

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Language development and maintenance is often a goal among smaller language groups. Without day-to-day use of the language by its speech community, any language in the world can become extinct. Languages live on principally by oral and written use in everyday life. However, without an orthography, there will be no writing or reading. Regarding language death and disappearance, and its causes and circumstances, Wurm (1991) states that an important factor contributing to language loss is when the language is unwritten.

The Karenic languages of northern Karen State in Myanmar are at risk for two reasons. First, these Karenic languages are spoken by relatively small numbers of speakers and they are situated between two large and vigorous languages, Sgaw Karen and Burmese. Second, speakers of the Northwest Karenic languages do not have an orthography with which to write and read their own dialects in their daily activities.

The objective of this thesis is to delineate how the Sgaw Karen alphabet can be expanded, so that it can be used to write the Karenic languages spoken in northern Karen State. It is hoped that a Sgaw based orthography will facilitate the development of vernacular literature in these languages and strengthen their long term vitality. It is also hoped that a Sgaw based orthography will help Northwest Karen speakers to read and write Sgaw Karen more easily, and that it will allow easier access to Burmese, using the Sgaw Karen orthography as a bridge.

With at least two million speakers, the Karenic group of languages is one of the major linguistic groups of Myanmar. Renard (1980:8) estimated that another 400,000 Karen live in Thailand, from the upper Malay Peninsula to the southern Shan State.

During a survey in April and May 1999, the author found that each of the Northwest Karenic groups is trying to maintain its language. This, together with the relative lack of linguistic information about these languages, was the reason for making an in-depth phonological survey of these dialects, in order to determine whether a suitable orthography could be devised for these languages based on the standard Sgaw Karen Script. This survey was limited to seven language varieties from Thandaungyi township of Karen State. The typological status of this group has not yet been established. In particular, although they belong to the Sgawic branch of the Karenic family, it is not clear whether they are more closely related to Sgaw or Kayah. They will therefore be referred to as "Northwest Karen", according to their geographical location. Pwo dialects of northern Karen State will not be included, because they are more distantly related to the northwestern Karenic languages.

Almost all the Karenic groups throughout Myanmar except Pa-O use Sgaw Karen as a lingua franca. Therefore the Standard Karen alphabet is a valid basis for a multi-related-language orthography. On the basis of the data collected, the author made a synchronic phonological comparison of each Northwest Karen variety with Standard Sgaw Karen, with the aim of extending the Sgaw Karen orthography to cover other Karenic languages so that they may produce their own literature.

Christian missionaries developed orthographies in the early 19th Century for the largest Karenic languages, Sgaw and Pwo, by modifying the Burmese script. Although other Karenic languages have more recently received Roman orthographies, notably through the efforts of Roman Catholic missionaries, the Burmese based Sgaw and Pwo orthographies are still the most widespread.

The Sgaw Karen orthography in use today was based on the speech of Sgaw Karen speakers who worked closely with the early missionaries in Yangon. Karen evangelists and some educated Karen leaders were the only native consultants available to the missionaries. The phonological basis of Sgaw Karen orthography was therefore limited to a fairly narrow circle. As a result, it is difficult to use the Sgaw orthography to represent related Karenic languages without the expansion through symbols presenting Northwestern Karenic features in order to support effective language planning.