

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Lisu is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in China, Myanmar, Thailand, and India. Lewis (2009) provides total Lisu population of 767,000; of these, 610,000 (2000 census) are in China, 126,000 in Myanmar (1987 census), 30,000 (2006 census) in Thailand, and 1,000 (1997 census) in India. It is difficult to arrive at any definite conclusion about the original birthplace of the Lisu. Enriquez (1933: 103-104) stated that many Lisu say they are from the Upper Salween, some said from Hsiang Hsiang (near Hpimaw), and other said they are from Wa Ba district in Upper Mekong. However, Enriquez (1933: 103-104) said it seems the Lisu came down from Eastern Tibet, spreading out into several places such as Nmai Kha, Salween River, Mekong River, Yangtze River, and Yunnan province.

The three major dialects of the Lisu language are the Central, Northern, and Southern dialects. Southern Lisu speakers are located primarily in Thailand and Myanmar, while only the Northern Lisu dialect is spoken in Southeast India. The Central Lisu dialect is spoken in China, Myanmar, and some in Thailand. All three major Lisu dialects are spoken in Myanmar and Thailand (Bradley 2006: xv).

Krauss (2007: ix) states:

“...languages at the far end of the endangerment scale, so classified when ‘the speaker population is fewer than 50 or when the number of speakers is a very small fraction of the ethnic group.’...”

It seems the number of Lisu people who can speak the language is decreasing in each of the country where they live. Therefore, language development among the Lisu people is urgently needed to sustain the language. Research is needed on language vitality, attitudes, and language use among the major Lisu dialects.

Another unanswered question is the relationship between the Lisu dialects.

Therefore, this thesis is a basic language survey of the three main Lisu dialects. This survey has two major parts: sociolinguistics and lexicostatistics. The sociolinguistic study will cover language vitality, language attitudes and language use of Lisu in three countries: Myanmar, China, and Thailand. The lexicostatic study of this thesis will examine the lexical relationship of the three Lisu dialects: Central,

Northern, and Southern. The following section discusses the background of the study.

## 1.1 Background of the study

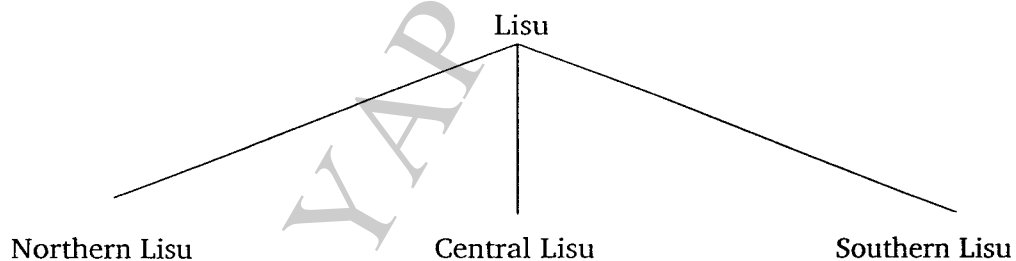
James O. Fraser (1886-1938), who also invented the first Lisu script, known as the Fraser Script (Old Lisu Script in China), had done phonological study on Lisu. Bradley compiled two Lisu dictionaries: 'The Northern Lisu dictionary' (1994), and 'The Southern Lisu dictionary' (2006). In Thurgood (2003: 222-235), Bradley also describes the phonology and morphosyntax of the major Lisu dialects. In his book of 'The Deep Syntax of Lisu Sentences' (1974), Hope gives a detailed study of Lisu syntax. Additionally, Lakana (1982 and 1983) studied Lisu phonology.

There is no published sociolinguistic study available for Lisu. This study will therefore focus on a sociolinguistic study of Lisu.

### 1.1.1 The classification of the Lisu language

Lisu belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family, under the central Loloish sub-branch of the Lolo-Burmese branch.

**Error! Reference source not found.** shows the classification of the Lisu language (see Chapter 2 for further discussion about the classification of the Lisu language).



**Figure 1 The classification of the Lisu language (adapted from Bradley 2006: xv)**

There are many ways to classify Lisu dialects (see more details in Chapter 2). In Thurgood (2003: 222), Bradley mentions that Lisu has three subgroups: the northern (Black Lo), the central (Sha Sha), and the southern (Yellow Lo). The northern Lisu or Black Lo are called [lo<sup>33</sup> wu<sup>55</sup>] 'Northern Lo' by the other Lisu, Hei Lisu in Chinese

and 'Black Lisu' in English. They are located in northwestern Yunnan province of China, northern Myanmar, and the eastern portion of India. The central Lisu are called [ʃa<sup>33</sup> ʃa<sup>33</sup>] by other Lisu, Hua Lisu in Chinese, and Flowery Lisu in English. They are located in western Yunnan and the adjacent areas of northeast of Myanmar. The Southern Lisu are called [lo<sup>35</sup> ʃy<sup>33</sup>] by other Lisu, Lisaw in Shan, Burmese, and Thai. They are located in Shan State of Myanmar, extreme southwest of Yunnan, China, and in northern Thailand.

Apart from the three Lisu dialects, Northern, Central, and Southern Lisu has a dialect called the Bible dialect. The Bible dialect is widely used and regarded as the standard among Christian Lisu (Bradley 2006: xviii).

### **1.1.2 The background of the Lisu language**

Bradley (2006: xv) states that the Lisu are a group of just under a million people, with nearly 600,000 in southwestern China, over 300,000 in northeastern Myanmar, over 40,000 in northern Thailand, and about 1,200 in five villages in northeastern India.

Figure 2 shows the geographic distribution of the Lisu people.

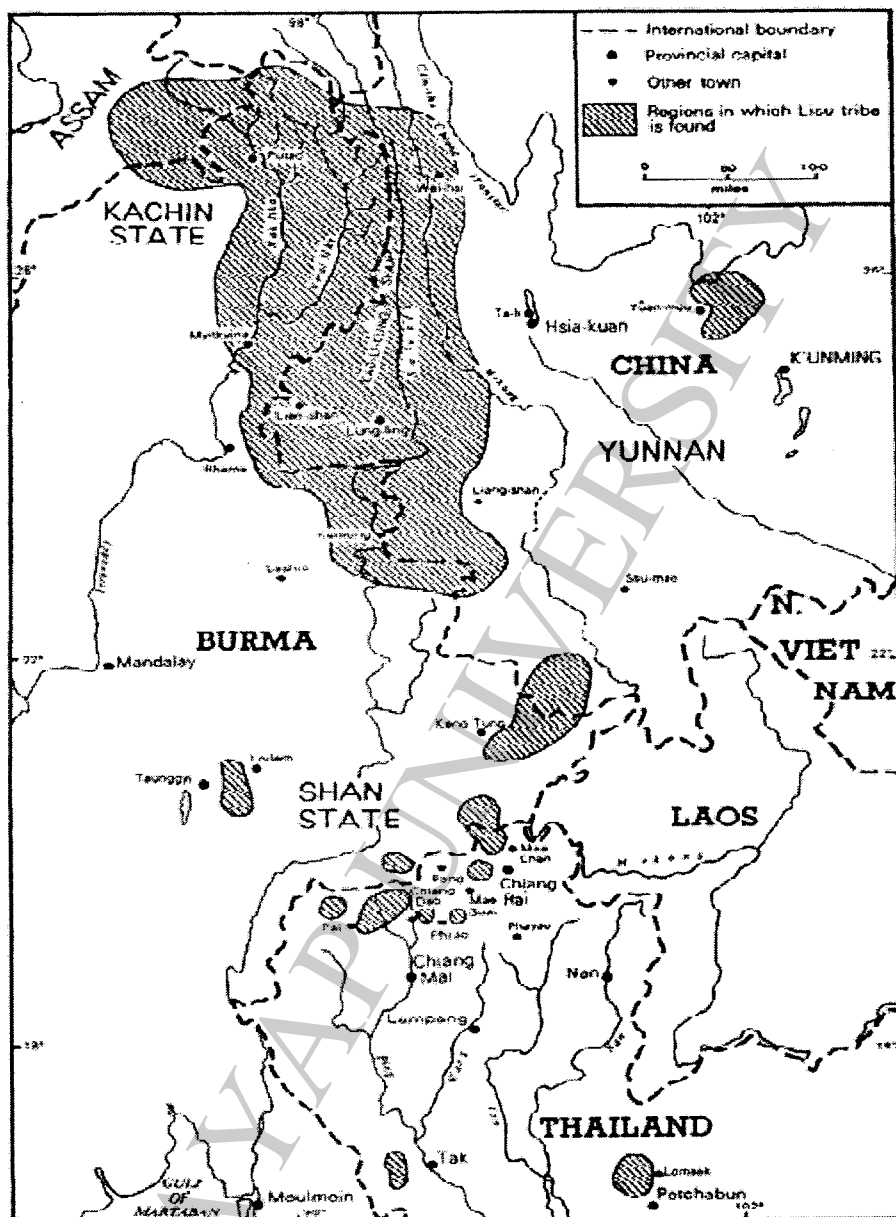


Figure 2 The distribution of Lisu language (adapted from Hope 1974: 54)

According to Figure 2, the Lisu are located in Northeast India, Northern Myanmar, and western Yunnan province, China. The Lisu are also located in the northern Thailand. The Lisu language typology is SOV. It is a tonal language with six major tones. The language does not have final consonants except in loanwords.

Enriquez (1933: 103) discusses Lisu tones and consonants as follow:

The language is difficult. There are 6 tones and 250 separated sounds, none of which has consonantal endings. Hence, the Lisu pronounce Chinese badly. They have, however, adopted and corrupted a large number of Chinese words.

## 1.2 Objectives of the study

The following objectives of this study fit under the framework of Sociolinguistics<sup>1</sup>.

1. To examine language vitality, language attitudes, and language use among three Lisu dialects: Central Lisu dialect, Northern Lisu dialect, and Southern Lisu dialect.
2. To determine the lexical relationship between three Lisu dialects: Central Lisu dialect, Northern Lisu dialect, and Southern Lisu dialect.

## 1.3 Scope of the study

This research will cover only the Northern, Central, and Southern Lisu dialects in Thailand, Myanmar, and China. The research includes 6 research sites from Myanmar, 4 from China, and 2 from Thailand. The total number of subjects for this study is 226; this number includes 12 wordlist interviewees and 214 sociolinguistic interviewees (see Chapter 3). For the lexicostatistic comparison, 100 words selected from the SIL MSEA (Mainland South East Asia) 436-item wordlist are used (see Appendix A). One set each of Knowledgeable Insider Sociolinguistic Questionnaire, Group Sociolinguistic Questionnaire, and Individual Sociolinguistic Questionnaire in three languages (Lisu, Burmese, and Chinese) is used for studying the sociolinguistic situation (see Appendices C-E). The focus of this research is to assess the sociolinguistic situation and lexical relationships between the three Lisu dialects.

## 1.4 Hypotheses of the study

The following statements are the hypotheses of this thesis. These are based on the author's observations as a native speaker as well as discussions with Mann (2007).

The Lisu language is being passed on to the next generation in rural areas, but this is less common in urban areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Lexical relationships have long been included in sociolinguistic studies. For example see O' Leary (1992).

The Central and Northern Lisu dialects are closely related in terms of lexical similarity; likewise, the Central and Southern Lisu dialects are also closely related.

The intelligibility between the Northern and the Southern dialects is low even though they share a fair level of lexical similarity.

### **1.5 Limitations of the study**

This study is a limited survey. It will cover only four sites each of the Central Lisu, the Northern Lisu, and the Southern Lisu dialects that are spoken in China, Thailand, and Myanmar. The number of researched sites varied because access to the selected sites is not always easy in all countries where the Lisu live. More sites are easier for the author to visit in Myanmar than in China. Thus, the author surveyed six sites in Myanmar and four sites in China. In Thailand, only two Southern Lisu sites are available for research. This study will not include the Northern and Central Lisu in Thailand because they recently migrated from other countries. The study focuses on central (urban) and peripheral (rural) sites, which means the central sites are more developed, have good transportation and have more regular contact with other groups than peripheral sites. Although the wordlist, SIL MSEA (Mainland South East Asia) used in this study has 436 items, some words were not given in some sites. For example, the words such as coconut, and crocodile were not given in most of the sites. Eliciting the wordlist in Thailand was done through a translator because the author does not speak Thai. Due to time considerations and sensitivity, this study does not focus on religious aspects of the communities.

### **1.6 Benefits of the study**

The sociolinguistic study in this thesis is intended to assist the Lisu people in understanding their current language situation. As this thesis may indicate the need for potential vernacular language development, it may encourage Lisu people to participate in the language development effort. This thesis will also indicate how the various Lisu dialects are lexically related. If there is a need for additional language development, reading materials could potentially be produced to protect Lisu from further language shift.