

A Survey of Khmuic and Palaungic Languages in Laos and Vietnam

Frank PROSCHAN

Indiana University at Bloomington (U.S.A.)

The remote mountainous areas of Northern Laos and Northwestern Vietnam are home to a number of little-known ethnolinguistic communities speaking languages of the Northern Mon-Khmer family. Separated by imposing geographical obstacles from the riverine lowland centers of population and administrative authority, the region was visited only occasionally by administrators or missionaries during the French colonial era. Ravaged by warfare for the three decades from 1945 to 1975 and isolated internationally since, the area remains until now a virtual *terra incognita* to international scholars of linguistics, ethnography, folklore, and history. Despite their scholarly isolation, Lao and especially Vietnamese linguists, ethnologists, and other scholars have carried out important research in the region, but limited financial and material resources have severely impeded their abilities to conduct systematic field studies, and the results of their research are little known outside of Laos and Vietnam. This paper surveys the state of knowledge of these languages and reports briefly on recent field studies of several languages carried out by the author (Proschan) and others (Gérard Diffloth, Vi Van An, Dang Anh Phuong, Thongpheth Kingsada).

My focus here will be several ethnolinguistic communities whose members speak languages within the Khmuic and Palaungic branches of the Mon-Khmer family (i.e., the Northern Division of Mon-Khmer), including the well-studied Kmhmu (Khơ Mú, 𑜋𑜰𑜫) ethnicity in both countries as well as several other groups heretofore almost unknown to scholars.¹ These lesser-known groups include the Ksing Mul (Xinh Mun), Khang (Kháng), Mang (Màng), and Iduh (Ổ Đu) in Vietnam and the Rmeet (ລະເມັດ), Ksing Mul (ຊິງມຸນ), Phong (ຜົງ), Bit (ບິດ), Thin (ຖິນ), Mlabri (ມລາບຣີ, ຢຸມບຣີ), Saamtaav (ສາມຕາວ), Iduh (ຮາດ), and Then (ແທນ) in Laos, groups ranging in size from about 20,000 members (Phong) to fewer than 200 (Iduh, Mlabri); see table 1.

¹ For orthographic convenience, a standard romanization of each group's ethnonym is employed throughout this proposal. Insofar as possible, this romanization corresponds to the group's preferred self-appellation or autonym, even where the Lao or Vietnamese authorities have adopted another name or another variant of the preferred name. The classifications used by Lao and Vietnamese do not necessarily refer strictly to languages, but instead to ethnic groups; while there is generally a relation between language and ethnicity they are not assumed to correspond exactly (see the discussion of the umbrella category "Saamtaav" below).

Table 1: Ethnolinguistic communities speaking Northern Mon-Khmer languages

Romanization Used Here	Population in Laos, 1985	Official Name in Laos	Transcription (IPA)	Preferred Autonym (IPA)	Also Known As
Kmhmu	389,694	ກຳມຸ	/kammu?/	kmhmu?, khmu?	
Phong	18,165	ຜົງ	/phoɔŋ/	kniang, phoɔŋ	tay phoɔŋ
Rmeet	14,355	ລະເມດ	/la?met/	rmeet	
Thin	13,977	ຖິນ	/thin/	lua?	mal, pray
Saamtaav	2,359	ສາມຕາວ	/saamtaav/	??	col, kior, con
Ksing Mul	2,164	ຊິງມຸນ	/singmun/	ksin mul	puok, pou hok
Bit	1,530	ບິດ	/bit/	phsiŋ	khaabit, khbit
Mlabri	24	ມລາບຣີ, ຢຸມບຣີ	/mlaabri?/	mila?bri?	phii ɬoɔŋ luang
Theen	200	ແທນ	/theen/	theen	khaa saam liam
Iduh	200	ຮາດ	/haat/	?iduh	tay hat
Romanization Used Here	Population in Vietnam, 1989	Official Name in Vietnam	Transcription (IPA)	Preferred Autonym (IPA)	Also Known As
Kmhmu	42,853	Khơ Mú	/khəmu?/	kmhmu?, khmu?	Xá Cầu
Ksing Mul	10,890	Xinh Mun	/sinmun/	ksin mul	Puộc
Khang	3,921	Kháng	/khaaŋ/	khaaŋ	Xá Khao
Mang	2,200	Mảng	/maaŋ/	maaŋ	Mang Ư
Iduh	194	Ơ Đu	?iduh/	?iduh	Tây Hạng

For the Kmhmu, whose 500,000 members span the area from Northwestern Vietnam to Northern Thailand, there has been extensive previous work with Kmhmu language, verbal arts, and ethnohistory carried out by a number of Swedish, French, Vietnamese, Thai, Swiss, and U.S. scholars. Despite this, there remain numerous Kmhmu dialects and local groups that have not heretofore been studied. The other ethnicities are far less known than the Kmhmu and the previous scholarship on each ranges from a substantial linguistic monograph (for the Ksing Mul) or a number of articles (for the Phong), to brief ethnographic sketches or lists of a mere handful of poorly transcribed words (for the Bit, Theen, and Iduh). The last two groups raise a particularly urgent concern, as their languages are spoken by only 200 persons living in two villages (Theen) or by a mere 7-10 persons in two villages within Vietnam and about 250 persons in two villages in Laos (Iduh; there are another 187 persons classified as Iduh in Vietnam who do not speak the ancestral language).

Studying the smaller languages and ethnicities detailed here is of urgent importance, precisely because the ethnohistorical evidence suggests that processes of acculturation and assimilation can be expected to lead to their eventual disappearance or incorporation into larger ethnolinguistic communities. Even sizable groups such as the

Rmeet demonstrate a tendency to intermarry with the more numerous Kmhmu and adopt the language and traditions of the latter group. In other cases, sociocultural pressures lead to a gradual reduction in the occasions on which the mother tongue is used and an increase in the occasions on which the national language or a local trade language is used in place of the mother tongue. This seems to be the case for Phong and Ksing Mul, for instance, where Lao or Vietnamese is the predominant language of younger people (at least in many villages) and the occasions for using the mother language are few and infrequent. For smaller groups such as the Iduh in Vietnam, the ancestral mother tongue is used only by a few older persons in very limited sociocultural contexts—when a researcher arrives in the village or an elder is called upon to represent the group in an official cultural event—while younger persons speak Vietnamese, Tai Meuy, or Kmhmu in everyday interactions. It should be noted that many members of these language groups are at least bilingual and in many cases speak as many as four or five languages, in a region of tremendous linguistic diversity and widespread multilingualism.

At the same time, tiny populations such as the Theen pose the interesting question of how, why, and to what extent isolated speakers of a distinct language may preserve their mother tongue and cultural traditions despite their small numbers. Information on the sociolinguistic situation in the only two villages of Theen speakers is still preliminary, but the mother tongue is still used in daily speech, according to Theen informants with whom Proschan conducted research (1994). Province officials in Luang Prabang report another group known as Naam, who also inhabit just two villages and are said to preserve their own distinct language (*p.c.*). Finally, nomadic hunter-gatherer groups such as the Mlabri (the so-called “yellow leaf” people) are quite literally in danger of extinction; an epidemic or other catastrophe could easily eliminate those few persons who speak a given dialect of the language (cf. Rischel 1995).

Previous Research and Current Research Issues

Of the various ethnic groups speaking Northern Mon-Khmer languages, the Kmhmu are both the most numerous (500,000 people in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, China) and the best known to scholars. Among French colonial-era accounts the most important ethnographic sources are Roux and Trần Văn Chu (1927), Izikowitz (1951), Pavie (1898, 1906, 1911), and Raquez (1902, 1905–06), and for linguistics Cuaz (1904), Lefèvre-Pontalis (1892–96), and Maspero (1955). During the American involvement in Laos, both Halpern (1957, 1958, 1960, 1961a, 1961b, 1963, 1964, 1983) and LeBar (1965, 1967a, 1967b) made important ethnographic studies. Smalley's linguistic monograph remains a key work (1961), complemented by the French linguist Ferlus's several studies (1972, 1974a, 1974b, 1977, 1979, 1980a, 1980b) and the dictionary of Delcros (1966). In recent years, indigenous researchers such as Đặng Nghiêâm Văn in Vietnam (1971, 1972, 1973, 1975), Suwilai Premasirat in Thailand (1982, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b), and Li Daoyong in China (1982, 1984) have made invaluable contributions, both in ethnography (Văn and Li) and linguistics (Suwilai).

Working with Kmhmu refugees from Laos living in the U.S., and more recently with Kmhmu in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, Proschan (1986, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1993, 1994) has studied language, verbal arts, folklore, and ethnology of several Kmhmu dialect groups. The largest single body of research on Kmhmu, spanning linguistics, ethnology, folklore, economic anthropology, material culture, and a number of related fields is that carried out since 1972 by a team from Lund University in Sweden (see the various works in the Bibliography by Lindell, Lundstrom, Svantesson, and Tayanin). Kmhmu is the fortunate beneficiary of much scholarly attention, signalled by the almost-simultaneous publication of three Kmhmu dictionaries (Suwilai 1993, Svantesson et al. 1994, Suksavang et al. 1994).

The other Khmuic languages and ethnicities (Thin, Mlabri, Phong, Ksing Mul, Theen, and Iduh) and those of the Palaungic branch (Rmeet, Khang, Bit, and Mang) are much less known.² Within the Khmuic branch, the Thin (a.k.a. Mal, Lawa, Lua', Pray) have been the subject of research by several linguists (Filbeck 1976a, 1976b, 1978, 1987; Huffman 1976a; Mingkwan 1989; Sujaritlak 1979; Suwilai 1988; Unchalee 1988) and ethnologists (Cholthira 1987, 1990; Dessaint 1973, 1981; Dessaint and Dessaint 1982) working in Thailand, as well as Elliott (1992) who has worked with Lua' from Laos now living in the United States. The Mlabri (known in ethnographic sources as Phi Tong Luang or Kha Tong Luang "Spirits of the Yellow Leaves") have figured into ethnographic debates for decades, with key works those of Bernatzik (1958[1938]), Boeles (1963), Surin (1988, 1992), and Trier (1986). The dialect spoken in Laos (Yumbri) was the subject of unpublished research by Ferlus (cf. Rischel and Egerod 1987); the dialects spoken in Thailand have been quite intensively studied in recent years (Kraisri 1963; Rischel 1982, 1989a, 1989b, 1992, 1995; Egerod and Rischel 1987; and Theraphan 1988, 1992). The Phong of Laos (pop. 20,000+) were documented prior to the 1960s in only a single published linguistic source (Macey 1905) and several folkloric and ethnographic mentions (Raquez 1902, 1905, Plunian 1905, Guy-Issartier 1948, Hkum 1992), supplemented more recently by Bùi Khánh Thế's essay on language (1975) and recent unpublished linguistic work by Proschan (notes, 1989-95), and Ferlus and Thongpheth Kingsada (notes, 1991). The Ksing Mul in Vietnam (pop. 11,000+) have recently been the subject of a linguistic monograph by a joint Soviet-Vietnamese team (Solntsev and Hoàng Tuệ 1990, cf. Vương Hoàng Tuyên 1963), but the dialect on which they focus is markedly different from that spoken in Laos (pop. 2,500+; see Macey 1905, Proschan notes 1992); ethnographic studies are limited to a few pages (Macey 1905, Phan Hữu Đạt 1962, Nguyễn Văn Huy 1972, 1978). The Theen ethnicity (pop. 200) was previously known only by virtue of a list of 40 words published by Ngô Đức Thịnh and Trương Văn Sinh (1973); unpublished research in 1992 by a

² General bibliographies of relevant research include Ferlus 1974a, Huffman 1986, Parkin 1991, Plam 1988, Smalley 1973, Theraphan 1984, and Thomas 1992(1989-90). Comparative studies covering some of the languages discussed here include Adams 1989, Diffloth 1974, Huffman 1976a, Huffman 1976b, Thomas 1964.

Lao colleague Souksavang Simana added 80 words and confirmed the crucial importance of the language for historical reconstruction of Proto-Khmuc. In February 1994, Proschan initiated linguistic research with three Theen speakers living in Vientiane, continued in 1995 by Diffloth. The Iduh in Vietnam (pop. 194; native speakers 7) were known until recently only through Vương Hoàng Tuyên's linguistic study (1963), Đặng Nghiêâm Văn's several brief ethnographic sketches (1973, 1978), and his unpublished word list of 75 words, with brief ethnographic mentions in Mukhlinov (1965). Proschan carried out research in April 1994 and April 1995, in cooperation with Vi Van An and Dang Anh Phuong of the Vietnamese Institute of Ethnology, among all 7 of the speakers of the language in Nghe An (where they live in one Kmhmu village and one mixed Tay Meuy-Kmhmu village). There are two villages of Iduh (known locally as Tay Hat) in eastern Xieng Khouang province of Laos, whose dialect differs slightly from that spoken within Vietnam, and was studied by Proschan and Thongpheth Kingsada in October 1995.

Turning to languages of the Palaungic branch, the best known of those in Laos or Vietnam is Rmeet, which has been the subject of extensive ethnographic description (Izikowitz *passim*) and substantial linguistic research (Garnier 1873, Lefèvre-Pontalis 1892-96, Lindell, Svantesson and Tayanin 1978, Mitani 1976, and Narumol 1980, 1982). Vietnamese scholars are the only sources for Khang (pop. 4,000) ethnography (Nguyễn Trúc Bình 1972, Nguyễn Văn Huy 1975, Cầm Trọng 1978) and language (Nguyễn Văn Huy 1975, Hoàng Mai Hạnh 1978) except for Bouchet's ethnographic notes (1905) and Lefèvre-Pontalis's short word list (1896). The Bit are frequently mentioned but little described; only a list of 84 words exists (Lefèvre-Pontalis 1896), with Aymé (1930) as the sole ethnographic source. Mang (pop. 2,500) have been studied by Vietnamese ethnographers (Thành Thiên 1972, Vương Hoàng Tuyên 1963, Ngô Đức Thịnh 1978) and linguists (Vương Hoàng Tuyên 1963, Nguyễn Loan 1976), with a brief ethnographic account by Li Daoyong for the Mang in China (1993). Finally there is the group classified by Lao ethnologists as Saamtaav, an umbrella term describing members of several ethnolinguistic communities who originated in the Saamtaav region of Burma (cf. Diffloth 1992[1989-90]:35). At Viangpoukha, Muang Long, and Muang Nam Tha in Luang Nam Tha province, there are so-called Saamtaav; these are presumably the people also known in historical sources as Tiol, Chol (Chon), or Kiorr (Raquez 1902:237-38; 1906:136; Izikowitz 1951; Lindell et al. 1989). Where the so-called Saamtaav in Thailand speak at least three distinct languages of the Bulang branch of the Waic group of Palaungic languages (Diffloth 1992[1989-90], Paulsen 1992[1989-90]), at least some of those in Laos speak a distantly related language, identified by Diffloth as Amok (within the Angkuic sub-branch of Palaungic). It is not clear whether all of those in Laos who are classified as Saamtaav speak this same Angkuic language, or whether some instead speak the Bulangic languages known from Northern Thailand or other languages as yet unknown.

The importance of ongoing research with these languages is increased because of the fact that the heretofore best-known Khmuic language, Kmhmu itself, is in some instances the worst exemplar of the branch since its "lexicon has undergone a great many replacements" (Diffloth 1991:25). The Khmuic branch, insofar as it has been defined on the basis of knowledge of only three western languages (Kmhmu, Thin, and Mlabri), has been less coherent than might be desired. As data are becoming available for Phong, Ksing Mul, Theen, and Iduh, and for additional dialects of Thin and Kmhmu, the identity of the branch is increasingly clear, and we expect that further information on these hitherto barely known languages will increase the coherency further.

Another aspect of language of great importance for ongoing research is that of person-referring forms such as pronouns, titles, and kinship terms. Person-referring terms have been the subject of substantial interest to Southeast Asian areal linguists since Benedict's study of kinship and kinship terminology (1941); Hy Van Luong's recent studies of Vietnamese usage (1984, 1987, 1988, 1990) consider the inter-workings of different native models of society as they are expressed through the choice of person-referring terms. Where languages such as Vietnamese, Siamese, or Khmer, spoken in highly stratified societies, comprehend very complex systems of person reference, the languages to be studied here are associated with *non-stratified, egalitarian* societies and the person-referring systems are simpler, for the most part excluding titles or status terms in favor of pronouns and kinship terms. There do seem to be quite striking differences among the related languages in terms of whether and to what extent there is a category of dual personal pronouns between singular and plural pronouns: some dialects of Kmhmu, for example, employ dual pronouns frequently where other dialects preserve them only vestigially if they are present at all. Thin and Phong involve systems that are different both from Kmhmu and from each other with regard to the importance of the dual category and the operation of inclusiveness and exclusiveness in first person plural forms.

The related realm of group-referring forms such as ethnonyms (names of ethnic groups), loconyms (names of sub-groups), and glossonyms (names of languages and dialects) also deserves intensive study. Understanding such onomastic systems is, of course, a prerequisite for properly situating the groups and languages in ethnohistorical and ethnolinguistic relations to one another, but they also constitute an important research topic in their own right (Đặng Nghiêâm Văn *ms.*, Proschan 1996). Just as person-referring systems embody native models of interpersonal relations and of how society operates locally, group-referring forms constitute folk classificatory models of interethnic and intercommunal relations, and express native conceptions of the very nature of ethnicity and ethnic identity. These native models are not expected to be perfect taxonomies along the lines of those studied by ethnoscientists; our assumption is that they are nevertheless orderly embodiments of local knowledge that can help us to understand how social relations are constituted by and expressed through language use (Proschan 1996).

Austroasiatic languages characteristically involve highly elaborated forms of expressive vocabulary and sound symbolism (Diffloth 1979, 1991, Suwilai 1993), which can often be studied more successfully in conversational and narrative contexts than through formal elicitation. This is especially true because expressives are likely to vary across dialects within a single language, or even to involve productive processes available for innovation by individual speakers, and formal interview settings impinge against elicitation of such dialectal or idiolectal variants. Traditional folktales have proven to be a rich source for such expressive vocabulary in the case of Kmhmu, and we expect that oral narratives of other languages, to be collected during ongoing fieldwork in the region, will be similarly fruitful.

Austroasiatic languages characteristically feature highly elaborate systems of reduplication (cf. *inter alia* Nguyen Van Huyen 1934, Watson 1966, Cooper 1973, Smith 1973, Banker 1964, Gorgoniev 1976, Jacob 1979, Svantesson 1983, Proschan 1989, 1994). At the smallest level of words, reduplicated forms are especially frequent within the realm of expressives, but reduplication also occurs at the larger levels of phrases and word-groups. Reduplication is the characteristic structure of riddles, proverbial sayings, certain play languages, and other forms of verbal art; it is structurally similar to the special form of poetic language known as parallelism (Jakobson 1987, Fox 1971, 1977, 1988, Proschan 1984, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1994). Poetic parallelism is the ordered interplay of repetition and difference, where words or phrases in one poetic line correspond to those in another poetic line. Kmhmu have a particularly complex form of “reverse word” parallelism which combines meaningful phrases and nonsense words or enigmatic phrases (Proschan 1989, 1992); no similar system of comparable complexity has been described for any world tradition of oral poetry, but it remains to be determined if other Khmuic or Palaungic groups may share this poetic form (cf. Suriya 1985).

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