

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Meung Yum and Savaiq are minority people groups who live in the mountains extending from Kunlong Township to Hopang Township in north eastern Shan State, Myanmar. These areas are situated alongside the Salween River. Kunlong Township is located in the area controlled by Myanmar government, but Hopang Township is in the Wa Self-Administered Region (Wa-SAR)<sup>1</sup>.

This thesis presents a study of the sociolinguistic situation based on two fieldtrips to Kunlong Township, carried out between December 2009 and February 2011. The main purpose of this study is to determine the need for vernacular language development among the Meung Yum people and whether that language development program could also serve speakers of Savaiq varieties.

In this chapter, Section 1.2 describes the names and language classification, Section 1.3 is about the geography and demography, Section 1.4 is about language development and education, Section 1.5 is about the religious situation, Section 1.6 details goals of the research, Sections 1.7, 1.8 and 1.9 describe the scope, benefits and outline of the thesis.

### 1.2 Names and language classification

To the author's knowledge, Meung Yum and Savaiq have never before been classified. In fact the author has never found these languages mentioned in the linguistics or ethnographic literature. In this section a working classification is given which will be supported by the research presented later in this thesis. Several types of evidence point to a classification in the Waic sub-branch of the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family. These include their own perception

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<sup>1</sup> Wa-SAR is divided into six different townships: Hopang, Mongmao, Panwai, Pangsang, Naphan, Metman and Pangsang.

and reported comprehension of related varieties and lexical similarity results as well. The following subsection presents details of the classification.

### 1.2.1 Classification

Mitani (1978) classified Waic languages under one of the branches of eastern Palaungic of the Mon-Khmer language family (Mitani 1978:3). The Palaungic branch is divided in two branches: 'Western branch' which comprises Danau, Palaung and Rieng, and 'Eastern branch' which compromises Wa, Angkuic and Lamet. Schmidt (1904) and Rangit (1943) gave brief sketches of Waic language classification. Diffloth (1979:13-15) published a reconstruction of Wa historical phonology based on six dialects. Three distinct groups are classified under the Waic language node: Bulang, Lawa, and Waic (Lewis 2009).

Meung Yum and Savaiq can be included among the Waic people groups for several reasons. According to village elders from Pan Tan- a Meung Yum village, they said they are mixed race of Wa and Shan. The Savaiq people refer to themselves as Wa when they talk to Burmese-speaking outsiders, since Savaiq is less known and they are identified as Wa people in their citizenship papers. Moreover, the lexical similarity results presented later in this thesis show Meung Yum and Savaiq share 84-85% lexical similarity with Yong Shuai. Meung Yum and Savaiq languages can therefore be classified under the Wa node of the Waic sub-branch as follows in Figure 1.

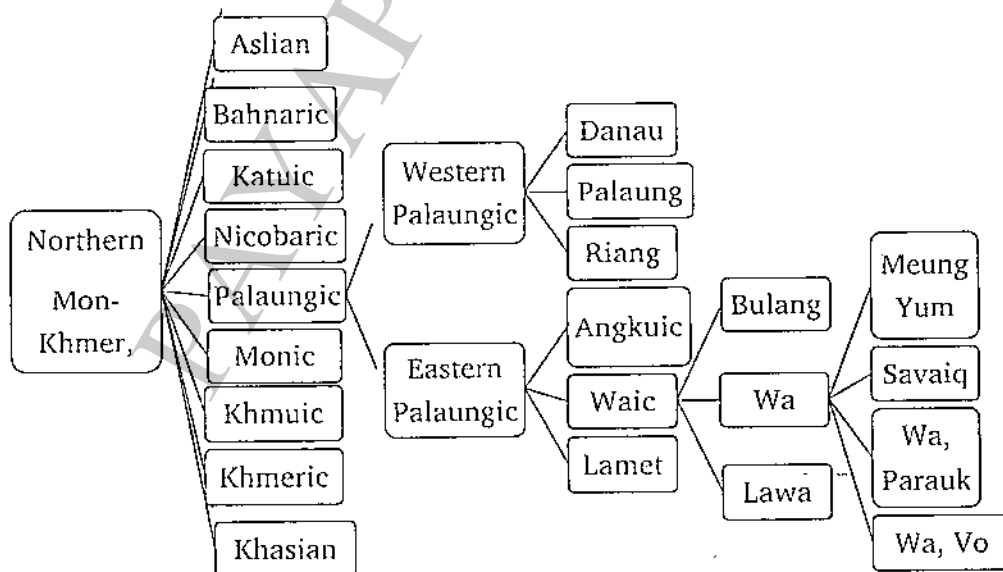


Figure 1: Language Classification of Waic languages (adapted from Lewis 2009)

The following subsection gives more information about the Meung Yum and Savaiq people's identity.

### 1.2.2 Identity

The identity of the Meung Yum and Savaiq people groups as members of the Waic language group is encoded in the language names. 'Rok' [rək] is a name for every people group that speaks a Wa or Palaungic dialect. The Meung Yum people identify themselves as 'Rok Meung Yum' and the Savaiq refer to themselves as 'Rok Savaiq'.

The different names of Meung Yum people are 'Ming Yum', 'Loi', 'Loi Meung Yum', 'Khala', 'Laca', 'Loi Lah', 'Leh Nu', and 'La Leit'. 'Meung Yum' does not have any meaning in their language and it is only their name. However, there is a village called 'Meung Yum' in the Wa-SAR. It could possibly be the people's native home, however, no Meung Yum elder or subject mentioned it as their original place in the survey. The name 'Khala' is offensive for the people.

'Savaiq' means "swallow bird" in their mother tongue. Other names used to refer to the Savaiq people are 'Kon Loi', 'Loi', 'Wa Chu', 'Wa', 'Awa' and 'La'. Most of the names' meanings are unknown, however, the name 'loi' [lɔj] means "mountain" in Shan and 'Kon Loi' means "mountain people".

### 1.3 Geography and demography

The term, 'Wa' is very broad and it refers to any variety of Waic people. The Waic ethnic group is possibly to be among the original inhabitants of mainland South East Asia (Watkins 2002:1). The people live in the mountainous area between the Salween and Mekong rivers. These areas are distributed in three countries: the south-western part of Yunnan province of China, in Shan State of north-eastern Myanmar, and in northern Thailand. Diffloth (1989) described this geographical region as 'the Waic Corridor'; it lies approximately from 24°N to 21° N. Watkins (2002:4) gives all major locations of the Wa people, shown in Figure 2. The black thick lines on the map show the boundaries of the countries.

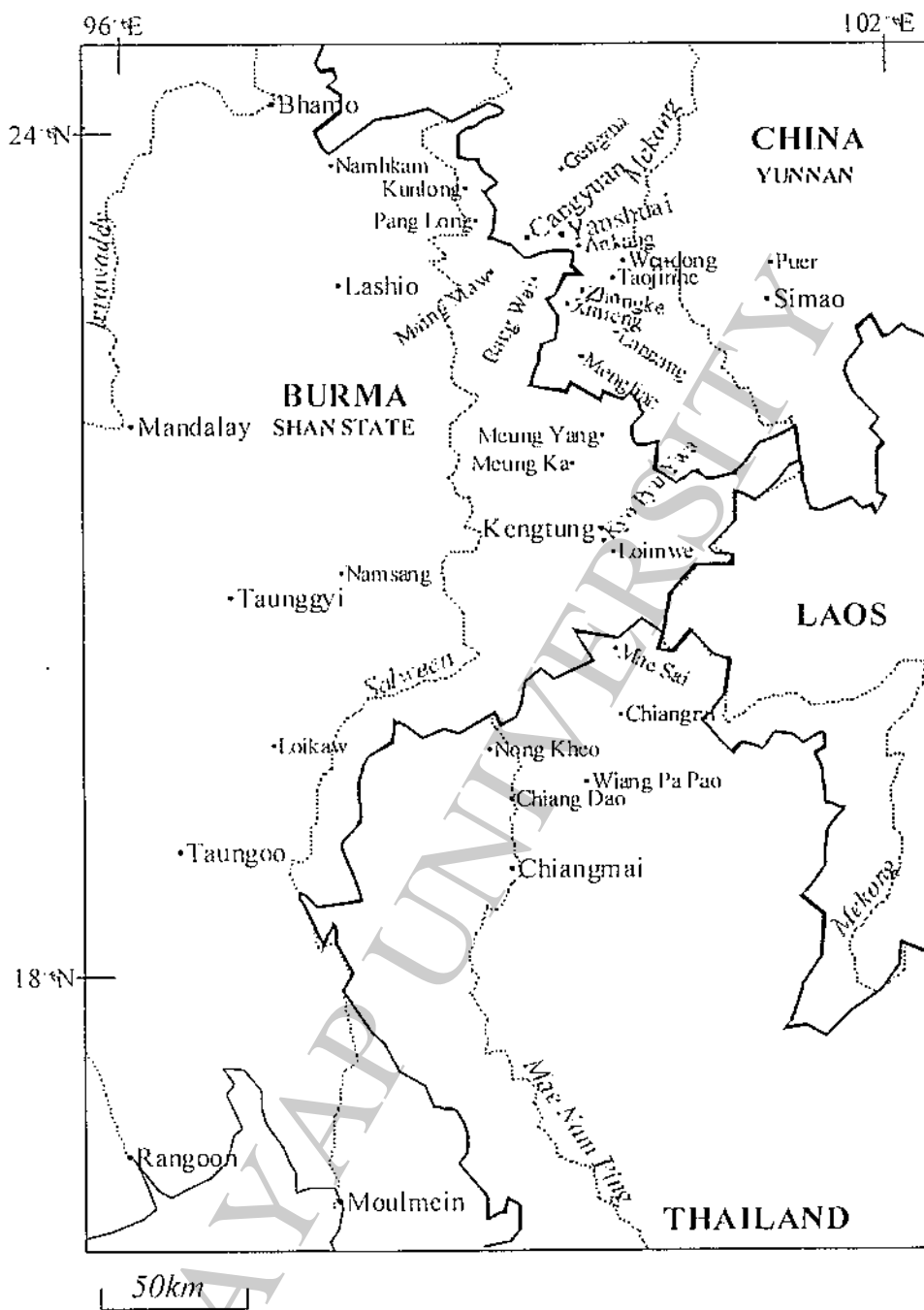


Figure 2: Map of Wa speaking area (Watkins 2002:4)

A map of Meung Yum and Savaïq villages is shown in Figure 3. The villages which are underlined show the places that the team visited for data collection. The bigger red dots indicate pure Meung Yum villages, the smaller pink dots indicate mixed villages with Meung Yum, and the blue dots show the Savaïq villages. Kunlong Township and the Wa-SAR are geographically separated by the Salween River. The black lines indicate township boundaries and the brown lines show roads.

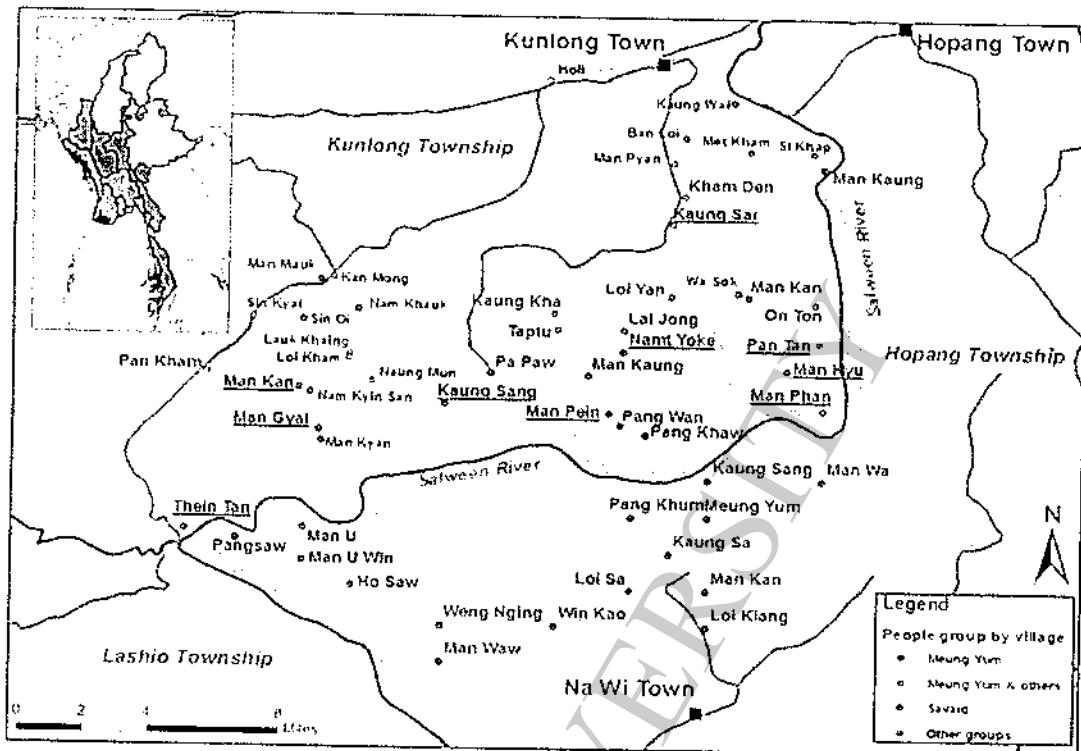


Figure 3: Meung Yum and Savaic villages in Kunlong Township and Wa-SAR<sup>2</sup>

The majority of the Waic people live in Myanmar and China but there is a small population in Thailand. Table 1 shows the estimated population of Wa people in the countries of Southeast Asia.

Table 1: The estimated population of Wa people by country

Source	Country	Population
Bradley (1994)	Myanmar	500,000
	China	322,000
Nahhas (2007:7)	Thailand	16,500
Total Wa population		838,500

<sup>2</sup> This map was created in ArcGIS using data collected by the author

According to the research carried out for this survey, the total Meung Yum population is estimated to be 8,000. Approximately half of them live Kunlong Township and half of them in Hopang Township. There are 51 Meung Yum villages in total. 21 of these villages are located in Kunlong Township and 30 villages are in the Wa-SAR. Among these villages, only nine of them are pure Meung Yum villages: Namt Yoke, Pang Khaw, Pang Wan, Man Pein, Pa Paw, Kaung Sang and Man Kan villages in Kunlong Township and Meung Yum and Noat Awng in the Wa SAR. The total population of Savaïq is unknown because of limited research about the people. The Savaïq people live in Kunlong, Mong Maw and Lashio townships. A few Savaïq headmen have mentioned that the Savaïq population is larger than the Meung Yum.

#### **1.4 Language development and education**

Wa languages have developed separately in the three countries. According to the statistics in Lewis (2009), 78% of Wa people in China are literate in L2 i.e., Chinese. The official orthography was designed in 1957 based on the Aishuai dialect for the people in China. Two main Wa varieties in Thailand are Bo Luang Lawa and Mae Hong Son Lawa. The Bible was translated in Lawa and a dictionary was produced in 2001. Among the people in Myanmar, the Wa literacy rate in L2 (Burmese) is 8%. The New Testament was translated into Wa by a missionary to the people Vincent M. Young in the 1930s (Lewis 2009). Watkins (2002:15) says the Wa dialect of the Bible translation is similar to the dialect spoken north of Keng Tung, Bang Wai.

A few songs including worship songs have been recorded on audio cassette tapes and cds. Some primer books have also been produced in a few Wa dialects. These are translated in the related national languages and also in English (see <http://www/Palaungic.org> for further details). Wa literacy is taught among the Wa churches in Myanmar and some books have been produced.

There have been no language development efforts among the Meung Yum and Savaïq. Kachin Baptist churches from Lashio have helped some Meung Yum people become Christians about ten years ago. They are currently helping the Meung Yum to start language development. The literature committee for all the Meung Yum villages in Kunlong Township is currently organized by Meung Yum Christian leaders so that people from both Buddhist and Christian communities are involved. The 17 committee members have been meeting since 2010. However, no Meung Yum people from the Wa-SAR are on the existing literature committee.

Government schools in most of the Meung Yum villages mainly offer primary education only. The Meung Yum children in the surveyed villages usually complete primary education. Burmese is the language of instruction used in the schools and teachers speak Burmese and Lachid while teaching classes. There are a few Meung Yum who have completed high school at schools in bigger towns.

Children in the two Savaiq villages surveyed go to a nearby village which offers primary education. Most Savaiq children attend school with Wa and Kachin people but the majority of the students in these schools are Savaiq. The language of instruction for them is Burmese. Most Savaiq children do not go to school beyond Standard Four, i.e., the fifth grade of primary school.

### **1.5 Religious situation**

Tin Yee (2004:83) mentions that animism, Buddhism, and Christianity are found among the Wa people in northern Shan State. Harding (1927:165) noted that the Wa people from the Kokang area believed in Buddhism: the monks wore yellow robes and the Shan script was used in the monasteries. Until the mid-Twentieth Century, the Wa practiced '*Latou*'— that is headhunting. They also performed human sacrifice as part of their animist religious beliefs. While the Wa are predominantly Buddhist today, Animism has not completely disappeared from their beliefs and practices. According to an interview with a Wa church leader, there are approximately fifty thousand Wa Christians in Myanmar.

The majority of the Meung Yum and Savaiq people are Buddhists. Shan Buddhist scripture is used in their religious community. A few Meung Yum villages have converted to Christianity. Burmese and Jingphaw writing is used in the Meung Yum Christian community.

### **1.6 Goals of the research**

Four main goals were set up for the research.

- Goal 1 was to determine the need for vernacular language development among Meung Yum speakers, especially by investigating the potential for them to use existing written materials in the languages of wider communication (LWCs) in use in the area.

- Goal 2 was to assess the readiness for vernacular language development if existing materials were found to not be adequate for them. This goal was to be investigated through language vitality, population size, interest and unity of the people.
- Goal 3 was to determine how many and which varieties should be selected for development.
- Goal 4 was to decide whether Savaiq language development could be achieved by a joint program with Meung Yum.

### **1.7 Scope and limitation of the research**

One limitation of the survey is in terms of site selection since only villages within Kunlong Township were visited. Due to access restrictions, no fieldwork was conducted in Meung Yum and Savaiq villages in the Wa-SAR.

Another limitation is that the language used in the RTT comprehension testing, which is Meung Yum, is not the standard or prestige dialect for Savaiq or for other varieties of Wa in the region. Further research using RTT is needed to test how much Meung Yum and Savaiq people can actually understand the Standard Wa variety. An RTT story in Standard Wa should be recorded and played in various Meung Yum and Savaiq villages chosen by the degree of contact they have with Standard Wa.

### **1.8 Benefits of the research**

This thesis makes contributions in two main areas. The results should be useful for the Meung Yum language committee in making decisions about language development. This study also be of benefit to others who wish to do further research on the people.

### **1.9 Outline of the thesis**

Language data from eight Meung Yum and two Savaiq villages were collected for this research. Two fieldwork trips were taken in December 2009 and in February 2011 in Kunlong Township. Chapter 2 presents the linguistic theoretical foundations of the research methods used in this study. Chapter 3 lays out full descriptions of the design of the sociolinguistic survey. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 contain the analysis of the data from the survey. Chapter 4 analyses the data relating to



Goal 1: assessing the need for language development. Chapter 5 analyses the data relating to Goal 2: investigating the readiness among the community, and Chapter 6 analyses the data concerning to Goal 3: choosing the variety which is suitable to use for language development among all the people, and Goal 4: whether Savaiq could be incorporated in a Meung Yum language development program. Chapter 7 concludes and summarizes all the findings and results of the study.

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