

## Chapter 6

### Conclusions

This thesis examines the vitality of Akha in Myanmar with the Sustainable Use Model. In this chapter a summary of the findings, conclusions, applications of the research results, and suggestions for further work will be provided.

#### 6.1 Overview of the study

This study provides the most detailed assessment to date of language vitality for Akha in Myanmar. Understanding the factors involved in language vitality will be helpful for getting support from the community for language development initiatives in the future. The thesis is also pioneering the use of the SUM, particularly the use of data on Bodies of Knowledge, to add insights to more conventional questionnaire data.

This thesis' results are based on the data from three different areas, from 18 villages, in Eastern Shan State. Two fieldwork trips were taken between April-July 2014. The first trip included 13 villages in Keng Tong and Tachileik townships and focused on the literacy program run by the Akha Baptist Convention. Details about the program and the attitudes of village leaders and teachers to Akha literacy were investigated. The second trip focused on sociolinguistics and visited 7 villages in 3 different areas: Nam Pan, Tachileik and Keng Tong. Two of the villages were Catholic; 2 were *Akha zah* and 3 were Baptist. Altogether 186 Akha villagers participated in providing data in some way during the two trips.

The first trip used questionnaires purposely designed to collect relevant information from Literacy teachers, village leaders and religious leaders. The second trip also used purpose-made questionnaires for village leaders, religious leaders and individual participants. In addition to questionnaires, the second trip used a purpose-made participatory tool called the Bodies of Knowledge Participatory tool. This was used in a group setting to allow a range of participants to discuss issues to provide a consensus answer. The two types of data complement each other in answering the two main research questions that shaped the study. Conclusions relating to each of these research questions are provided in the following section.

## **6.2 Conclusions Relating to the Research Questions**

In this section the research questions are restated and conclusions presented.

### **6.2.1 Research Question 1: What is the current level of vitality of Akha in Myanmar?**

By the results of this analysis and from the personal experience of the author it can be said that the predominant language used by Akha people in their daily life is Akha. They are also passing down the language to their children and grandchildren. Thus the vitality of Akha is at least EGIDS 6a 'Vigorous'.

Many villages have Akha literacy classes but these are mostly all church-based and in the Christian (mainly Baptist) community. The literacy classes are run in the hot season school break and last between one and three months. Even though the oral transmission is strong, since the literacy teaching is not spread through the whole Akha community the EGIDS level of Akha in Myanmar is level 5 'Developing'.

One noticeable finding is that within the Christian community there is widespread use of reading, especially reading of Christian religious materials at church, but in comparison very limited use of writing. This suggests that even within EGIDS level 5, there might be 2 sublevels: 5b 'Reading' and 5a 'Reading and Writing'. Sublevel 5b reflects a more passive use of the written form whereas sublevel 5a reflects a more creative use worthy of a higher status. Since most people who use literacy skills, use them mainly for reading, Akha would be classified as the lower sublevel 5b. So even within the Christian community the vitality of the language would be strengthened if people wrote things more often.

### **6.2.2 Research Question 2: What evidence is there that the current level of vitality of Akha in Myanmar is sustainable?**

There is evidence from both the questionnaire data and the Bodies of Knowledge data to answer this research question. The FAMED conditions provide a frame of reference for evidence about sustainability.

The language has many functions orally in the community, especially in religious and home domains. Evidence for this can be seen by the Function levels: for BoKs relating to religion (BoK nos. 25; 26; 28) the levels are 4 or 5 in the Christian

villages and 6b or 6a in the *Akha zah* villages. For family (BoK no. 12) the levels are all 6a apart from Gaw tsum (Baptist) village which has level 5.

While there is strong support for acquisition of the oral form of the language throughout the Akha community, support for acquisition of Akha literacy is mainly limited to the Baptist community, although even among Baptist villages only slightly over half (70/120 [58%]) currently have a literacy class. These villages have access to collections of written materials in 'village libraries'. The Acquisition levels for BoKs 25; 26 and 28, ('Religious 1-2-3'), are higher in Christian villages than other villages. It is telling that the analysis of the questionnaire data also shows greatest support for acquisition in the religious domain.

People can be motivated to use the language for practically-oriented ('instrumental') or socially-oriented ('integrative') reasons. The questionnaire data shows that the participants have a strong identity as Akha which suggests that they will be motivated to speak Akha to express their identity. There is a generally positive view about Akha literacy proficiency with 76% of individuals specifying benefits to being literate in Akha. They score at least level 6a for the BoK categories, community, family, and religion, in the Motivation condition.

The BoK data for Environment are generally level 5 which show that the environment is generally perceived as not against language development. Even though the official language of instruction in government schools is Burmese and other ethnic group languages are not allowed for formal instruction, this is only one aspect. Akha communities are allowed to teach Akha literacy through non-formal education.

To consider the situation of Differentiation there are three languages, Burmese, Shan, and Chinese, that are used as LWCs. Even though they are using the LWCs to communicate with other people, the proficiency in those LWCs is quite low since they mostly speak only their mother tongue in the community. So Akha is generally preferred for interaction between Akha speakers and other languages are only used if there are particular reasons, such as being in a group where some people do not speak Akha.

The SUM states that level 6a is sustainable orality whereas level 4 is sustainable literacy. The SUM therefore implies that in the long term, the current level of Akha vitality will drop to 6a unless action can be taken to raise the level to level 4. Level 4 is characterised as one where the language is spoken throughout the community

and literacy is sustained by a widespread system of institutionally supported education (Lewis & Simons 2015:105). The current level of Akha vitality is 5 because it is spoken throughout the community and is used in written form by part of the community. There is support for literacy through the Akha Baptist Convention so within the Baptist community there is an institution that takes responsibility for materials development and literacy education and training. It can be argued therefore that the present level of vitality can be sustained at least in the medium term as long as the ABC continues its present support.

In order to raise the vitality level to EGIDS level 4, it would be necessary to have a much broader program of literacy education and training including all communities not just Baptist. While the BoK analysis of this research identified certain areas where extra materials should be developed, there is still scope for existing materials to be more widely circulated and used. This is perhaps one reason why many of the BoKs were at level 6a in some villages rather than level 5 although the fact that some villages were at level 5 shows what can be achieved. The tendency for people who are literate in Akha to use their literacy ability for reading but not for writing is another area where efforts could be made to encourage people to increase their Akha writing.

Let's get back to the hierarchy of sustainable use figure to see where Akha language situation is. Since Akha language is considered as EGIDS level 5, this level is not sustainable. So they need to move up to EGIDS level 4, sustainable literacy.

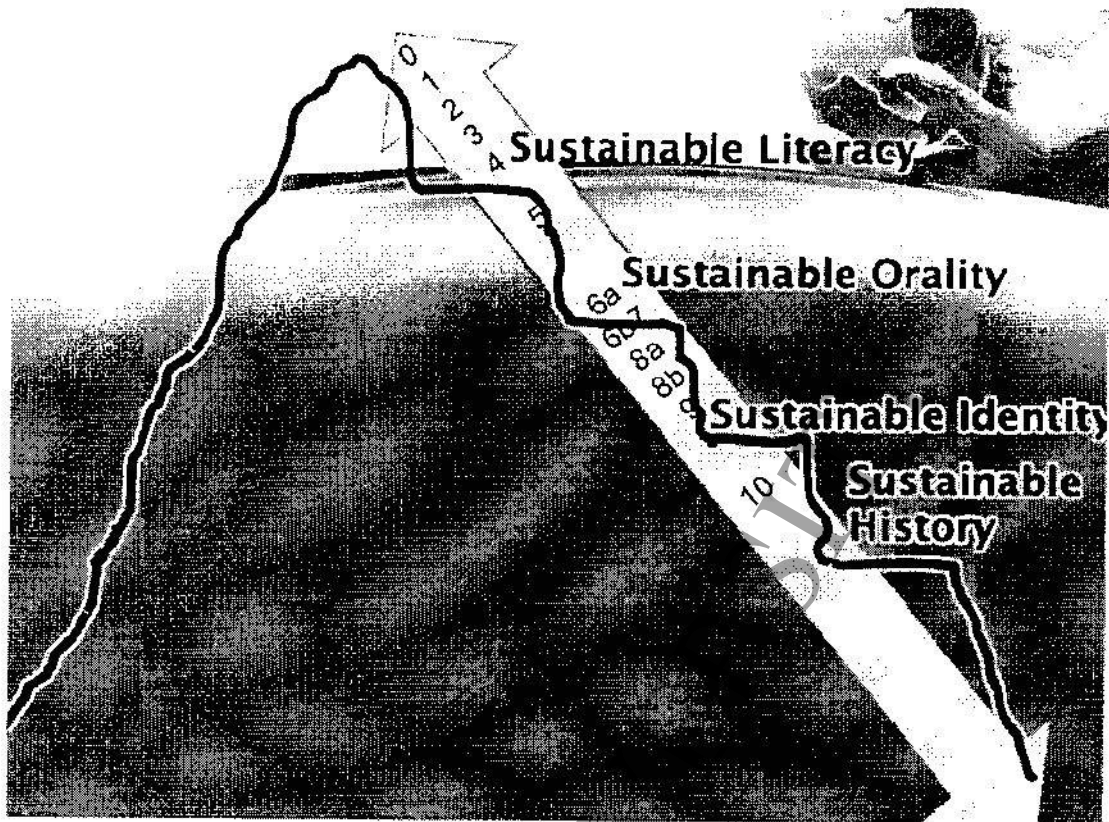


Figure 15 Hierarchy of Sustainable Use (Source: Lewis and Simons 2015:148)

### 6.3 Implications of the research results

This study helps to know the language situation, and it helps the community to see which steps they need to start working on to strengthen language vitality. The results of this study suggest ways in which the situation could be strengthened in both breadth and depth. Both of these will be necessary if the vitality is to be sustained and achieve a step up to level 4 on the EGIDS.

#### 6.3.1 Going deeper

The results for the BoKs identify areas where the use of Akha might be strengthened by the production of certain reading materials in Akha. These include the following BoKs: Community (BoK No. 5, 7, 8, 9, 10), Farming (BoK No. 13, 14), Health (BoK No. 17) and Religion (BoK No. 25, 26).

In addition to materials which address the Acquisition condition, other initiatives could be taken to target the other four FAMED conditions.

### **6.3.2 Going broader**

Since Akha use is already strongly used orally and there is a literacy program at least in part of the community, i.e. the Baptist community, there is a strong platform from which to build further literacy efforts. The obvious potential for growth is to the remaining 50/120 [42%] of Baptist villages that currently do not have a literacy class. However, extending to the other religious communities would also be necessary to achieve sustainable literacy in the whole Akha community. This would move towards the requirement of EGIDS level 4 in which the written form of the language is used by the whole community.

Another way that the present level of literacy could be broadened is to teach all year round rather than just during the school break. This would have resource implications in terms of personnel but would also require curriculum development. If this is achieved it will provide more Akha education so a broader range of topics can be included which will provide greater scope for learning in the mother tongue. This would also have the potential to give Akha learners more confidence to write in Akha, an important step in raising the present level as mentioned above. Also the greater the number of people who develop deeper literacy skills in Akha, the easier it will be for future generations to learn because there will be greater opportunity for children to learn from family members rather than having to rely on literacy classes. These activities will make the current level more sustainable, even if Akha doesn't achieve EGIDS level 4.

### **6.4 Suggestions for further work**

There are four other countries where Akha people are living: China, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. One obvious area for further research would be to assess the vitality of Akha for the populations in those countries so that the results can be compared. When doing the research for those areas, the research tools or questionnaires should be as similar as possible to the tools that were used for this research so that the results will be comparable. Knowing more about the vitality and the factors affecting it in each country will be helpful to work for Akha language development in each location

### **6.4.1 Specific ideas for choosing the areas**

To choose the areas or villages to do research in each country, the distance (both time and geographical length) between town and villages should be considered. And also it should be considered to include the Akha speech communities in town. The language situation from the villages in town and villages in remote areas may be different.

To think about the different religions is also important when choosing the areas or villages for further research. The same number of villages from different religions should be chosen in each area. According to this research religious affiliation is the main factor that causes differences in language use and literacy. Most of the Christian villages in this study are running a literacy class but not in the villages of other religions.

### **6.4.2 Improvements to the BoKT**

The use of pictures for the BoK research is a very good resource. So the pictures for BoKs research need to be improved. The pictures will also need to be adjusted depending on the country or area to be surveyed. Another important thing is to have separate pictures for the religious things depending on the religious group. For example; the religious materials like a Bible or a hymnal are not understood for non-Christian villages. So other related pictures that show their religious images would be more suitable and understandable for participants to help them to give more accurate answers.