

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 A guide to this thesis

The first chapter of this thesis consists of an introduction to the Bisu people and language (section 1.2), an overview of the thesis research goal (section 1.3), methodology and scope (section 1.4), and a review of relevant literature (section 1.5). Chapter two presents an outline of Bisu language phonology and a guide to the orthography used.

Chapters three, four, and five consist of grammatical analysis. Chapter three presents the word classes that are needed to describe the Bisu noun phrase. Chapter four presents the structure and function of the noun phrase, atypical noun phrase types, and the range of words and phrases that can function as noun phrase heads. Chapter five describes the modifiers that occur within the noun phrase and includes an in-depth analysis of number markers and case markers.

Chapter six summarizes the descriptive work of the previous three chapters, draws conclusions, and gives recommendations for further research.

## 1.2 The Bisu people and language

The Bisu people are an ethnic minority group of mainland Southeast Asia. Communities of Bisu speakers live in the border areas of southern China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. While definite numbers of Bisu speakers in each country are not known, estimates place the total number between 2,000 (Bradley 2007:175) and 10,000 (Xu 2001:4). The following map shows Bisu areas within mainland Southeast Asia.

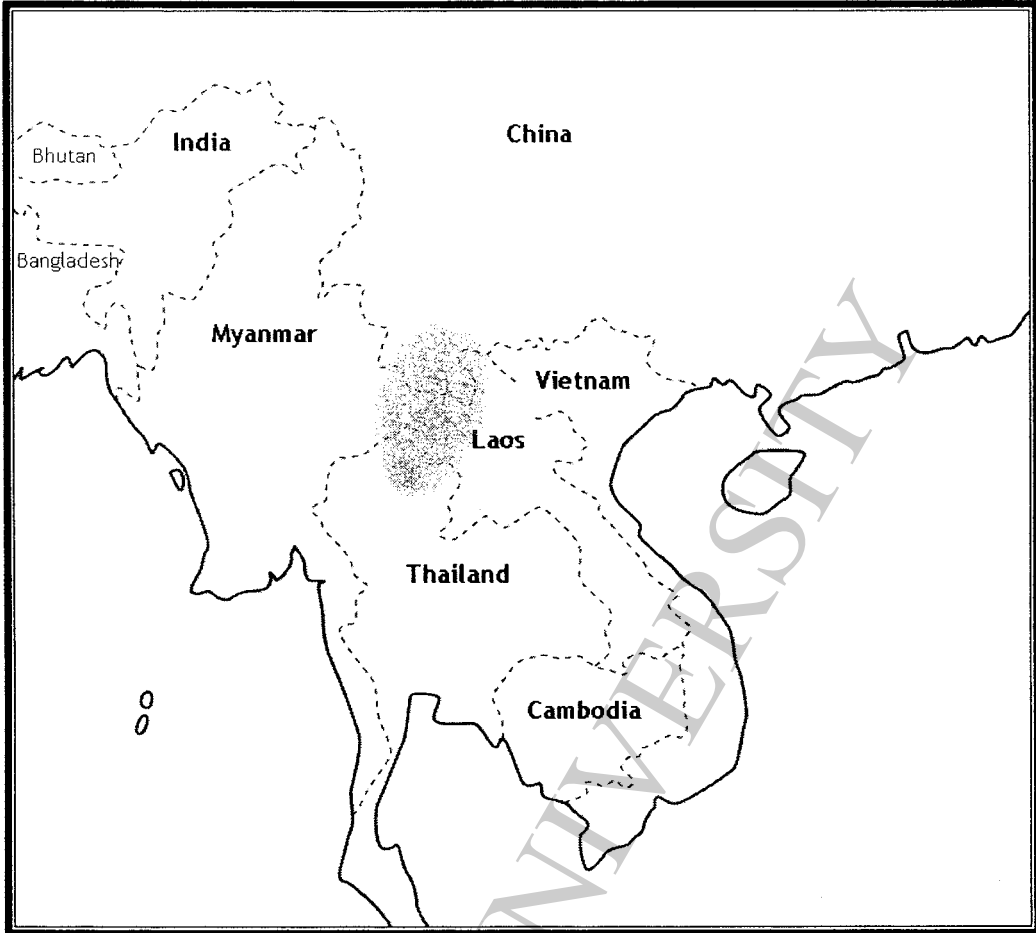


Figure 1 Bisu areas in Southeast Asia  
(adapted from Sankakukei:2006-2007)

In Thailand approximately 700 Bisu speakers are concentrated in two villages in Chiang Rai Province. Doi Chom Phu Village, where the research for this thesis was carried out, is located in Mae Lao District. The following map shows Doi Chom Phu Village in relation to the provincial capital Chiang Rai city.

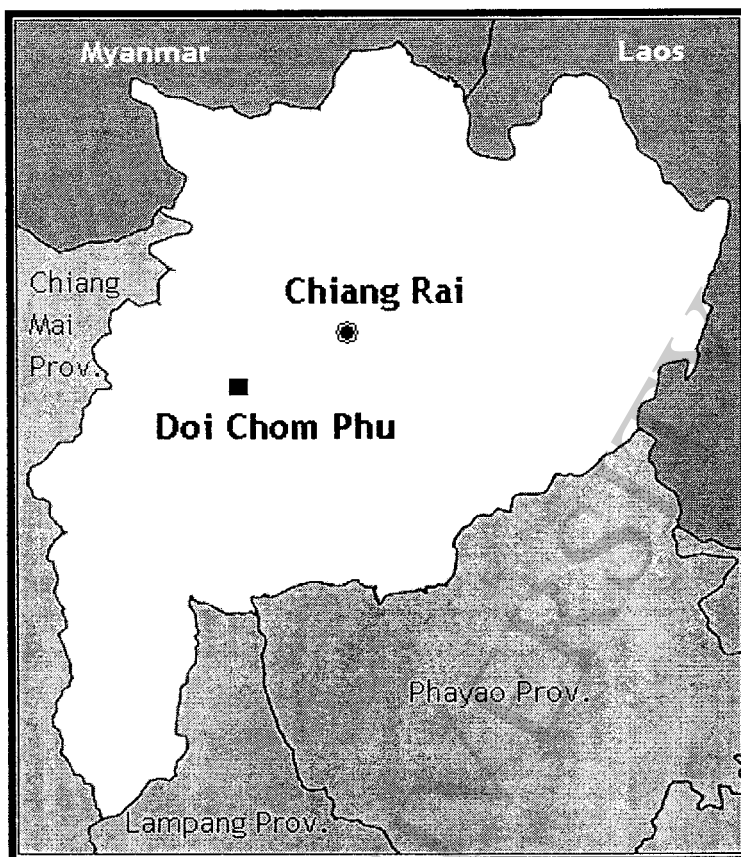


Figure 2 Doi Chom Phu Village in Chiang Rai Province  
(adapted from Wikimedia Commons:2005)

Xu (2001:16) calls the variety of Bisu spoken in Doi Chom Phu “an important and representative Bisu dialect.”

### 1.2.1 Language genetic classification

The genetic classification of many Southeast Asian languages, including Bisu, is periodically updated and revised on the basis of new research and analysis. The following classificatory details for Bisu are taken from the 2007 edition of Atlas of the world’s languages, the East and South East Asia section edited by David Bradley. Alternative classifications may be found in the Ethnologue (Gordon 2005:327), The Sino-Tibetan languages (Thurgood and LaPolla 2003:8) and The Bisu language (Xu 2001:5).

Bisu is a Burmese-Ngwi language, which is a major branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages family tree. This branch is also known as Lolo-Burmese (see Thurgood 2003) and Burmese-Yipho (see Xu 2001). Within this branch, the Ngwi languages are divided into Northern, Central, Southern and South-eastern sub-branches.

Southern Ngwi consists of three sub-groups: Akoid, Bi-Ka, and Bisoid. The Bisoid branch consists of four language clusters: Bisu, Laomian, Sangkong, and Phunoi.

The following figure illustrates these relationships.

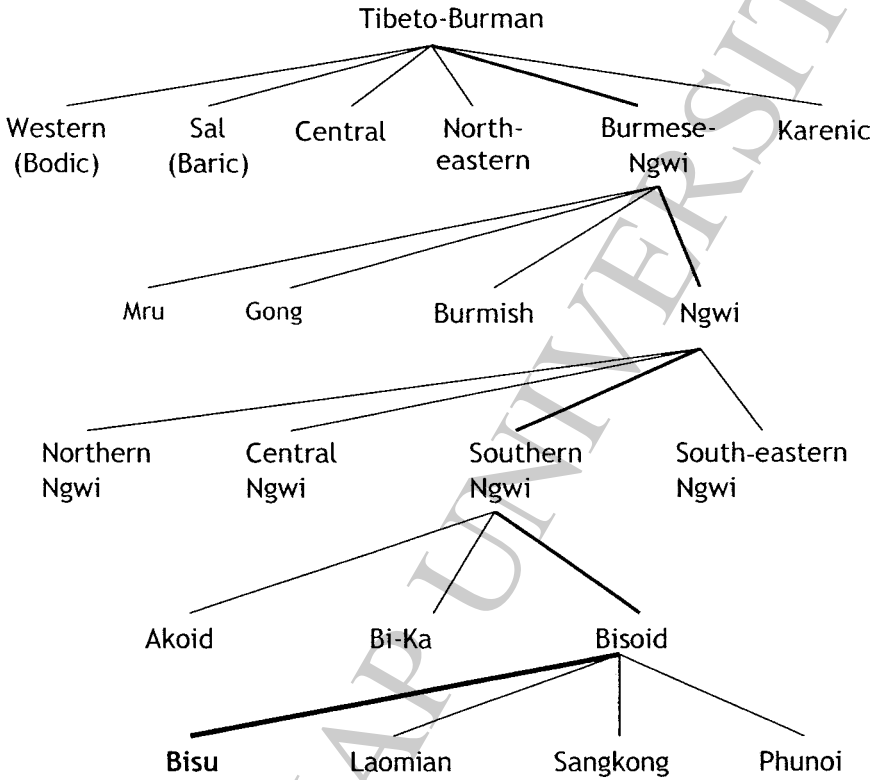


Figure 3 A genetic classification of Bisu (per Bradley 2007)

1.2.2 Typology

With regard to typology, Bisu is a typical Tibeto-Burman, Burmese-Ngwi language in most respects. Bradley (2007:171) notes that Burmese-Ngwi languages “are verb-final, with complex tonal and consonant systems but little or no morphology.”

Consistent with this, Bisu is verb-final and has little morphology. It has three tones

with some tone sandhi, thirteen or fourteen syllable-initial consonant clusters, and nine syllable-final consonants.

As with the majority of Tibeto-Burman languages, standard word order in Bisu is subject, object, verb (SOV), with the subject frequently omitted. With regard to other word order characteristics, Dryer (2008:3) argues:

The OV languages of Asia outside of Tibeto-Burman are in many ways atypical of OV languages in the world, so that... while OV language in Tibeto-Burman often exhibit word order properties that are different from other OV languages in Asia, they are actually more typical in many ways of OV languages in the world as a whole.

Consistent with Dryer's generalizations, Bisu has orderings such as genitives preceding possessed nouns (GenN), adjectives, demonstratives and numerals following nouns (NAdj, NDem and NNum), postpositions (rather than prepositions), negatives preceding verbs (NegV), and question particles occurring sentence-final. It is notably different from other Tibeto-Burman languages with respect to the ordering of noun and relative clause (NRel/RelN), where "the OV Tibeto-Burman languages are overwhelmingly RelN" (Dryer 2008:37). Out of 57 Tibeto-Burman languages for which Dryer has data, 54 are RelN, including four Loloish (Ngwi) languages closely related to Bisu: Akha, Hani, Lahu and Lisu. In contrast, in Bisu the relative clause follows the noun it modifies (NRel).

### 1.2.3 Language names

The Bisu in Thailand refer to themselves by the names "Bisu," "Misu," or "Mbisu." In Northern Thailand, outsiders call them "Lawa" or "Lua," a name that is both confusing (because it is applied indiscriminately to several different minority groups) and derogatory (Person 2000). In Myanmar the Bisu call themselves "Bisu" and are "classified as the *Pyen* ethnic group, from an alternative exonym, also seen in the Chinese term *Laopin*" (Bradley 2007:174). Within Yunnan Province, China, the Bisu in Menghai County call themselves "Mbisu" and are called "Laopin" by

outsiders (Person 2005:120). In northeastern Laos, the Laopan subgroup of the related language Phunoi is “linguistically close to Bisu” (Bradley 2007:174).

#### 1.2.4 History of the Bisu in Thailand

No written history exists for the Bisu in Thailand. Person (2000) speculates that the Bisu came to Thailand either as refugees from civil unrest in China, or as prisoners of war from Yunnan Province (in China) or the Shan States (in Myanmar). Xu (2001:7), on the other hand, reports that “the Bisu in Thailand are said to have migrated there from Laos about two to three hundred years ago.” The first record of Bisu in Thailand dates from 1876 when Holt S. Hallett, a British railway engineer, traveled through Northern Thailand and encountered a “Lolo” group which he named the “Keng Tung Lawa” and which can be identified as Bisu (Person 2005:122).

The Thai Bisu people’s own oral history is sketchy and incomplete, but speaks of mistreatment and frequent resettlement until about 80 years ago, when the entire group settled on the lower slopes of Doi Chom Phu mountain. They were unable to cultivate paddy rice, so attempted to grow hill rice with little success. Despite poor crops and other difficulties, the Bisu population grew and in the 1940’s a large group moved away to establish another village on the slopes of Doi Pui mountain, about 45 km to the northeast. The Doi Chom Phu Bisu lived in poverty until the 1980’s, when the Thai government provided assistance with widening fields for paddy rice farming.

#### 1.2.5 Present day Doi Chom Phu

Today about 200 Bisu people live in Doi Chom Phu Village. As in the past, most villagers are subsistence farmers cultivating hill and paddy rice as primary crops. The village has several conveniences of modern life, including running water, electricity, and cell phone coverage. The Buddhist temple Wat Doi Chom Phu serves as a centre for community life for both the village and the surrounding area.

Events such as Buddhist holidays and funerals bring Northern Thai villagers and merchants into the village. Inter-marriage is allowed and non-Bisu speakers are integrated into the community – although they rarely learn to speak the language. For example, the larger village market (of two) is operated by a Bisu husband and his monolingual Northern Thai wife.

Most Bisu speakers aged 50 or younger have native speaker competence in both Bisu and Northern Thai, and those aged 25 or younger are also fluent in Standard Thai (Person 2005:125). Pre-school-aged children are usually placed in Northern Thai-speaking day care while their mothers return to work in the fields. School-aged children attend public school in a nearby Northern Thai town. The language of instruction is officially Standard Thai but Northern Thai is the language most used in that domain (Person 2005:126). Person (2005:126) concludes that “the numerical weakness of the Bisu and the ongoing linguistic pressures of the larger Thai world place the language in a state of endangerment.”

#### 1.2.6 Language attitudes and vitality

Despite a small population and considerable outside pressure, the Bisu show positive language attitudes and language vitality. In a sociolinguistic survey of Bisu speakers in China and Thailand, Ji (2005:45) categorizes the Thai village of Doi Chom Phu as one of four “strong villages.” Strong villages have high levels of Bisu language use and positive attitudes toward the language. In strong villages, “Bisu is used exclusively in the home domain and within the Bisu group” (Ji 2005:111). Strong villages have positive attitudes toward:

- Bisu language maintenance. For example, respondents expect Bisu to be the language their children speak most frequently and most fluently (Ji 2005:74) and agree that “we need to keep speaking Bisu from one generation to the next” (Ji 2005:81).

- Bisu identity. For example, respondents are willing to be identified as “Bisu” rather than “Lahu,” “Han,” or “Thai” (Ji 2005:78); agree that “Bisu is a valuable language” (Ji 2005:81); and disagree that “you are considered low class if you speak Bisu” (Ji 2005:81).
- Bisu literacy. For example, respondents agree that “Bisu is a language worth learning to read and write” (Ji 2005:81) and are willing to spend time learning to read and write Bisu (Ji 2005:81).

These positive attitudes occur regardless of the age or gender of respondents. In other words, in strong villages such as Doi Chom Phu, respondents aged 15-30 regard their mother tongue as highly as respondents aged 31-50 and 51-70, and men and women regard it equally highly. The sociolinguistic study concludes that “most Bisu people value their language” (Ji 2005:119).

Further evidence of positive language attitudes is clear in Kirk Person’s 2005 article *Language revitalization or dying gasp? Language preservation efforts among the Bisu of Northern Thailand*. He documents the efforts of mother-tongue speakers to develop a Bisu orthography and basic reading materials through grassroots community involvement and the assistance of outside experts. Person (2005:139) portrays a people who have realized “how truly endangered their language is. Simultaneously, 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.”

### **1.3 Research goal**

This thesis was written to contribute to a more detailed knowledge of the grammar of the Bisu language and thus to the documentation of the world's languages. Additionally, because a good understanding of a language’s grammar is necessary for successful translation, this thesis will contribute to better translation of materials into Bisu.



The goal of this thesis is to describe the Bisu noun phrase. This description covers the word classes relevant to the noun phrase, a description of the syntactic contexts in which noun phrases appear, and the structure and function of constituents within the noun phrase.

#### 1.4 Methodology and scope

Data for this thesis was collected in several ways. Seven texts used were collected from two mother-tongue Bisu speakers: Somchai Kaewkhamnoi (male) and Pattanan Jessadakraisri (female), both in their mid-20's, both from Doi Chom Phu Village. The first text came from a Bisu folk tale that had been written and printed at a story-writing workshop. I asked Somchai to review the story and re-tell it orally. We transcribed the recording of his re-telling, and then he edited and corrected his version. I glossed and interlinearized his edited version.

Second, I recorded extemporaneous speech as Somchai described a typical day in his childhood. I then re-played the recording to him and to Pattanan, and asked each of them to verbally summarize the text. I recorded these summaries, transcribed all three texts, and then mother-tongue speakers edited and corrected the texts. I glossed and interlinearized these edited texts.

Third, I asked Pattanan to “describe what she saw.” The stimuli for her descriptions were 1) several pages out of the Thai children’s picture-book Outdoor games and 2) a six-minute video known as The pear film. Each description was recorded, transcribed, and then edited and corrected before glossing and interlinearizing.

I recorded the texts directly onto my laptop computer using the free digital audio editor program Audacity. The texts were transcribed using the Roman-based “Pyen” orthography and typed in MS Word. The edited texts were imported into SIL Fieldworks Language Explorer and glossed and interlinearized using this program.

The seven texts described above form the main body of data for this thesis. This data is supplemented by language-learning data I gathered between May and December 2007 while living in Doi Chom Phu Village, and by data collected during a follow-up trip I made in February and March 2008 (notably, the text narrating The pear film was collected during this trip). My primary sources for the supplementary data were Pattanan, Somchai, Supap Sripan and Nawalas “Toi” Tajan.

## 1.5 Review of relevant literature

I consulted several general introductions to grammar as a starting point for this thesis. The textbooks Describing morphosyntax: A guide for field linguists by Payne and Analyzing grammar: An introduction by Kroeger were helpful. Givon’s two-volume Syntax provided a more sophisticated perspective on several aspects of word classes and other grammatical features. In addition, entries in the Encyclopedia of Linguistics and various linguistics dictionaries also helped sharpen my understanding of different terms and category labels.

I consulted several cross-linguistic surveys of grammatical behaviour. In this regard Shopen’s three-volume Language typology and syntactic description was very helpful, and in particular the article Shopen co-wrote with Schachter on parts of speech systems. Adjective classes: A cross-linguistic typology, edited by Dixon and Aikhenvald, was invaluable in understanding current approaches to analyzing adjectives. I particularly relied on the articles by Dixon, LaPolla and Huang, and Enfield from this collection.

I gathered information about other Burmese-Ngwi languages from the The Sino-Tibetan languages, edited by Thurgood and LaPolla. Li and Thompson’s Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar provided a thorough analysis of the most prominent language of East Asia.

Previous work on the Bisu language has been carried out by several linguists.

Nishida provided a preliminary language sketch, including several grammatical

features, in 1973, and Beaudoin included a grammar sketch as part of his dissertation *Un monographie du Bisu* [A monograph of Bisu] in 1991. Person's 2000 dissertation on Sentence-final particles in Bisu narrative includes a brief grammar sketch. All of these writers provided insights that helped me analyze the Bisu noun phrase to a greater depth than has been previously done. Xu's *The Bisu language* was also an excellent source of comparative data and analysis regarding the varieties of Bisu that are spoken in Yunnan province, China. Ji's thesis *A study of language use and language attitudes among Bisu speakers of China and Thailand* provided a great deal of sociolinguistic background information.