Hong Son, toward the Burmese border, bilingualism decreases. Even in villages where Northern Thai is a second language, however, Pwo Karen remains the language of preference in daily village life.⁴

2. Methodology

In order to expedite locating the villages, help ensure a good reception in each village, and improve the quality of the data, a Pwo Karen assistant was employed. For

³It should be noted that Cooke, et al, make it clear that their divisions were based on limited familiarity with the variety of Pwo Karen spoken in the provinces listed in Group 3.

⁴I should also note that in the course of my research I investigated the two Karen villages that are located in Sukhothai province and found that they are both populated by Sgaw Karen with the exception of a few Pwo Karen who have married into these villages.