

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Historical, Cultural, and Geographic Background of Lahu

1.1.1 General Information

The Lahu are a Tibeto-Burman people living in mountainous areas of Northern Southeast Asia in the countries of China, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. There are also some Lahu living in the United States and in several countries in Europe. The Lahu language is classified as Central Loloish, Loloish, Burmese-Lolo, Tibeto-Burman, and Sino-Tibetan (Bradley 1997). Lahu is closely related to such Southern Loloish languages as Akha and mBisu and more closely related to the Central Loloish language, Lisu.

The word "Lahu" is the name the people call themselves. Tai people in the Shan State call them "Mussur" which means "hunter". This name was later adopted by the Northern Thai, and became the term Thai people call this language group.

1.1.2 Origin

It is believed that the first homeland of the Lahu was in Southwestern China. They migrated southward for many generations. By about 1840 there were Lahu villages in Kengtung State, Burma, and by the early 1880's some were living in the Fang area of northern Thailand near the Burma border. Other Lahu migrated into Laos and Vietnam directly from China, and others migrated from Myanmar (Bradley 1979).

1.1.3 Population

It is impossible to give a precise figure for the total Lahu population. The approximate Lahu population in mid-1983 was (Lewis, 1984):

China	250,000
Burma	150,000
Thailand	40,000
Laos	10,000

It is estimated that there are about 10,000 Lahu in Vietnam and 2,000 in the United States. Therefore, the total Lahu population in mid-1983 was about 462,000.

1.1.4 Subgroups

Lahu can be divided into two main subgroups, Black Lahu and Yellow Lahu, based on language and culture. Each subgroup can be further divided into specific dialects.

1. *Black Lahu* includes:

Lahu Nyi (Red)

Lahu Na (Black)

Lahu Sheh Leh

2. *Yellow Lahu* includes:

Banlan

Bakeo

There are a few other Lahu groups with small populations, such as the Ku Lao (referred to as Lahu Hpu, or "White Lahu", in Laos), the A Ga (called Abele by the Lahu Shi), and the La Ba. The comparative populations of the subgroups in mid-1983 were (Lewis, 1984):

1. *Black Lahu*

Lahu Nyi 46%

Lahu Na 18%

Lahu Sheh Leh 13%

2. *Yellow Lahu*

Banlan 17%

Bakeo 3%

3. *Other*

(Ku Lao, La Ba, etc.) 3%

A Roman based script was developed for Black Lahu by Paul Lewis. Black Lahu has become the standard language for many Lahu speakers. Other dialects of Lahu use Black Lahu language as a standard language in areas such as public speaking, church services, and as a language of wider communication.

1.1.5 Way of Life

Lahu society is agriculturally based. The Lahu are traditionally hill farmers. Their three main crops are rice, maize, and opium. The slash and burn method of agriculture is an old established feature of the Lahu lifestyle.

Opium was of great economic importance to the Lahu. It was also the main cash crop among the Hmong, Yao, Lisu, and Akha. But, at the present time, it appears that the cultivation of opium is being reduced. Today other crops such as beans, fruit, ginger, and other agricultured products are cultivated instead of opium.

1.1.6 Lahu in Thailand

In Thailand, the Lahu people are one of the tribal minority groups that migrated from Yunnan, China. They settled in the provinces of Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Lam Pang, Mae Hong Sorn and Tak. By 1987 there was a population of 40,000. The first Lahu migrated into Thailand prior to the 1880's. Bradley (1979) says missionaries and others found Lahu in Thailand at about that time. The influence of these missionaries on the Lahu became important in the early 1900's, when an American Baptist missionary, William Young, converted thousands of Lahu to Christianity. This movement among the Lahu has survived and spread greatly, with help from a series of missionaries, including the Young family and Paul Lewis.

Lewis (1984) points out that the first Lahu who arrived in Thailand were Lahu Nyi, followed by Lahu Sheh Leh and a few households of Lahu Bakeo. The first major incursion of Lahu Na from Burma occurred in 1954. Then, in the 1960's and the early 1970's, a surge of Lahu Na and Lahu Shi Banlan, with a few Bakeo, fled from what they considered an oppressive situation on the Burma side. In 1982-83, there was another influx of Lahu from Burma.

1.2 Linguistic Classification of Lahu

There are three major language families represented in Southeast Asia: Austro-Asiatic, Austro-Thai, and Sino-Tibetan. The Austro-Asiatic peoples originated in Southeast and eastern South Asia. The Austro-Thai were mainly located around the islands of the South China Sea, and the Sino-Tibetan people originated the southern China and included the Tibeto-Burman people.

Sino-Tibetan is the world's second largest language family with more than 300 languages and major dialects, including Chinese, Tibetan and Burmese.

"Sino-Tibetan languages have in common a number of features, many of which are typological in nature: monosyllabicity, tonality, affixation, initial consonant alternation, vowel alternation, indistinct word classes, use of noun classifiers, and strict word order." (the New Encyclopedia Britannica. 1988 10:838-839)

Tibeto-Burman is a sub branch of Sino-Tibetan. Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken in Tibet, Burma, southern China, northern Laos, northern Thailand, Nepal, and throughout the Himalayan Mountain region.

Lolo-Burmese is a sub-branch of Tibeto-Burman. Matisoff (1973a) characterizes the Lolo-Burmese languages as follows:

"The Lolo-Burmese subgroup of languages, spoken in the eastern portion of the Tibeto-Burman area, is characterized by the radical simplification of initial consonant clusters and the disappearance of most syllable-final consonant contrasts, compensated for by a proliferation of vowels and tones."

Lolo-Burmese can be further divided into the Burmic branch and Loloish branch. The Loloish family is divided into Southern Loloish, Northern Loloish and Central Loloish. Southern Loloish includes several languages, including Akha and mBisu. Southern Loloish languages are spoken in the southernmost portion of the range of

Loloish groups. Many speakers of these languages live in Thailand, northern Laos, and eastern Shan State in Burma. Central Loloish includes Lisu and Lahu. Central Loloish languages are spoken in southern Yunnan, northern Vietnam, northern Thailand, northeastern Burma, and Laos.

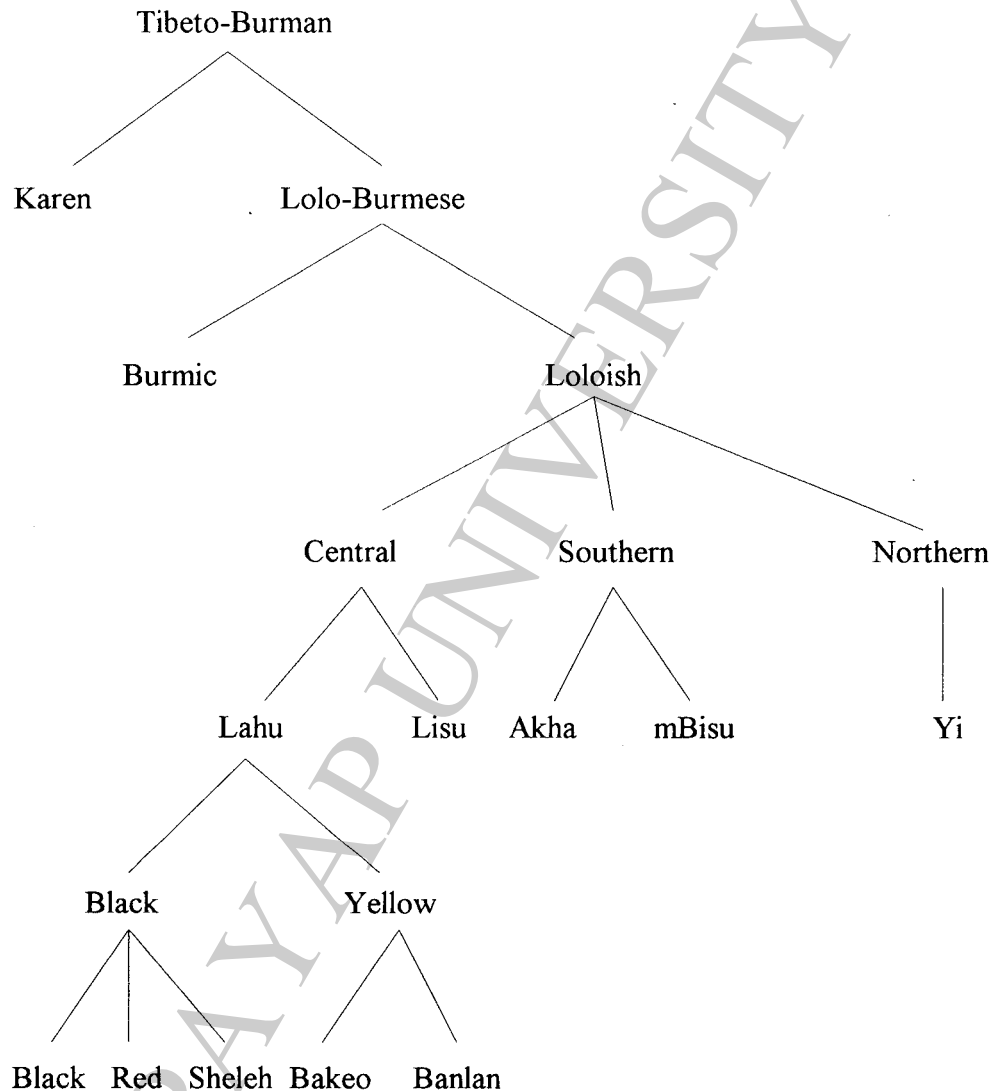


Figure 1. Linguistic affiliation of Lahu dialects and Tibeto-Burman family (Bradley 1979).

1.2.1 The Influence of Other Languages

Lahu has absorbed a great number of loan words from Tai Yai and from other languages such as Chinese, Burmese, Thai, and English. The influence of loan words is seen in both vocabulary and phonology. Most of the primary loans are monosyllabic. Modern loans that relate to politics, economics, and culture are generally disyllabic.

As the Lahu have migrated into the highlands of the north of Thailand, they have built relationships with the lowland people in such areas as trade and government affairs. Many Lahu in northern Thailand are able to speak standard Thai and Northern Thai Kammuang.

There is contact also with other hill tribes such as Karen, Lisu, and Akha, and some Lahu may also speak those languages, although these other groups tend to learn Black Lahu.

1.2.2 Bakeo Dialect

Bakeo is one dialect of Lahu Shi. There are only two basic linguistic descriptions of the Bakeo dialect. Bradley (1979) claimed that his research in 1972 was the first linguistic description of Bakeo. Additional research was also done by Bradley in 1979 and included in, "Lahu Dialects". There are several villages in Thailand where Bakeo people live, but there are no pure Bakeo villages in Thailand. They generally live with other speakers of dialects of Lahu or Lisu. The Bakeo population makes up only three percent of all dialects of Lahu.

The Bakeo dialect is between Black Lahu and Yellow Lahu. Bakeo phonetics and phonology are similar to those of Black Lahu, but its pitches and contours are more similar phonetically to those of the Banlan dialect.

1.3 The Goal of this Thesis

The goal of this thesis is to describe the phonological system of the Lahu Bakeo language spoken by the Bakeo people living at Ban Hoew Mashan, Mae Suay District, Chiang Rai province, Thailand. The segmental and suprasegmental phonology of the dialect will be described in greater detail than has been done previously.

1.4 Methodology and Analysis

This study began with library research on Lahu and related languages. Data was collected in a Lahu Bakeo village at Ban Huay Masang, Mae Suay district, Chiang Rai province, in the beginning of January 1996. The original intent was to survey whether or not the villagers still use Lahu Bakeo dialect as a medium of communication with the people in the village and family members. About thirty Lahu Bakeo words were recorded and compared to Black Lahu. The data showed considerable difference between the two dialects. This led to the current thesis topic.

Further data was collected with a tape recorder and transcribed phonetically in the form of wordlists. The program Find Phone was used for phonological analysis. Tone was checked using the CECIL¹ software. The analysis in this study is based on a functional approach to phonology.

¹ CECIL stands for Computerized Extraction of Components of Intonation in Language.