

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Lisu is spoken in China, Myanmar, and Thailand and has three major dialects: Northern Lisu, Central Lisu, and Southern Lisu. The Northern and Central Lisu are in China while all three dialects are in Myanmar and Thailand. Since Lisu is spoken in three countries, the sociolinguistic situations may not be the same in those countries.

Sociolinguistic and lexicostatistic study of the three major Lisu dialects are the two primary research aspects of this thesis. The sociolinguistic situations discussed in this study will assist the Lisu people to understand their current language context and the lexical comparison will provide the lexical similarity between the three major Lisu dialects. This chapter summarizes the findings of this thesis and draws conclusions. There are some suggestions for further research at the end of this chapter.

The following section provides an evaluation of methodologies used in this study.

6.1 Evaluation of methodology

For eliciting the wordlist, surveyors should carefully study and clarify the meaning of the words before using the wordlist. Translation of the words is also needed to check whether they are translated correctly or not. For example, the Burmese translation of words such as 'winnow', 'cut', and 'seed' can be ambiguous. In Lisu and Burmese, there are two kinds of winnowing; one is removing the debris from the rice after harvesting, the other kind of winnowing is removing the debris before cooking. It can be misleading the interviewer at the fieldwork. The subjects asked the author which kind of winnow he wanted during the fieldwork, so we used the first meaning for winnowing. The word 'cut' also has many meanings in Lisu and Burmese. For this word, the author used the word 'cut' (as in 'cutting hair'). Also for the word 'seed', there are two meanings in Lisu. The first meaning is for sowing, and the second meaning is for things that are eaten like fruit. The author elicited the second meaning. Thus, the surveyor needs to know which specific words he is going to elicit before the fieldwork.

During the fieldwork, the author interviewed three kinds of sociolinguistic questionnaires and one wordlist at each site. It was manageable but too busy to do alone. It is not so convenient for the author to ask the questions as well as transcribe the answers at the same time. At least one or two team members should accompany the surveyor to share the load.

Each sociolinguistic questionnaire, which was used in this thesis, has more than 40 questions. It is a bit long for the subjects to answer all 40 more questions at a time. The questionnaires should be short and be able to answer the research questions well. Since the individual sociolinguistic questions represent the individual view of the researched language, they are more reliable than the leader and group questions, which represent the overall views.

The following sections present the sociolinguistic and lexicostatistic findings of this study.

6.2 Sociolinguistic results

According to the sociolinguistic findings of this thesis, the Lisu language is being passed on to the next generation in both rural and urban areas. This finding does not support the hypothesis that the Lisu language is being passed on to the next generation in rural areas, but is less common in urban areas. While Lisu is being passed on to the next generation in rural areas, there is no difference between the findings for urban and rural areas.

The sociolinguistic study of this thesis covers the use of the language of wider communication, attitudes toward languages of wider communication, intelligibility of Lisu dialects, attitudes toward Lisu dialects, attitudes toward Lisu scripts, and language vitality.

The younger generation appears to speak languages of wider communication such as Chinese, Burmese, Central Thai, and Northern Thai better than the older generation because they have more access education in these languages. Students, traders, laborers, village leaders, and the educated people speak more of the language of wider communication than others in the Lisu communities.

Overall, the Lisu subjects reported high bilingual proficiency and the subjects from central sites reported higher bilingual proficiency than those from peripheral sites.

All of the subjects interviewed reported they could speak one of the languages of wider communication used in the area where they live. In other words, none of the subjects interviewed are monolinguals in Lisu although they said there are some monolingual Lisu among them. Moreover, the central sites tend to have better communication and education infrastructure, and have more opportunity for contact with the languages of wider communication than the peripheral sites. The Lisu subjects from Myanmar reported the highest bilingual proficiency, followed by those in Thailand, and those in China reported the lowest. The Lisu speakers from Myanmar reported the least positive attitudes toward the language of wider communication, followed by those in Thailand, and then those in China. It may be that issues relating to ethnicity are the reasons that the subjects in Myanmar have less positive attitudes toward the languages of wider communication.

Of the three Lisu dialects, the Southern Lisu subjects reported the highest bilingual proficiency while the Northern Lisu subjects reported the lowest. (For the discussion of intelligibility conclusions see section 6.3.)

The lexical comparison of the Lisu wordlists does not show a lack of intelligibility between the dialects. However, informal conversations with Lisu speakers and observation indicate that there are intelligibility difficulties between Northern and Southern Lisu. Intelligibility between Central and Southern Lisu tends to be higher than between Central and Northern Lisu dialects

For the attitudes toward the Lisu dialects, there was no general agreement about which dialect is the most pure. Although most subjects of each dialect reported a positive attitude toward their own dialect, the subjects from Khitsagoat (KSG), a Southern Lisu dialect in Myanmar reported that their own dialect is the least pure. Moreover, most of the other subjects also said that the dialect from this area is the least pure. The Northern Lisu dialect appears to have the most contact while the Southern Lisu appears to have the least contact. Northern Lisu speakers from Putao township in Myanmar travel to the Central Lisu speaking area, Myitkyina, for better education and to Moegok township or Mongshu township, the Southern Lisu speaking areas, to do business at the gem mines. Thus, the Northern Lisu dialect is reported to have more contact with the other dialects than Central and Southern Lisu dialects.

Regarding the Lisu scripts, the Lisu subjects reported that they prefer the Fraser script and less prefer the Modified Fraser script, Burmese based script, and Northern Lisu script. The Lisu people have strong motivation for reading and writing in Lisu because nearly all subjects reported that it is beneficial to learn to read and write in Lisu.

Since three out of six leaders from the central sites reported there are some Lisu who cannot speak Lisu very well, there might be some sort of language shift among the central sites. The Lisu parents from Thailand more often teach other languages to their children than parents in China and Myanmar, and the use of Lisu among children in Thailand is less. Therefore, the language competence of the children from Thailand appears to be shifting toward the languages of wider communication.

6.3 Lexicostatistic results

This thesis hypothesized that Northern and Central Lisu are lexically closely related likewise Central and Southern Lisu are also lexically closely related. The results of the lexical comparison support the latter statement but not the former. Based on the lexical comparison, Central Lisu is more closely related lexically with the Southern Lisu than with the Northern Lisu.

Lexical comparison was carried out between varieties of Northern, Central, and Southern Lisu dialects. According to the comparison results, the highest percentage (98%) is within the same dialect of Northern Lisu, Yikuaibi (YKB) and Labieshan (LBS) from China. The lowest percentage (82%) is between the Northern dialect, Mulashide (MLSD) from Myanmar and Southern Lisu dialect, Hongkhong (MKT) from Thailand.

The lexical results are all above the 70% threshold, below this threshold there would not be appreciable intelligibility based on lexical difference alone. While, the lexical comparison of the Lisu wordlists does not show a lack of intelligibility, informal conversations with Lisu speakers and observation indicate that there are intelligibility difficulties between Northern and Southern Lisu. Intelligibility between Central and Southern Lisu tends to be higher than between Central and Northern Lisu dialects.

All sites from China (both Northern and Central Lisu dialects) have high lexical similarity as shown by the fact that the minimum is 90% while comparing with any

Northern and Central sites. However, the Northern Lisu sites from Myanmar have lower lexical similarity with almost none having more than 92%. Therefore, the Northern Lisu from Myanmar is more divergent in terms of lexical similarity. For example, the kinship terms in Northern Lisu dialects are different from any dialects from any countries except the Lisu from northeast of India who formerly live in Putao area. Their ways of naming the kinship terms is similar to the languages closer to them. For example, the Northern Lisu from Putao area names their sons as [a⁵⁵ phu³³] ‘eldest son’, [a⁵⁵ di⁵⁵] ‘second son’, and [a⁵⁵ khi³³] ‘third son’ according to their order. This way of naming is similar with Rawang, one of a closer languages but no Lisu dialects from any country (except from the Northern Lisu from India) name in this way. This information needs further study.

The other interesting issue is the author had a hard time understanding the speech of older and younger people during the first visit to the Putao area but did not have much problem when first visiting in the Northern speaking areas of China. The Northern Lisu dialect of China is more similar with Lisu dialects than the Northern Lisu dialect of Myanmar. This could be related to the birthplace of Lisu language, as many believe that China is the place from which their ancestors originated. In other words, the Lisu dialects spoken in China are believed to be more standard than those of other countries are.

6.4 Suggestion for further studies

According to this study, there might be a language shift among the Lisu language in the central sites. It would be interesting to do further research to document this shift and indicate causes. Lisu use among the younger generation in Thailand tends to shift to Northern Thai or Central Thai because most of the children were reported not speak Lisu to each other. This is true especially in urban Lisu communities in Thailand.

This study shows that the Northern Lisu varieties from Myanmar have the lowest lexical similarity with the other Lisu dialects. An intelligibility study between the Lisu dialects needs to be done to determine if there is further need for language development. Khitsagoat in Myanmar should be investigated since it is quite different from the other Lisu dialects.

It will also be interesting to investigate language contact between Lisu and the other LWCs. Finally, it would be profitable to research the Eastern Lisu dialect since there is little information about it in the literature.

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