

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents a summary of the research findings and a discussion both in terms of what conclusions can be drawn and in terms of what needs further study. The following section gives a broad overview of the work and Section 9.2 presents a summary of the conclusions relating to each of the goals of the study. Sections 9.3 and 9.4 discuss respectively the implications of the research findings and suggestions for further research.

9.1 Overview of the Study

The overarching theme of the research presented in this thesis is the ongoing assessment of the Khuen language development programme. The data comes primarily from two surveys conducted in four of the ten Khuen-majority village tracts around Keng Tung town, Eastern Shan State, Myanmar. The first survey – referred to in this thesis as the ‘sociolinguistic survey’ – collected wordlists in seven locations and in six of those seven locations a sample of 12 individuals answered Individual Sociolinguistic Questionnaires (ISQs). The various sections on the ISQ collected information on subject demographics; ethnolinguistic identity; bilingual proficiency; language attitudes and dialect perceptions. Wordlist data was used in two ways. Firstly a phonological analysis of each wordlist laid the ground for comparison of phonological features across wordlists. Secondly the wordlists were compared for lexical similarity among the Khuen varieties themselves as well as with wordlists from other Tai languages of the region. The ISQ responses were analysed to provide evidence about Khuen language vitality, Khuen literacy proficiency and proficiency of Khuen speakers in the LWCs in use in the region.

The second survey – referred to as the ‘literacy survey’ – was motivated by the high reported literacy rates on the sociolinguistic survey. Separate tests of reading,

writing and numeracy were designed based on similar tests used in the Lao National Literacy Survey (Lao People's Democratic Republic 2004). Data was collected in five of the villages where data was collected on the sociolinguistic survey although most subjects who participated in the literacy survey had not participated in the sociolinguistic survey. Each subject who took the literacy tests also answered a Literacy Questionnaire. Sections on the Literacy Questionnaire collected information on subject demographics; ethnolinguistic identity and Khuen literacy proficiency and attitudes. The literacy tests were marked according to a pre-set marking scheme and the results of reading, writing and numeracy tests combined to determine the literacy level of each subject. These tested literacy proficiency results were used to compute estimates of literacy rates for comparison with the reported literacy rates calculated from the sociolinguistic survey.

9.2 Conclusions Relating to Goals of Study

In this section the goals of the study are restated and a summary of the conclusions that can be drawn relating to each goal is presented.

9.2.1 Goal 1: Assess the need for literacy in Khuen

Nine specific research questions relating to this broad goal were investigated. The research questions probe the potential for Khuen speakers to use one of the LWCs in the region – specifically Shan, Burmese and Lue – which presently have greater bodies of literature than Khuen. The survey revealed that Lue is not used as an LWC by the Khuen speakers in the villages of the survey. Consequently the information gathered about the potential of Khuen speakers to use Lue was much less comprehensive than that relating to Shan or Burmese. Notwithstanding, the indications are that Lue is not currently a viable alternative to Khuen as the language of literacy. Assessing the viability of Shan and Burmese as media of literacy for Khuen speakers can be done in two time-frames – present and future. The former is assessed by contemporary literacy rates and the latter by a

combination of language attitudes and oral proficiency evaluations. These are treated in turn in the following paragraphs.

Current literacy proficiency in Shan is related to literacy proficiency in Burmese in that 5/6 [83%] of subjects who claimed to be literate in Shan also claimed to be literate in Burmese. As shown in Table 48, literacy rates are affected by age and gender. For both Shan and Burmese rates tend to decrease with age, as one might expect with younger generations being more likely to encounter Shan language and literature as well as having greater access to formal (Burmese-medium) education. The most striking thing about the results is the fact that 47/60 [78%] are neither literate in Shan nor in Burmese indicating that in the present 78% of Khuen speakers are unable to use Shan or Burmese as their medium of literacy.

In assessing the potential of Khuen speakers to use Shan or Burmese for literacy at some stage in the future, both language attitudes and oral proficiency are relevant. Khuen speakers did not demonstrate strong negative attitudes to bilingualism in Shan or Burmese indicating that attitudes would not be a major impediment to use of Shan or Burmese for literacy. This was in contrast to the levels of oral proficiency reported by subjects. Notwithstanding the fact that subjects' comprehension of spoken Shan and Burmese is generally higher than their speaking proficiency, the lack of proficiency in oral Shan and Burmese would impede the majority of Khuen speakers should they seek to develop literacy skills in Shan or Burmese. This leads to the conclusion that the viability of Shan or Burmese as the language of literacy for Khuen speakers is severely constrained by the lack of oral proficiency in these languages among Khuen speakers.

9.2.2 Goal 2: Assess the potential demand for literacy in Khuen

As with the assessment of potential need for literacy in Khuen in Section 9.2.1, the assessment of potential demand for literacy in Khuen can be done in two time-frames – present and future. The former is assessed by contemporary literacy rates

and the latter by a combination of language attitudes and oral proficiency evaluations. These are treated in turn in the following paragraphs.

Current literacy rates in Khuen show variation between males and females although age rates are relatively constant across different age groups. 29/30 [97%] of male subjects claimed to be literate in Khuen, meaning that in the younger two age groups the literacy rate is 100%. The extremely high rates for male subjects are plausible in light of the fact that all male subjects spent time in a Khuen temple, the median time being 7 years. All male subjects reported reading Khuen literature during their time in the temple. Literacy rates for females were much lower than those of males reflecting the fact that women have much less opportunity to study Khuen literacy. Nevertheless the rates for females are remarkably high for a minority language that is not taught in the formal education system. The current high literacy rates in Khuen indicate that the overwhelming majority of adult males and approximately 50% of adult females are able to make use of written materials in Khuen. There is thus a large community who are in a position to benefit from any new written materials in Khuen.

In assessing the potential demand for literacy in Khuen at some stage in the future, both language attitudes and patterns of language use are relevant. Subjects showed unanimously positive attitudes to Khuen literacy and similarly positive attitudes to Khuen culture imply positive attitudes to Khuen language. Taken together these findings suggest that Khuen literacy and culture will be preserved by future generations. This is borne out by reported patterns of language use. Khuen is used by the overwhelming majority of subjects in the family domain as well as other domains of necessity such as village meetings and in religious contexts. Parents are passing Khuen on to their children who use Khuen when playing with other children. This shows that use of Khuen is not restricted to the family domain but is also used outside the home with friends. 56/60 [93%] of subjects said they thought that in 20 years' time children would be speaking Khuen. In other words they believe that parents in 20 years' time will be teaching Khuen to their children. All the evidence points to strong language vitality in the present and there is very little

to contradict the general belief of Khuen speakers themselves that future generations will be speaking Khuen. This implies that there will be a large community of Khuen speakers in future generations for whom Khuen is the most natural language of literacy.

9.2.3 Goal 3: Determine which Khuen variety is the most suitable for use as a written standard

The concepts of ‘accessibility’ and ‘acceptability’ are both useful in assessing the potential of any particular candidate to serve as a written standard for a particular language. Accessibility relates to the phonological, lexical and grammatical closeness of the chosen variety to all of the other varieties. Acceptability is gauged in terms of the attitudes of Khuen speakers in general to the chosen variety.

As discussed in Section 3.3.4 language attitudes cannot be directly observed but must be inferred from observation of related behaviour or stated feelings or opinions. This study attempted to gauge attitudes to different varieties by seeking to identify the most prestigious Khuen variety. There was no consensus among the responses meaning that the evidence relating to acceptability in this study has little to contribute in assessing the most suitable variety for use as a written standard. This is not to say that it is unimportant, simply that the evidence relating to acceptability here is inconclusive.

As far as accessibility is concerned, the approach taken in this study was to identify groupings of Khuen varieties by several criteria and assess these groupings for representativeness and geographical distribution. The groupings derived on the basis of lexical similarity were statistically significant but the groupings were based on such small differences that they did not provide strong evidence of groupings that are practically important. The fact that all lexical similarity percentages between Khuen varieties were at least 93% implies that whichever variety is chosen to be the standard, its lexical similarity to any other Khuen variety would be at least 93%. Notwithstanding this observation, on the

basis of lexical similarity Yang Loh would appear to be the least suitable candidate since it generally has the lowest similarity with other Khuen varieties.

When comparing the phonological features of Khuen varieties, there is a great deal of homogeneity but some differences do exist which point to certain subgroupings. The inventory of initial consonant phonemes provides clear evidence that Yang Kway and Wan Jay varieties can be identified as a sub-group. Since they both lie in Murng Lang village tract one might expect them to group together.

Comparing vowel phonemes for the seven varieties it can be seen that Yang Kway, Wan Jay and Pa Jahm follow the same pattern. As with the consonant phonemes there is much homogeneity across the varieties but there is clear evidence that Pa Jahm, Yang Kway and Wan Jay form a sub-group with respect to vowel features. The evidence is not clear enough to say whether all of the other varieties form a single group or not.

As far as tone patterns are concerned there are no significant differences among the seven varieties. Murng Jem has some unusual behaviour in the A column which could indicate change induced by contact with Shan. This however requires further investigation to establish whether the behaviour is common throughout the community or restricted to some individuals or groups.

To summarise, the phonological features (consonants, vowels and tones) of the Murng Lang varieties Yang Kway and Wan Jay consistently pattern together indicating that they should be grouped together on the basis of phonological criteria. There is not enough clear evidence to say whether the other varieties should all be grouped together or whether further subgroupings exist. It is clear however that Yang Loh is not the best representative of these other varieties and hence not the ideal candidate for a standard variety. From their geographical location these varieties are associated with the Kang Murng dialect studied by Gedney ([1964] 1994) and Rasi (1978).

To put the choice of which variety should be used for the written standard in perspective, the generally high degree of homogeneity among varieties both phonologically and lexically means that any variety apart from Yang Lorh could reasonably serve as the standard. The greater geographical range of the Kang Murng variety grouping gives it an advantage over the more geographically limited Murng Lang variety grouping. However more information is needed particularly regarding the attitudes of Khuen speakers towards the different varieties before a conclusion can be drawn with any confidence.

9.2.4 Goal 4: Determine which Tai varieties are most closely related to Khuen

The groupings from lexical similarity were compared with those based on phonological features. Standard Thai has the lowest lexical similarity to Khuen followed by Tai Mao. A similar pattern is shown by the classification based on Chamberlain's (1975) and Robinson's (1994) phonological criteria hierarchy⁴⁴. Following Robinson's classification Northern Thai and Lue Murng Yorhng are the varieties closest to Khuen. There is no further evidence from phonological segments to establish either of these two as closer than the other. Lexically, both Lue Murng Yorhng and Lue Jinghong are closer than Northern Thai but the differences are so slight as to probably not be of practical importance, despite being statistically significant.

9.2.5 Goal 5: Assess the current state of literacy in Khuen

Five specific research questions were investigated with the aim of assessing the current state of literacy in Khuen. These research questions examine patterns of literacy education as well as patterns of ongoing literacy use. Attitudes to Khuen literacy are also probed. Subjects' literacy proficiency was measured by tests in

⁴⁴ Standard Thai separates off from Khuen at the highest division of SWT (*b>ph; *d>th etc.) and Tai Mao at the next highest branch (*khw>kh; *kw>k; A1-23-4 etc.).

reading, writing and numeracy and from these estimates of adult literacy rates computed. Finally tested literacy proficiency was compared with self-assessed proficiency in an attempt to find a 'cheaper' alternative to testing literacy proficiency.

The patterns of Khuen literacy education of males and females were compared in Table 77 under the headings 'Where?'; 'What as?'; 'When?' and 'How long?' Generally speaking males start slightly earlier than females and study for longer, the underlying reason being that males study as part of their general apprenticeship as a novice or monk in the temple whereas females attend classes at the temple as lay students.

In order to take a 'snapshot' of Khuen literacy use, subjects were asked what Khuen materials they had read in the last 30 days (Q32b). The most striking thing about the responses is that 50/65 [77%] of the materials specified were to do with religion, the remaining 15/65 [23%] of responses being spread over several diverse categories. This pattern of reading points to two things. Firstly it points to the importance of Buddhist faith in Khuen society both on an individual level and a community level. Secondly it suggests that the range of materials that people read is very limited which may in turn indicate that the range of materials available for people to read is very limited.

Strong positive attitudes towards Khuen literacy are inferred from the unanimously positive responses to questions about whether Khuen children should learn to read Khuen and whether subjects see any advantage to Khuen literacy.

Given the fact that the vast majority of Khuen people are Buddhist and that Buddhist males are expected to spend time as a novice in a Khuen temple where Khuen literacy is an integral part of the experience, it is not surprising that the literacy rates for adult males are around 100% in every age group. This is true for both tested and reported rates. Moreover, performance of males in literacy tests revealed a very thorough knowledge with all males tested showing functional literacy skills or better. Female literacy rates were relatively consistent across the

different age groups although the youngest age group had more subjects classified as having functional or sustained functional literacy skills than the other two age groups.

Comparing tested literacy rates with reported rates there is very close agreement: for males the rates are identical and female tested rates are between 4-6% below reported rates. This close correspondence affirms the changes in methodology used to obtain the reported rates as compared to the methodology used for the Lao National Literacy Survey (Lao People's Democratic Republic 2004).

In the search for a 'cheaper' alternative to time-consuming literacy tests, subjects' self-assessment of their literacy proficiency was compared to their test scores. However the self-assessment was found not to be a reliable predictor of test scores. Many females grossly underestimated their proficiency whereas self-assessment for males was inaccurate due to both overestimation and underestimation of literacy proficiency.

9.3 Implications of Research Findings

In this section some implications are drawn from the results summarised in Section 9.2.

9.3.1 Implications for Khuen language development

The results in this thesis show many positive aspects for Khuen language development. Perhaps the most significant is the strong language vitality displayed making it likely that Khuen will be spoken by future generations. Subjects displayed a strong sense of identity as Khuen and showed positive attitudes towards Khuen culture. There were positive attitudes towards Khuen language and literacy. The tested literacy rate was extremely high for men and, given the fact that Khuen literacy is not taught in the regular education system, the tested literacy rates for females were also surprisingly high.

The snapshot of what Khuen literacy skills are currently used for revealed that 50/65 [77%] of the materials that subjects had read in the last 30 days were to do with religion, the remaining 15/65 [23%] being spread over several diverse categories. This concentration of Khuen literacy use in one domain points to a need to examine the range of materials available for people to read, both in terms of what materials exist in Khuen and in terms of how such materials might be circulated.

The phonological evidence showed that there was relatively little variation across different Khuen varieties. Moreover, the evidence points to a process of loss of phonemes which means that what phonological change there is can be readily accommodated by the existing Khuen orthography. The evidence from lexical comparison is again that the Khuen varieties are very similar – the lowest lexical similarity percentage encountered between any two Khuen varieties was 93%. These two points taken together mean that whichever variety is used for the written standard will be closely related both phonologically and lexically to the other varieties covered by this study. Moreover phonological and even lexical variation among Khuen varieties are not seen as serious threats to Khuen language development.

9.3.2 Implications for literacy in the mother tongue

Literacy rates are high for a minority language that is not taught in government schools. The tested rates for males (100%; 100%; 92%) are all vastly superior to the overall tested rate for males in the Lao National Literacy Survey (LNLS) (Lao People's Democratic Republic 2004) viz., 53.7%. Females have lower rates but the tested rates for females (45%; 36%; 44%) compare favourably with the overall tested literacy rate for females in the LNLS viz., 36.9%. There are two factors shared by males and females that support the acquisition of Khuen literacy skills. Firstly, Khuen is their mother tongue and so it is most natural for them to begin to learn literacy skills in Khuen. Secondly, Khuen literacy skills have both symbolic

and practical value in the community meaning that there is strong motivation to acquire Khuen literacy skills.

9.3.3 Implications for the methodology for literacy surveys

The estimates of tested literacy rates in this study were much closer to the corresponding reported rates than was the case in the LNLS. Although there are likely to be several factors involved in this, the results are consistent with the hypothesis that some of the discrepancy in the LNLS was due to the protocol used in estimating the reported literacy rates. Moreover the close correspondence of tested rates and reported rates in the Khuen survey suggests that the protocol used in the Khuen survey, namely to ask each subject separate questions about their proficiency in reading, writing and numeracy, gives more accurate information.

Another fundamental issue in undertaking a survey is the language in which it is conducted. Before designing the Khuen surveys the author was advised that Khuen should be used and, where that was not possible, then Shan should be used. The evidence of the survey is that had the national language been used the communication would have been difficult to say the least since so few subjects claimed any proficiency in Burmese. The analogy for the LNLS is that information gained from members of minority groups must have a lower degree of reliability associated with it than information from mother tongue speakers of the language used for the survey, i.e., Lao.

9.4 Suggestions for Further Research

There are two main areas for further research suggested by the research presented above. The first has to do with gathering more of the same kind of data to improve the reliability of the sample by increasing its size and geographical dispersion. The second has to do with more focused investigations of particular issues raised by the results.

9.4.1 Extending the present study

An obvious next step in the ongoing assessment of the Khuen language development programme is to collect data from the remaining six Khuen-majority village tracts that were not included in the present study. Further wordlists would provide evidence for phonological and lexical comparison with the varieties already surveyed. Similarly literacy testing would expand the sample and hence increase the precision of the overall literacy rates.

Having collected more data in the Khuen-majority village tracts, extending the survey to Khuen-speaking villages in more ethnically mixed areas would provide further insight into language maintenance (or language shift) as well as insights into phonological change in situations where Khuen is in contact with other languages. In particular it is expected that there will be communities where Lue is used more widely as an LWC.

9.4.2 New topics arising from the research results

From the point of view of corpus planning, conducting an inventory of publications in Khuen as well as assessing their availability would have great benefits. It would enable those promoting Khuen literacy to identify areas where new materials need to be produced and stimulate consideration of the availability of Khuen literature, particularly in villages distant from Keng Tung. One obvious area for new materials production has to do with the process of modernisation, that is, providing literature relating to new technologies and discoveries.

The high literacy rates among Khuen speakers are remarkable for a minority language in Asia that is not taught in the formal education system. Identifying the factors that contribute to the success of Khuen literacy teaching and learning would be helpful not only to the Khuen Cultural and Literature Committee but also to language planners in other languages in the region. One area that deserves special attention is the influence of Buddhism on language use and literacy both at the community level and the individual level.

One of the striking features of the sociolinguistic survey was the fact that subjects expressed little confidence in their ability to use Shan despite the fact that they understood the questions on the Individual Sociolinguistic Questionnaire which were all in Shan. An objective evaluation of the subjects' proficiency in Shan would provide useful insights, not just for the Khuen situation but more broadly for the many situations where multilingualism is so common that people are often unaware when they have switched to a different language.⁴⁵

The wordlist data from Murng Jem revealed an unusual pattern of tone splits in the A column. An obvious thing to investigate is whether this feature is widespread in the community or and if so to probe factors that might explain it.

While the tone splits were generally consistent for the B column in the seven varieties sampled on the survey, other evidence of variation in the tone split in the B column means that it is still of interest to gather more information on the tone splits.

Applying Robinson's (1994:146) phonological criteria to classify the two Lue varieties studied in this thesis, Lue Murng Yorhng is placed in different subgroup to Lue Jinghong. Since the Lue data is from 1964, it would be of interest to check the contemporary use and phonological features of Lue Murng Yorhng. Furthermore the classification based on phonological criteria implies that Lue Murng Yorhng is closer to Khuen than to Lue Jinghong. A broader study is thus needed to probe other aspects of the relationship between the two languages.

⁴⁵ In pilot testing the survey instruments for the sociolinguistic survey, the team spoke in Shan to one lady who claimed that she could only speak Khuen but understood the questions and answered them in Shan!