CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the methods of the survey data collection and analysis are described. Seven Northwest Karen varieties and one dialect of Kayah are chosen for analysis and comparison with Standard Sgaw Karen language. The analyzed data will then be evaluated as the phonological basis for an extended script for Northwest Karen varieties.

5.1 Selection of language varieties for analysis

The decision about which of the language data corpora should undergo a phonological analysis was based on sociolinguistic considerations. The felt needs for vernacular literature and the possibility of language death due to a strong influence by the surrounding languages were the basic factors.

The data gathered include two dialects of Bwe, from the east and west banks of Daylo stream in Thandaungyi township; two dialects of Paku, Shokho and Kathokhi (named after the villages in Taungoo township); Geker and Gebah in Taungoo township; and Palachi, one of the Mopgha (Mopwa) groups in Tawbyagyi village, Thandaungyi township.

5.2 Data collection

For each variety, a word list of 436[1] items and responses to a list of sociolinguistic questions were collected. The survey that provided the data for this paper was done in April and May 1999 in the northern part of Karen State (Thandaungyi, Thandaung Myothit and Taungoo townships).

During October and November 1999, a literacy and translation workshop held in Yangon with attendees from the Kayah, Geker, Gebah, Palachi, Kayan, Yinnet, Yinkya and Bwe language groups provided the author with an opportunity to collect additional data.

5.3 Language informants

There were seven language informants, one for each dialect of Northwest Karen. The secretaries of the Churches Associations in northwest Karen State helped find informants from each language group. Each secretary was asked to locate an informant who was about forty or fifty years of age, a constant dweller at his or her village, who spoke their own dialect and understood Sgaw quite well. Most of the informants were about fifty and one was seventy years old. Data on Kayah was gathered from a Kayah speaker in Chiang Mai, Thailand (age 36).

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[1] This word list is a standard survey tool used by SiL International in mainland South East Asia. It contains 89 words from the Swadesh 100 wordlist and additional words relevant to the culture and natural resources in South East Asia. Please see the complete word lists in Appendix A.

5.4 Handling of data

The word lists were recorded with a 'Sony' tape recorder (TCM- 495V), using a necktie microphone (IMP-1KΩ). The sociolinguistic questionnaire[1] has both a short and a long form. A sample of the Questionnaire is attached in Appendix C. The recorded data were transcribed in Chiang Mai in June 1999. The data were transcribed by the author and entered into the Speech Manager database program.

The data were analyzed with assistance from A. Noel Mann and Mr. Seung Kim. The analyzed data were then evaluated as a basis for comparing the Sgaw, Kayah and the Northwest Karen languages (see Ch.7).

5.5 Phonological analysis of Sgaw

The overall goal of this analysis is to make phonological inventories for each dialect and synchronic comparison between them. Therefore, in constructing the phonological inventories of the Northwest Karen languages, a relatively narrow phonetic transcription was used. This narrow transcription is evident in, for example, the syllable-final glottal stops. These are usually considered features of particular tones in traditional Tibeto-Burman phonology, and therefore not marked. The native speaker, however, may be more aware of phonetic realizations rather than underlying abstract phonological units and this may need to be considered when developing an alphabet. Furthermore, when comparing the sounds of his language with the known phonetic values of the Sgaw Karen orthography, phonetic details which are only allophonic variation in one language (for instance, breathiness on low tones and the

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[1] This sociolinguistics questionnaire was developed by SIL for use in Mainland Southeast Asia.

voicing of fortis stops on mid tones in Sgaw) may be phonologically distinctive in another language. It is important for orthography design to keep the phonetic quality of each phoneme available, for the sake of comparison between languages. The third reason for a narrow transcription is as Gudchinsky (1990) suggests, that related factors, such as the relative importance of phonological and morphophonological features in a language, may have to be taken into consideration when developing an alphabet.

5.6 Adapting for the Northwest Karen orthography

The results from the phonological comparison and synchronic analysis will be applied for revision of the existing Sgaw Karen orthography and adapted to the development of Northwest Karen orthography. The principles of orthography design discussed in Chapter 3 will serve as guides for extending the Sgaw orthography (details are discussed in Chapter 8).