CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL APPROACH

This chapter deals with the theoretical requirements for the development of orthography and language planning. First, an overview of the theories behind writing systems will be presented. Then, language planning for the Sgaw Karen will be discussed since orthography is not only a matter of linguistics, but of language planning and language policy, too. The intention is to prepare an evaluation of the existing Sgaw Karen orthography in line with the theories presented in this chapter. It is also intended to find means and ways towards meeting the needs of the smaller groups such as the Northwest Karen, in order to better utilize their lingua franca, Sgaw Karen, as well as a basis for their own orthography.

3.1 Orthography development

An alphabet is a forum for unlimited creativity and expression – for the recording of histories, writing of music, of books, a vehicle for correspondence with each other. It is also a bridge to other peoples and cultures (Pittman 1998:76). This is one of the reasons why Pittman (1998:13) says that 'to decipher the alphabet of a dead language is noble and to design an alphabet for a living language is sublime'.

An *orthography* is a systematic and uniform transcription with written characters called graphemes and punctuation (Bussmann 1996:343). Gudschinsky (1990: 116) states that 'orthography' (or more simply, an alphabet) is a set of letters by which all the phonemes of the language are symbolized. An alphabetic writing

system is the inventory of written signs in a standardized order basing on the phonetic and phonological criteria mentioned above, i.e. a system in which graphic signs represent individual phonemes or suprasegmentals such as tones. In an alphabetic writing system, graphemes are a written approximation of phonemes, the smallest distinctive units within the sound system.

The orthographic system of a given language is the result of different and, at times, competing principles. Bussmann (1996: 344) lists eight principles for orthography design:

i.   <u>Phonetic principle</u>: every spoken sound should correspond exactly to one written character.

ii. <u>Phonological principle</u>: each written sign should correspond to asingle phoneme.

iii. <u>Etymological principle</u>: etymologically related words should be spelled analogously.

iv. <u>Historical principle</u>: the orthography should remain static over time.

v.   <u>Homonym principle</u>: different words that sound alike but have different meanings should be spelled differently.

vi. <u>Principle of economy</u>: superfluous letters should not be included.

vii. <u>Principle of aesthetics</u>: for various reasons some letter combinations may not be favored.

viii. <u>Pragmatic principle</u>: the orthography should be generally useful.

Sgall (1987) notes that the written form must also correspond to the structuring of other levels of language of morphophonemics, or of syntax or of the level of meaning especially with regards to punctuation as illustrated in the following diagram (cf. Luelsdorff 1987).

Meaning (Especially with punctuation)

Surface syntax

Morphology

Phonology

Phonetics ———————————————————— Graphology
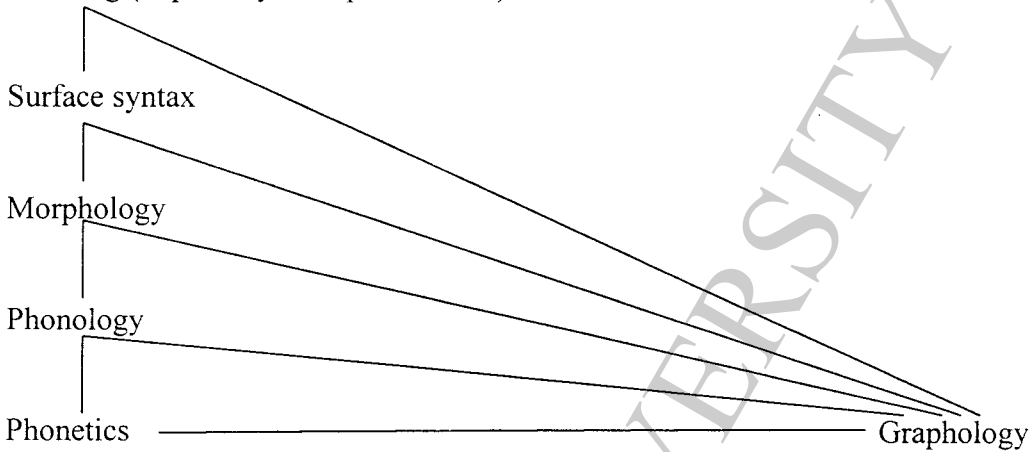
Simons (1977) proposes a "Principle of Multidialectal Orthography Design," that is, an orthography may be designed with the purpose of serving more than one related language variety so that people with spoken language barriers may be able to use the same written materials. This principle will be applied to the making of Northwestern Karen orthography. Simon's method is designed to be used by many dialects. When successfully applied it has the advantage of uniting mutually unintelligible dialects, which consequently overcomes the limits of communication.

A multidialectal orthography is the result of a comparison of the phonologies of many dialects of a language, and taking the comparison into account in designing the orthography. Different pronunciations of the same word are unified by writing them identically in the orthography where each reader assigns his own pronunciation

to the written symbol. Simon presents seven factors to consider in designing a multidialectal orthography. They are:

i. <u>Social acceptability</u>: The first principle suggests the choice of orthography, which is the most socially acceptable one.

ii. <u>Psychological acceptability</u>: The second principle suggests psycholinguistic acceptability; it means the orthography chosen must be felt to be real by the native speakers.

iii. <u>Resolution of ambiguity</u>: This principle suggests the choice of an orthography with greatest contribution towards the resolution of potential ambiguity.

iv. <u>Simplicity</u>: The fourth principle advocates simplicity in the orthography.

v. <u>Convergence of skewed systems of the phonological structure</u>: The fifth principle says that it is advisable to choose an orthography which reflects a level of phonological structure at which skewed systems converge.

vi. <u>Contrast and neutralization</u>: the sixth principle is to choose orthography which symbolizes contrast for the sake of the readers, that they may be able to read it with ease, and which symbolizes neutralization for the sake of the writer that he may be able to write it without any difficulty.

vii. <u>Least effort requirement in teaching and learning</u>: the last principle states that one needs to take into account the overall effort required for an illiterate to become fluently literate.

3.2 Language planning

Myanmar is a country of many racial groups. Therefore, the Myanmar government has a national policy with the goal of social and political cohesion. This policy has a direct bearing on language policy. Burmese is the national language and is utilized by all the racial groups as a lingua franca throughout the whole country. The national government of Myanmar has also declared Burmese a language of literacy. Languages of the other national races, however, are encouraged according to the Constitution. Chapter 11, Article 152 of the Constitution promulgated in 1974 states that every citizen shall have the right to education, and that languages of the other national races may also be taught (UNESCO Regional Office for Education in Asia and the Pacific 1984: 5). This is an encouragement for all the national races in Myanmar to learn reading and writing in their mother tongue within their own community, for economic and pedagogic reasons preferably based on the Burmese script.

Burmese based Sgaw script is well established and widely used by the Karen, including the Northwest Karen. If the existing Sgaw orthography can serve as a muti-related-language orthography to embrace all the related Karenic dialects, it will be a great advantage for the Northwest Karen to learn reading and writing in their mother tongue within their own community. It will also be easily implemented in Myanmar under the current language planning guidelines.

3.2.1 Language planning at the educational level

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization report (UNESCO 1953:11) on the question of the language of education on a worldwide basis, states that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue.

Mother tongue literacy reinforces the natural intuition with better knowledge and technical skills making ways for efficient growth in acquiring a secondlanguage. Psychologically, mother tongue literacy builds on a system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium. In fact, a later UNESCO Report also recommends that the use of the mother tongue should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. (Unesco1953, as cited in Fasold 1984: 293ff.)

In fact, a later UNESCO Report also recommends that the use of the mother tongue should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible (UNESCO 1968:691). Therefore, developing the Sgaw Karen orthography to embrace all the varying dialects of the Northwest Karenic groups is an urgent need. The use of Sgaw Karen script for this purpose will also allow maximum transfer for current literacy.

3.2.2 Language planning at the religious level

Karen forms one of the major ethnic groups in Myanmar and Karen are the largest Christian community in Myanmar. While there are different denominations

among the Karen Christians, the Karen Baptists outnumber the other churches. Even at the national level, the Karen Christian Church is the largest among other major racial groups. These Christians speak, read and write Sgaw Karen. Moreover, not only Christians but also the Sgaw Buddhists and animists among the Sgaw are eager to learn to read and write Sgaw. An inclusive literacy project is now taking place among the Karen. The Karen Baptist Convention, in conjunction with the local Churches Associations, is working out literacy projects among the Karen people throughout Myanmar.

3.2.3 Implications for the present research

A survey trip in early April 1999 revealed that,although most of the NorthwestKaren groups are so far maintaining their languages well, there are a number of factors which may work against language maintainance in the long run. Most of the Northwestern Karen people are Baptists Christians, and they read the Sgaw Karen Bible, sing and pray in Sgaw. They have Bible study classes and leadership training programs using Sgaw. Some of the informants reported that in some of the village primary schools Sgaw Karen is one of the subjects taught, but that when the students return to their homes they speak to each other in their own dialect. In addition, all the Northwest Karenic groups learn to read and write Sgaw as the language of mass media among the whole Karenic community since it is the written language closest to their mother tongue. Burmese is learned with an educational purpose for the children. Moreover, their language is surrounded by two strong languages Sgaw and Burmese. The presence of these factors led to the plan for an extended the Karen orthography, which will help enable each of the Northwest

Karenic group to have easier access to Sgaw as well as read and write their own dialect.

Using a multidialectal orthography, the Sgaw groups including Bassein, Moulmein, Papun and Thai Sgaw could use the present Sgaw alphabet. Nevertheless, for the sake of the Northwest Karenic group, the current Sgaw alphabet needs to be expanded. This should be relatively easy because, although the Bwe, Pakus, and Palachi have some distinctive sounds that Sgaw does not have (see Chapter 6, Data Analysis) there are some Burmese letters which are not used in the present Sgaw orthography, which might be suitable for extending the orthography. The Pwo Karen alphabet is also familiar to many Sgaw, so that it may be possible to borrow Pwo characters, which are appropriate for the Northwest Karen orthography. Therefore, the Sgaw orthography needs to be extended into the form of a multi-related-language orthography.

Sgaw Karen script is very much familiar with the Northwest Karen, since some Sgaw literatures used to educate them. Some educated Northwest Karen learned to speak, read and write in Sgaw. When a Sgaw and a Bwe or Geker or Gebah meet, they will communicate in Sgaw rather than any other language. It makes them feel more real to them as much as the Sgaw script is to a Sgaw. Language switching from Sgaw to a Northwest Karen, vice versa, finds a smooth way (the maximum correspondences of the vowel system, the syllable types and the skewed systems converged). Moreover, Sgaw orthography is simple enough for the Northwest Karen to adopt or modify to fit their needs. It will take the least effort to

read and write when their dialects are transcribed in Sgaw. In designing a multidialectal orthography, therefore, Simon's principles are considered eligible.