

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This thesis is a study of the participant reference system found in five third-person narrative texts of the Bru language as spoken in the village of Khok Sa-at in Sakon Nakhorn province, Thailand. It analyzes the participant reference system in terms of its function with the goal of making discoveries that will aid in understanding the emic discourse tendencies of Bru narrative text.

Following the actors in a Bru narrative can be difficult due to the extensive use of zero anaphora, i.e. leaving the actor unspecified. When zero anaphora is used, Bru speakers assume that the context of the text is sufficient to specify the participant. This study will examine in what contexts zero anaphora is used. Along with zero anaphora, Bru narratives use proper names, kinship terms and pronouns to refer to participants, as well as longer noun phrases. This study will examine the different strategies of participant reference and what motivates Bru speakers to use them.

All languages have a system of identifying participants within a narrative. Each participant reference system uses referring expressions, generally Noun Phrases (NPs) in all their forms, according to its own particular discourse grammar. The discourse grammar of a language determines when pronouns and proper names are necessary to identify a participant. Paragraph boundaries, salience and disambiguation all influence the type of referring expressions likely to be used. Grimes (1975:47) argues that the participant identification system of a narrative text provides a means for establishing the identity of a referent and maintaining it without confusion to the hearers.

The following chapters seek to describe the participant identification system of Bru narrative. The remainder of chapter one will describe the Bru people, where they are located and their language classification. It will also present the research questions, objectives and scope of the study. It will introduce the six texts to be examined and will explain the theoretical methodology used to analyze the texts.

Chapter 2 provides a brief description of Bru phonology and sentence level grammar. Chapter 3 describes the inventory of referring expressions used in Bru narrative. Chapter 4 applies Givón's theory of "Look-Back" and "Decay" to rank participants in their order of importance. Chapter 5 describes participant identification patterns in 8 different contexts using Dooley and Levinsohn's (2001:44) methodology. Chapter 6 summarizes the findings of this paper and evaluates the methodology used.

### 1.1 The Bru people

There are approximately 120,000 speakers of Bru Tri located in southern Laos and central Vietnam. In Thailand there are 3 distinct Bru dialects with populations of around 5000 speakers each. They are located in Ubon Ratchathani province (Bru Wyn Buek), Mukdahan Province (Bru Don Luang) and Sakon Nakhorn province (Bru Khok Sa-at). See Figure 1 for a map of the main Bru population areas from (Mann 2009:10).

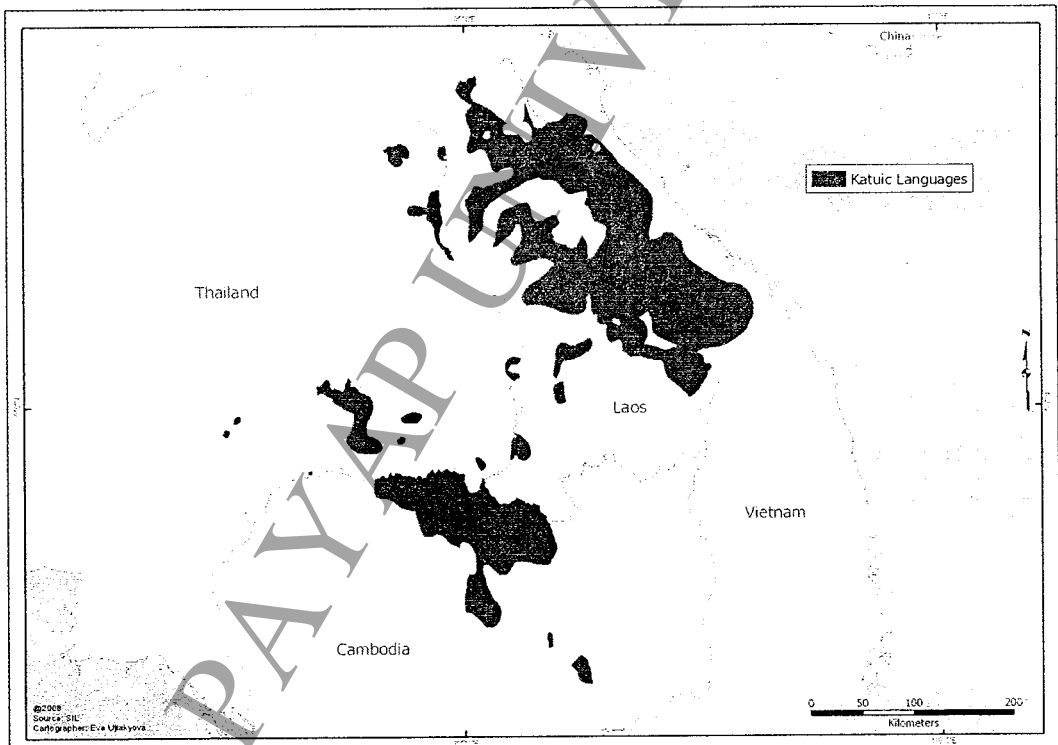


Figure 1: Map of Northern Katuic languages in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam

(Mann 2009:10)

This study will focus on the Bru speech variety of the village of Khok Sa-at (Bru KS) located in Sakon Nakhorn province of Northeast Thailand.

## 1.2 Language background

Bru is an Austroasiatic, Mon-Khmer language in the Katuic branch. The Ethnologue (Gordon 2005) classifies 20 languages as Katuic. Some of the major languages are Bru, Katang, Suey, Kuy, Ta-oih and So. They are found in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

### 1.2.1 Language classification

Miller and Miller (1996) refer to the Bru languages of Northeast Thailand as being in the North Katuic grouping (with Thomas 1966; Smith 1981). Smith includes Katang, Sui, So and Bru in this subgroup. However, the Ethnologue (Gordon:2005) identifies these languages as West Katuic. The Katuic family derives its name from the Katu language.

Miller and Miller (1996) argue that there is a strong relationship between the So, Bru, and Katang groups and separate the Suai, Kuy and Kuai as a different sub-category. Figure 2 below shows a proposed partial Mon-Khmer language family tree following Miller and Miller.

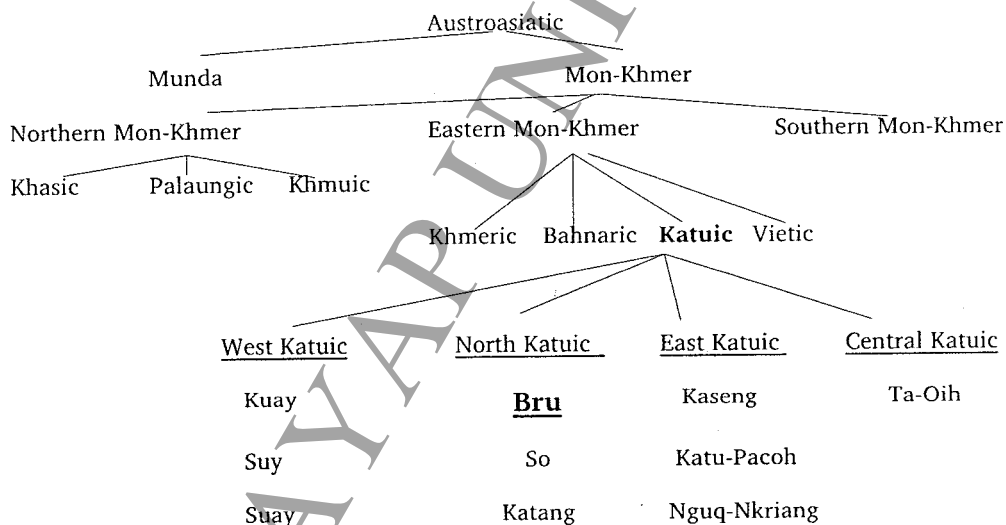


Figure 2: Bru Language Family Tree

The Bru language data for this thesis comes from the village of Khok Sa-at in the Phang Khone sub-district of Sakon Nakhorn province of Thailand. The village of Khok Sa-at represents the language variety spoken by eight villages within the Phang Khone and Phanna Nikhom sub-districts along the shore of the Nam Un reservoir.<sup>1</sup> The eight villages are shown in figure 3 below.

<sup>1</sup> The eight villages are Khok Sa-at, Kham Wae, Nong Hai Yaay, Nong Hai Noi, Naa Lao, Naa Than, Huay Bun and Hin Taek.

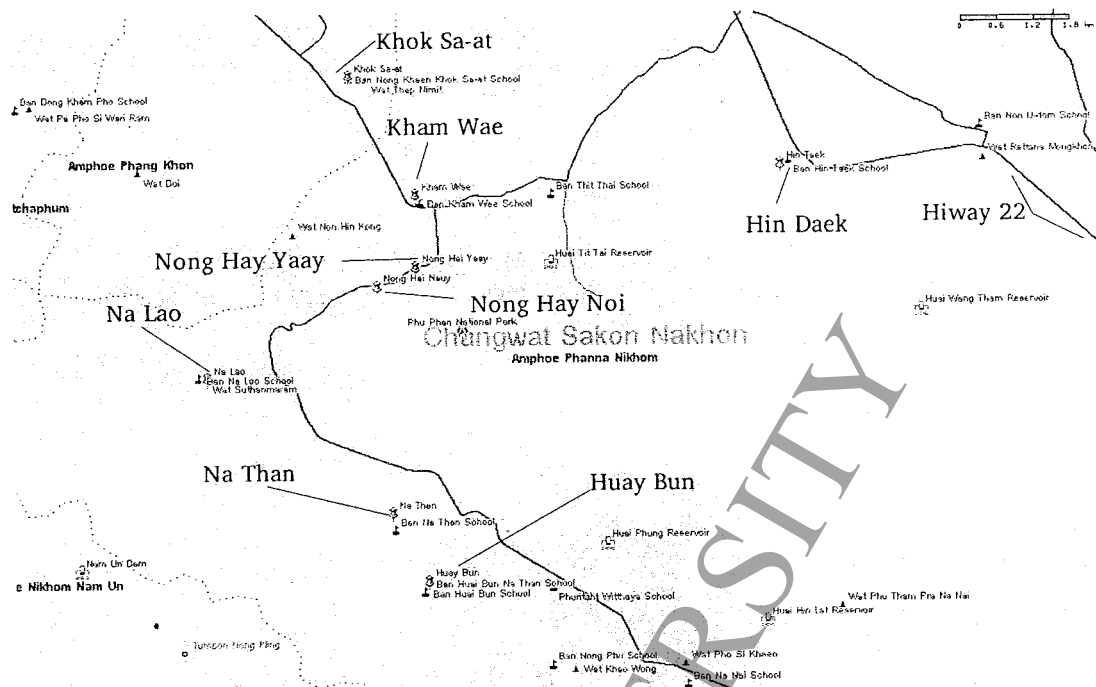


Figure 3: Detailed Map of 8 Bru KS villages (Mapmagic Thailand:2008)

Henceforth, this variety will be referred to as Bru KS, though there is no agreed upon name that refers to this variety. Bru KS is not mutually intelligible with the Bru Tri of Laos and Viet Nam, the speakers of which are approximately 150 kilometers away, nor is it mutually intelligible with the Bru of Don Luang in Mukdahan province (100 kilometers away). Neither is Bru KS mutually intelligible with the Bru of Wyn Buek of Ubon Ratchathani province. Miller reports that the Bru of Khok Sa-at originate from the Meung Wang area in Laos near the Vietnamese Border (Miller and Miller:1996).

The Bru and So languages of Northeast Thailand are very similar, as seen in the high percentage of cognates (91%) they share (Miller and Miller:1996) and in observed ease of language acquisition between the two languages. The story teller of Khok Sa-at relates<sup>2</sup> how the Bru came from Laos a few generations ago and states that the neighboring So of Kusuman village and the Bru of Dong Luang were in the same migration, settling in different regions. Migliazza (2003) states that the So people came to Thailand from central Laos within the last 150 years due to political and economic conditions there.

The religious orientation of the Bru in Khok Sa-at is traditionally animist but strongly influenced by Thai Buddhism. They make their living through rice paddy farming, raising cattle, fishing, foraging and temporarily moving to Bangkok to work in factories.

<sup>2</sup> This historical narrative is not included in the texts under study.

### 1.2.2 Language vitality

According to Kabin Hunguan, the village headman of Khok Sa-at, the Bru speaking population of these villages is approximately five thousand people. All of the villages have a mixed population, with Phu Thai and Isaan speakers living together with the Bru KS speakers. About half the population of Khok Sa-at speak Bru while ninety percent of the population of Naa Lao village speak Bru. Most of the Bru KS speakers are bi-lingual in Isaan (Lao) and Bru. Many also speak Thai fluently as public schooling has become more available in the last forty years.

While no sociolinguistic surveys were conducted to measure language vitality, the author lived in the village of Khok Sa-at for fourteen months and visited the other seven villages. It was observed that many elementary school children of Bru parents in Khok Sa-at were not speaking the Bru language, and language informants stated that the children of parents who have intermarried do not speak Bru, though many have a passive understanding. The children of Naa Lao village are reported to speak Bru within the family and were observed to be using Bru within the village.

Using Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), the village of Khok Sa-at is estimated to be in stage 7, where the older generation is using the language but the children are not using it. The language is still spoken in the home among those in their mid-twenties and older. Those younger than twenty rarely used Bru. Thus there is the beginning of a disruption between the child-bearing generation and the newest generation.

The village of Naa Lao is estimated to be in stage 6 of the GIDS because the children are learning the language naturally in an intergenerational context. Stage 5 requires that there be literacy in the threatened language along with some informal education. As there is only a beginning orthography, no literacy and no formal or informal education, the Bru KS language cannot be in stage 5.

Fishman (1991) argues that stage 6 is the level for language maintenance. While the other six villages of this variety were not visited often enough to make observations, it is reported that they are in the same category as Khok Sa-at (Stage 7). The villages of Na Than and Huay Bun, which are closer to the village of Naa Lao, were reported to have a higher percentage of Bru speakers and may still be in Stage 6.

At these levels of language maintenance, the Bru language is threatened. If the mixed population villages of Khok Sa-at and the surrounding area could increase their language use among the children, they could achieve a level 6. If literacy

materials now being developed are accepted and used by the Bru speaking population, then Bru KS may be able to achieve a level 5. If this happens, then this variety of Bru would remain viable for the foreseeable future.

If Bru KS is compared to the Mpi language survey data found in Tehan and Nahhas (2009), it can be seen that the Bru KS language is more likely to be maintained due to the larger population of speakers. The Mpi village of Ban Sakoen is in Stage 8 as only older members of the village speak Mpi. The neighboring Mpi village of Ban Dong is in Stage 7 as some of the children speak Mpi and more have a passive understanding (Tehan and Nahhas 2009:6). It is expected that the Bru KS language will follow the same trajectory as Mpi if there is no effort to maintain the language through literacy and through increasing its status by teaching it as a subject in local schools.

### **1.2.3 Previous research on Bru and So**

The Bru language of Vietnam and Laos, referred to as Bru Tri, has been studied by John and Carolyn Miller who have written articles on the sentence level grammar (Miller, John:1964; Miller, Carolyn:1964) and a short discourse analysis (Miller and Miller 2002).

Migliazza (1998) has written a grammar of the closely related So language as well as discourse articles (2000; 2001; 2003) and a lexicostatistical study (1992). Gainey (1985) has written a comparative phonology of Kui, Bru and So. Burusphat (1989 and 1993) has written about Kui narratives. There are no studies published on participant reference in Bru narrative text.

### **1.3 Research questions**

The following questions are addressed in this thesis:

1. What is the inventory of referring expressions available for identification in Bru narrative discourse?
2. What are the default encodings for tracking participants in the various contexts of narrative discourse?
3. When is null reference used and what is the motivation for its use?
4. What motivates the use of non-default encodings of participant identification?

## 1.4 Objectives of the study

The objectives in this study were to collect and examine five Bru narrative texts. The phonetically transcribed texts were used to present a short description of Bru KS phonology and grammar. An additional 3000 word Bru dictionary compiled by the author was also used to inform the phonology. The texts were then analyzed by:

1. Compiling an inventory of referring expressions and describing their functions on the discourse level,
2. Describing the default patterns for participant identification, and
3. Identifying non-default occurrences of participant identification and suggesting possible motivations for them.

## 1.5 Limitations and scope

This study is based on an analysis of five third-person narrative texts. These texts were written by the son of the village storyteller, who edited them to reflect natural Bru speech. Only one type of text is studied, namely third person narratives.

Another limitation of this research is that the author is not a native speaker of Bru KS and has had to rely on language informants for correct translation and interlinearization of the texts. There are some ambiguities in the text which could lead to a variant translation. It is believed that these ambiguities are minimal for the purposes of this study.

## 1.6 The text corpus

There are six narrative texts in the corpus. Five of these texts are analyzed, while the sixth (King Paajit) was added for the purpose of providing examples of proper nouns in the text and was not completely analyzed. This section describes how the texts were collected and gives a summary of each of the narratives.

### 1.6.1 Data collection

All of the texts in this study were collected in the village of Khok Sa-at in Sakon Nakhorn province, Thailand. My language informant, Thongbai Khunakorn, typed these stories in the tentative Bru Khok Sa-at orthography. Mr. Khunakorn and I then interlinearized each text in the Fieldworks<sup>3</sup> computer program. We also phonetically transcribed each word in the lexicon created by the Fieldworks program

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<sup>3</sup> Fieldworks was developed by SIL and can be downloaded for free at <http://fieldworks.sil.org>.

to allow phonological analysis. The stories were written in June of 2007 and interlinearized beginning in July and August of 2007.

Mr. Khunakorn edited the texts to make them grammatically well-formed according to his intuition. He is the son of the village storyteller who has told these stories many times. The village story teller is bilingual in Lao and adds many Lao words when telling a story. These Lao words were edited out when a natural Bru word could be substituted. Sometimes the Lao words were a repetition of a Bru word, added to aid the understanding of Bru children who might not know that particular Bru word.

Mixing languages in a bi-lingual situation is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Mr. Khunakorn had definite opinions as to which Lao words had been fully adopted into the Bru lexicon and which words were not. Thus, the narratives under study were edited with a “purist” disposition.

### 1.6.2 Plot summaries

These plot summaries will outline the main events of the narratives to aid the reader in understanding the subsequent analysis of this paper.

**The Seven Orphans** is a mythical story about a barren couple who desire children. They pray to the gods and are given seven sons who have Merit. These seven sons eat all of the couple's food, and so the couple decides to abandon them in the forest. First they try to abandon the seven sons by leaving them in a deep hole. After that fails, the father attempts to crush them by having a tree fall on them. The children escape the second attempt by crawling out from under the tree and then finding their way home. The third attempt is successful as the children climb too high in a tree chasing a squirrel and are left there by their father. The gods save the children by sending a large bird who brings them to a new land near the mythical Seven Mountains. The seven orphans prosper in the new land and grow up. One day they meet seven daughters of a near-by king who are trading for rice. The seven orphan boys have enough to trade with the seven daughters who save their people during a famine. Soon after that, the couples marry and live together happily all of their days.

**The Big Snake Son-in-Law (S-I-L)** is a mythical story with two episodes. The first episode is about an old couple who have many unmarried daughters. One day, the couple finds a snake who has taken all of the ripe mangoes. The snake gives them the mangoes on condition that the daughter who eats the mangoes must become his wife. The youngest daughter eats the mangoes and has to become the snake's wife.



She is afraid but keeps to the bargain. The snake, seeing that she is an honest person, reveals that he is really a god and removes his snake skin to reveal a handsome husband. She wishes her husband would be a person permanently and a crow helps by stealing the snake skin and dropping it in the fire while the husband is in human form clearing the fields. The wife then disguises her husband by smearing charcoal on his face so that her sisters would not be jealous. The husband is discovered to be a handsome man when water is spilled on him and the sisters are envious.

The second episode is about another mother and father who have one unmarried daughter and who want to have a god/snake for a son-in-law also. So they catch a snake and force their daughter to marry it. The snake quickly eats the daughter and makes a hole in the wall of the house to escape. The father and mother pursue the snake but they can not catch up to it. Two brothers are then introduced as farmers living in the mountains. One day they go to check their trap and find a big snake caught in it. They cut the snake open and find the young woman who is still breathing. They revive her and heal her. When she is healed, she can not remember who she is or where she came from. She offers to marry the brother who saved her. The two brothers agree that it is more appropriate for the older brother to marry her. After they are married, she plants a pumpkin vine and prays to the gods that they will make it grow until it reaches her mothers house. The gods grant her request and the vine grows onto the roof of her mother and father's house. The mother and father follow the vine back to its source and discover their daughter. They are united and live happily together all of their days.

**The Buyeang Fish** is a mythical story about a younger brother who helps people and animals. His older brother orders soldiers to kill him out of fear and envy. The younger brother convinces the soldiers to set him free, and he goes in search of a new city. He has no food and eats only the fruit on the trees. While walking in the woods, he saves a buyeang fish instead of eating it. He also saves a deer and a wolf. Then he comes to a city where a witch has turned everyone except an old woman into stone. He saves the village by challenging the witch's magical powers and is able to hide from her magic mirror with help from the fish, deer and wolf. In anger, the witch throws down her wand which breaks and the tip points back at the witch and turns her to stone. The spell is broken, and the king gives his daughter and kingdom to the younger brother. They live together happily all of their days.

**The Wild Buffalo Ear** is a Bru mythical story. The word si.nur: 'wild buffalo' in the title is difficult to translate as the Bru did not know what kind of animal it was.

They said it was big like a buffalo and lived in the mountains but there are none of these kinds of animals left in the mountains of Thailand. Some So speakers reported that they had a similar word which meant wild buffalo.

The Wild Buffalo Ear is about a grandfather and grandson who receive a gift of meat from some hunters. They are surprised when their gift is only the ear of a wild buffalo. The gods take pity on them and transform the ear into a beautiful woman who secretly prepares food for them. They discover her and she marries the grandson. After living together some time, the spirit in the fields causes weeds to grow. The grandfather and grandson can not pull up all of the weeds. The daughter-in-law solves the problem by stabbing the field with sharpened sticks. Later, there is a famine and the daughter-in-law transforms leaves into rice as they are steamed. The grandfather discovers that she is steaming leaves and angrily criticizes her. She overhears the criticism, goes to the field and pulls up her sharpened stakes and leaves the grandfather and grandson, never to be seen again.

**The Ghost Grandfather** is about a grandfather who dies and leaves his grandson with no family. The grandson mourns so much that the grandfather has pity and gives him medicine to see the world of the dead. The grandson lives in a ghost village with his grandfather. Some friends come to take the grandson hunting and the grandson fails to shoot a deer, but does capture an insect. The grandfather shows his grandson that the insect is the deer by causing it to transform into its original body. Then the grandson hunts birds and kills three. The grandfather shows the grandson that the birds were high officials in the ghost village. The grandson must flee the ghost village and return to the land of the living where he mourns his grandfather.

**King Pachit** is a text translated from the Isaan language and contains elements of both myth and history, with frequent authorial intrusions explaining to the listener how some actual places were named due to the events of this narrative. It is about Prince Pachit who goes in search of a bride. It was prophesied that he would find his wife near the city of Pimaanburi. The prophesy led him to a pregnant woman and he asked that her child be raised to be his wife if it was a girl. When the girl was born, Prince Pachit saw that she was beautiful and named her Arapim. When Arapim grew up, Prince Pachit returned to his home city to inform his father and gather gifts. While he was away, Arapim met Prommatat, the king of Pimaanburi, who tried to force her to marry him. But when he came close to her, her body became too hot to touch. Prince Pachit then finds and rescues Arapim. During their escape, a monk deceives them and captures Arapim. She escapes but is now separated from Prince

Pachit. The gods show Arapim a medicine which revives the dead. She resurrects the daughter of a rich man who had died. As a reward, the rich man makes a rest house in the city with a mural depicting how she was separated from Prince Pachit. Arapim transforms herself into a man to search for Prince Pachit. Meanwhile, Prince Pachit comes to the city, sees the mural and finds Arapim in her male state. She transforms herself back into a woman, they marry and return to rule King Pachit's city.

The complete texts of these narratives are included in Appendices 1 – 6.

### 1.6.3 Text genre

The texts in this study are all monologue narrative texts. They are classified as narratives because they are agent focused and have a chronological progression (Longacre 1996). Each text has at least three participants as that is ideal for studying the particular system of participant reference in a language. There are no first person narratives in this study.

Greninger (2009) describes additional features such as textual form, textual content, context and rhetorical goals which further refine the genre of a text.

Textual form is used to classify the structure of the text. All the narratives of this study are classified as fables as opposed to remote narratives or reports. Four of the five narrative fables are participant focused. The one event focused exception is The Big Snake Son-in-Law (S-I-L) which takes part in two episodes, each incorporating a big snake who becomes a son-in-law. In this event-focused fable, more participants are introduced and they move in and out of focus faster than in the participant focused fables.

Each of the fables has an introduction, a body and a closure. The introduction of each fable contains a title and some form of the standard introduction *tɛ: lɔ: dʊn tɔ?* *tʃɔ:* 'from before, a long time ago' which identifies the narrative as a fable. The introduction also consists of identifying the participants and the setting using the existential verb *bʊn* 'exist'.

The body of the text follows the actions of the participants in a chronological order. The participants are generally in focus and are introduced with a full noun phrase and sometimes a relative clause.

The standard closure to the fable has the participants 'living happily ever after' with the standard *ɔ:t ruɑ? ɔ: kʊ: kʊ: si.ŋaj* (literally 'live happy good every day'). The two exceptions to this standard ending were 'The Wild Buffalo Ear' narrative where the

wife leaves the husband and grandfather never to be seen again and in 'The Grandfather Ghost' story where the grandson must live by himself *ku: ku: si.ŋaj* 'every day'. Each closure has a *finis* realized as the one word *sot* 'end'.

The textual content of each of the narratives has to do with family and living together in harmony. We see in these narratives the daily struggle for food and the importance of having children. An exception to the textual content is seen in 'The Buyeang Fish' story which has less rural content; having to do with cities, control, soldiers, witches and magic. It is interesting to note that 'The Buyeang Fish' narrative uses props familiar to Western fairy tales such as: a magic mirror, a wand which turns people to stone, and a city with soldiers. Perhaps this narrative has been influenced by Western fairy tales.

The rhetorical goal of these fables is to entertain the listeners. One could argue that an additional rhetorical goal in 'The Buyeang Fish' narrative is the importance of helping others, though this is never made explicit with a moral at the end of the story.

### 1.7 Theoretical approach

This study analyzes participant reference using various discourse theories. The overarching theory common to discourse is that words and sentences can best be understood in their environment. It is understood that text boundaries motivate word choice and sentence structure. Deictic terms such as demonstratives and pronouns may have particular functions related to the text as a whole which a discourse approach can identify.

This thesis applies Givón's (1983) theory of topic continuity which examines how topics are coded on a clause-by-clause basis. He theorizes that the coding used to identify a participant is motivated by (1) the length of absence from the scene, (2) potential interference from other topics, (3) availability of semantic information, and (4) availability of thematic information (1983:11).

Lambrecht (1994) presents a cognitive theory of what is in the minds of a speaker and hearer during a narrative. He is concerned with how a speaker signals information to a hearer using particular language specific coding.

vanDijk and Kintsch (1983:72) present four assumptions about how speech is processed. They are: (1) language users have a limited memory, (2) they cannot process many different kinds of information at the same time, (3) production and

understanding of utterances is linear, and (4) other factors beyond linguistic information are required for understanding, such as a knowledge of the culture.

These theories form the underlying assumptions of Dooley and Levinsohn's (2001:44) methodology which seeks to discover default participant reference patterns in eight different environments.

PAYYAP UNIVERSITY