STANDARDISATION OF LISU: COMPETITION AND CONVERGENCE

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Lisu (ISO 639-3 lis) is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by over a million people in five countries

southwestern China   (700,000+)

northeastern Burma   (400,000+)

northern Thailand   (50,000+)

northeastern India   (3,000+)

It is recognised as a national minority, ethnic group or tribal group in all four countries

Lisu has four main dialects

Northern (with subdialects)   ~600,000
(northwestern Yunnan, China; northern Burma; northeastern India)

Central (with subdialects)   ~400,000
(western Yunnan, China; eastern Burma)

Southern   ~120,000
(southeastern Burma, northern Thailand)

Eastern   ~30,000
(southwestern Sichuan, China)

Prior to about 1930, there was little contact between these dialects, and intelligibility was incomplete due to phonological, lexical and structural differences.

Eastern dialect is the most distinct. Northern and Southern dialects share some features, but differ in many others. Central Lisu has a maximal system in most ways, with a few exceptions to be discussed later.

Since 1930, with conversion to Christianity, contact between Central and Northern dialects in China and Burma has greatly increased.

Since the early 1970s, with movement of some Central and Northern dialect speakers into the Southern dialect area in Thailand, there has been contact between these three dialects.

In the 1970s, Central and Northern dialect Lisu speakers who had come to Thailand had limited understanding of Southern dialect.

Many have since learned to understand Southern dialect, but mostly choose not to speak it; some Southern dialect speakers have developed comprehension of spoken Central dialect

Lisu was a non-literary language until 1914; since then, three competing orthographies have developed, each based on a different variety

1) From 1914:   'Fraser' Lisu

   simplified C Lisu, some N elements

1) From ~1925:   Huang Renpo Lisu

   N Lisu, central Fugong County subvariety

1) From 1955:   *pinyin* Lisu

   N Lisu, Weixi County subvariety

1) 'Fraser' script was initially developed at Christmas 1914 by a Scottish China Inland missionary, James Outram Fraser; an American Baptist Mission missionary, J. G. Geis; and a Karen evangelist, Sara Ba Thaw, at Myitkyina in Burma.

Its final version was developed by Fraser and Ba Thaw at Tengchong in China between 1915 and 1917.

This is based mainly on a simplified Central dialect, with a few features of Northern dialect introduced by a Bible translation committee during the 1920s.

The 1914 'Fraser' script used upper case letters and some diacritics: accents, macron, etc.

The standard 'Fraser' script uses 25 upright upper case letters, 15 inverted upper case letters, and six combinations of punctuation after the syllable to represent the tone.

As punctuation is used to mark tones, = is used for full stop, and -. for comma. In the absence of distinct upper case letters, proper names have hyphens between syllables, as in LI-SU 'Lisu'.

The vowel /a/ is inherent in a consonant written without a vowel.

'Fraser' Lisu alphabetical order

B P Ꝑ D T ⊥ G K ꓘ J C Ɔ Z F Ⅎ
b p pʰ d t tʰ g k kʰ (see discussion) dz ts tsʰ

M N L S R Я Ʌ H ꓨ J W X   Y
m n l s ɹ z ŋ ɦ x h f w (see discussion) j

A Ɐ Ǝ I O U ꓶ ꓭ ꓸ
ɑ æ e ø i o u y ɯ ɤ

'Fraser' Lisu ꓗ ꓚ ꓛ ꓫ

Central Lisu has a contrast between
/dʑ tɕ tɕʰ ɕ/ before /ɑ/, written ꓗꓬ ꓚꓬ ꓛꓬ ꓫꓬ
and pronounced [dʑa tɕa tɕʰa ɕa],
versus /dʐ tʂ tʂʰ ʂ/ before /ɑ/, written ꓗ ꓚ ꓛ ꓫ
and pronounced [dʐɑ tʂɑ tʂʰɑ ʂɑ]

The tones are in the following alphabetical order

.   high level

,   high rising

..   higher-mid creaky

.,   mid noncreaky

:   low falling

;   low falling, final glottal stop

These are written at the end of the syllable; syllables are $C_1(C_2)V$ Tone

except some loans which have final nasals

C_2 is W or Y; these only occur after certain consonants and before certain vowels

2) Huang Renpo script was devised by the Lisu traditional religious leader Huang Renpo (1900-1965) in Weixi County in the 1920s, based on his own Northern dialect subvariety, and represents each syllable by a syllabic character which is the size and shape of a Chinese character, arranged like a Chinese book reading from top to bottom starting at the right.

Only one old man can now read this script, which was only ever used for traditional Lisu religious books.

In many cases, phonetically similar words (with the same segments and different tones, or very similar segments) are represented by the same syllabic character, and the script is not logographic

Pinyin (Chinese phonetic writing) script and minority romanisations

From 1955, during the development of the *pinyin* alphabetic script for standard Mandarin Chinese, linguists from various national minorities worked on parallel scripts, which would mutually reinforce learning of mother tongue and standard Mandarin by using the same principles.

One different principle was used in many of these: instead of using superscript diacritics to represent tones, postscript extra consonants are widely used.

Lisu *pinyin*

The Lisu *pinyin* was developed by a group of Lisu experts from central Fugong County, speakers of a variety of the Northern dialect, in conjunction with Chinese and initially Russian linguists.

This went through three stages: first with Cyrillic letters used to represent sounds absent from Mandarin Chinese in 1957; then with the Cyrillic letters removed, after the departure of the Russian experts in 1958, using various digraphs and representing Chinese loanwords in exactly their *pinyin* form; and finally in late 1958 in its final form, approved and implemented in 1959, with Chinese loans partly integrated.

Pinyin Lisu, in 'Fraser' alphabetical order

bb	b	p	dd	d	t	gg	g	k	jj	j	q	zz	z	z
b		p	pʰ	d		t	tʰ	g		k	kʰ (see discussion)		dz	ts	tsʰ

m	n	l	s	r	ss	ng	h-n	h	h	f	w	x	y/ø
m	n	l	s	ɹ	z	ŋ	ħ	x	h	f	w/v (see discussion)		j

a	ai	ei	ei	i	o	u	u	e	e	e-
ɑ	æ	e	ø	i	o	u	y	ɯ	ɤ	ɣ

'Fraser' Lisu alphabetical order

B P ꓒ D T ꓔ G K ꓗ J C Ɔ Z F ꓞ

b p pʰ d t tʰ g k kʰ (see discussion) dz ts tsʰ

M N L S R Ʋ V H Ɠ ꓩ W X   Y

m n l s ɹ z ŋ ħ x h f w (see discussion) j

A Ʌ E Ǝ I O U ꓵ ꓷ ꓭ

ɑ æ ə ø i o u y ɯ ɤ ɣ

Tones in Lisu *pinyin*

The six tones of Lisu are indicated by postscript consonant letters (cited here in the 'Fraser' order)

-l   high level
-q   high rising
unmarked   higher-mid creaky
-x   mid noncreaky
-t   low
-r   low creaky, final glottal stop

Where necessary, an apostrophe is inserted to separate syllables

'Fraser' Lisu and *Pinyin* Lisu

Examples of Lisu tones

'Fraser'	*pinyin*	IPA	gloss
LO.	*lol*	[lo^{55}]	'watch'
LO,	*loq*	[lo^{35}]	'reach top'
LO..	*lo*	[lo̠^{44}]	'throw'
LO.,	*lox*	[lo^{33}]	'light (weight)'
LO:	*lot*	[lo^{21}]	'gather'
LO;	*lor*	[loʔ^{21}]	'enough'

'Fraser' and *pinyin* Lisu Proverb

ꓕꓳ.‚ ꓤ: ꓢꓥ; ꓪ: ꓚꓵ. ꓢꓥ; ꓪ:-.
Coxssat   sairwat   jil   sairwat,
$ts^ho^{33}\ za^{21}$ $sæʔ^{21}\ wa^{21}$ $tʂɻ^{55}$ $sæʔ^{21}\ wa^{21}$
person   strength   sweat strength

ꓢꓒ. ꓠꓲ‚ ꓢꓥ; ꓪ: ꓧꓳ.. ꓢꓥ; ꓪ:=
selniq   sairwat   ho   sairwat.
$sɯ^{55}$ ni^{35} $sæʔ^{21}\ wa^{21}$ $x\underline{o}^{44}$ $sæʔ^{21}\ wa^{21}$
person   strength   sweat strength

'Human strength is sweat, the strength of knowledge is iron'

Is Tone marking obligatory?

In *pinyin* Lisu, tone marking is nearly obligatory, except that –x for the mid level tone is sometimes omitted, making the /33/ and /44/ tones homographic.

In 'Fraser' Lisu, a very high proportion of tones is omitted: 80% or more in Scriptures and even more elsewhere; just enough marking to preserve meaning!

Some Lisu prefer to omit the .. /44/ tone marking completely, leaving this tone unmarked as in *pinyin* Lisu; this is the most frequent tone.

Are Tones stable?

Most Lisu syllables have one consistent tone in all dialects.

There is some dialect variation in the distribution of the /44/ and /33/ tones; this contrast is disappearing in Southern Lisu and some varieties of Northern Lisu, which makes it harder for these speakers to become literate in orthographies which distinguish them.

Many low tone syllables vary between open /21/ and glottal-stop final /21/ when they occur nonfinally in a word, but word-finally the distinction is maintained.

Gaps in Lisu *pinyin?*

It can be noted that there are some apparent gaps in *pinyin* Lisu as opposed to 'Fraser' Lisu.

The /x/ versus /h/ contrast has a vanishingly low functional load; /h/ occurs only in two final strong imperative markers, and varies between [x] and [h] even in those two forms.

The apparent vowel gaps are due to dialect differences, where the Fugong variety of Northern dialect lacks some contrasts like /u/ versus /y/ and /e/ versus /ø/.

Alphabetisation

The alphabetical order for 'Fraser' Lisu was established in the first primers in the early 1920s and has been used consistently ever since.

The alphabetical order for *pinyin* Lisu, as for Chinese *pinyin*, follows the normal ABC order exactly.

As a syllabary, Huang Renpo Lisu has no inherent alphabetical order; no dictionary has ever been published, so this issue has not arisen.

'Fraser' Lisu **W Y** and *Pinyin* Lisu

In most ways the 'Fraser' script is phonemically adequate, but there is a contrast between /w/ and /v/ before /u/ and between /j/ and /ɟ/ before /i/ in most varieties of Lisu including many Central subdialects.

'Fraser' Lisu **W Y** and *Pinyin* Lisu

Northern   Central   Southern
o [ʔo]   **WU** [ʍu]   [u] ~ [wu]
vu [vu]   **WU** [vu]   [vu] ~ [wu]
ei [ʔe]   **YI**   [ji]   [i] ~ [ji]
yi [j̈i]   **YI**   [j̈i]   [j̈i] ˜ [ji]

One Lisu colleague adds an apostrophe to distinguish /vu/, **W'U** but this has not caught on

'Fraser' Lisu **W Y** and *Pinyin* Lisu

Due to dialect contact and the spread of literacy in 'Fraser' Lisu, the word **WU-S** 'God' is now usually pronounced with /wu/ by Christian speakers of Northern and Southern Lisu, using the Central Lisu pronunciation

This is much less frequent for other words, except when reading aloud from printed text

Lisu *pinyin w* and *v*

The use of *w* and *v* follows allophonic usage for native words in Northern Lisu:

w	after /a o/	*wa wo*
v	after /æ e u/	*vai vei vu*

These sounds do not occur before other vowels in Northern Lisu

However, *w* is also used to represent this sound in Chinese loans after /e/ and /u/

The Christian God is now also written *Wusa* not reflecting the former Northern pronunciation *Oxsa*

Pinyin Lisu *jj j q x*

In Northern Lisu, there is a contrast between
[dʒɑ tʃɑ tʃʰɑ ʃɑ] written *jja ja qa xa*, and
[dʑa tɕa tɕʰa ɕa] written *jjai jai qai xai*
Thus, the contrast is marked as a vowel
difference, with [a] regarded as an allophone of
/æ/ rather than /ɑ/

'Fraser' Lisu ꓒ ꓚ ꓳ ꓫ

Central Lisu has a contrast between
/dʑ tɕ tɕʰ ɕ/ before /ɑ/, written ꓒꓬ ꓚꓬ ꓳꓬ ꓫꓬ
and pronounced [dʑa tɕa tɕʰa ɕa],
versus /dʐ tʂ tʂʰ ʂ/ before /ɑ/, written ꓒ ꓚ ꓳ ꓫ
and pronounced [dʐɑ tʂɑ tʂʰɑ ʂɑ]

'Fraser' Lisu and *Pinyin* Lisu [ɻ] [ʅ]

In all varieties of Lisu, there are syllables with syllabic fricatives [ɻ] or [ʅ]. In Northern and Southern Lisu these occur after palatoalveolar affricates and fricatives, while in Central Lisu they occur after retroflex affricates and fricatives.

'Fraser' Lisu and *Pinyin* Lisu [ɲ] [ʐ]

In pinyin Lisu, these are written with *pinyin* alveopalatal consonants followed by *i* ([ɲ, ʐ])
[dʒɹ tʃɹ tʃʰɹ ʃɹ ʒɹ] > *jji ji qi xi ri*
In 'Fraser' Lisu, these are
[dʐɻ tʂɻ tʂʰɻ ʂɻ ʐɻ] > ꓘꓵ ꓚꓵ ꓳꓵ ꓫꓵ ꓣꓵ
That is, [ʐ] is treated as an allophone of /y/ in 'Fraser' Lisu and as an allophone of /i/ in *pinyin*

Gaps in Lisu *pinyin?*

It can be noted that there are a couple of gaps in *pinyin* Lisu as opposed to 'Fraser' Lisu.

The /x/ versus /h/ contrast has a vanishingly low functional load; /h/ occurs only in two final strong imperative markers, and varies between [x] and [h] even in those forms

Most of the vowel differences are due to dialect differences, where the Fugong variety of Northern dialect lacks some contrasts: /u/ versus /y/ and /e/ versus /ø/ and a single back unrounded vowel 'e'.

Issues in learning 'Fraser' Lisu

For speakers of Northern and Southern Lisu dialects, differences between their phonology and that which the 'Fraser' script is based on cause learning problems.

Naturally absent contrasts such as /e/ versus /ø/ and so on require word-by-word learning. This is particularly difficult for Southern Lisu speakers, most of whom are losing the /33/ versus /44/ tonal contrast and have replaced all retroflex affricates and fricatives with alveolars.

Structural Innovations in 'Fraser' Lisu

As a language designed by a committee, 'Fraser' Lisu is not quite identical to any spoken dialect, though it is very similar to some Central subvarieties.

However, it has also undergone some simplifications and innovations; some examples are given below.

Structural Characteristics of 'Book Language'

Simplified grammatical system

    evidentials: use of only 1 form of up to 8

    epistemics: use of only 2 forms of up to 5

Selected forms are used in most dialects, with similar meanings:

'**lowest common denominator**' **dialect**

Unintended Consequences of Structural Change

Extension of one epistemic

All spoken varieties: lo^{44}

(absolutely certain, from personal knowledge of speaker, certainty may have been questioned)

Book Language: lo^{44}

(on nearly every final clause in Scriptures)

Nonimalisation and Relativisation

Nominalization of clausal/verbal forms

    subject   + su^{33}

    patient   + a^{33} ma^{33}

     (+ Head N also used for relativization)

    locative + gu^{33}

    means   + du^{33}

Abstract Nouns

Verb > Abstract Noun formation strategy

Native: Nominalization with a^{33} ma^{33}

       Headed relativization with a^{33} ma^{33}

Innovative: Suffixation with –ni^{35}

      (literally 'heart')

'Heart' Constructions

Widespread areal use of body part + Verb constructions with lexicalised meanings

ny^{33} 'to want'

ni^{35} ny^{33} 'heart-want' > 'to love'

'Heart' constructions usually treated as N + V

ni^{35} ma^{21} ny^{33} 'heart not want' > 'not to love'

'HEART' ABSTRACT NOUNS

Where corresponding N + V exists
ny^{33} ni^{35} 'love'

Where N + V does not exist, abstract
sɯ^{55} ni^{35} 'knowledge'

Where N + V does not exist, concrete
dzɑ^{21} ni^{35} 'eating'

'Fraser' Lisu as Spoken Book Language

Given its association with Christianity, it is not surprising that Christian Lisu have started to use the written language, with its structural innovations, as a new spoken variety in formal church and other settings.

Thus it now serves as a new lingua franca as well as the only recognised literary variety; Lisu love to criticise other Lisu for putting material from their own dialect into the written form!

Speaking Book Language

While the formal structure and lexicon of the Bible language is usually retained when speaking it aloud, speakers adapt it to their own pronunciation.

Thus, most Southern Lisu Christians use their own alveolar affricates and fricatives instead of the literary retroflexes; most Northern Lisu Christians use their own palatalised replacements for literary bilabial + /j/ clusters; and so on.

Speaking Book Lisu

Book Lisu	Northern Lisu	Southern Lisu
C.. [tʂa̠⁴⁴] 'tell'	[tʃa̠⁴⁴]	[tsa³³]
MY: [mja²¹] 'many'	[ɲa²¹]	[mja²¹]
⊥Ǝ., [tʰø³³] 'this'	[tʰe³³]	[tʰe³³]
WU. [wu⁵⁵] 'top'	[ʔo⁵⁵]	[ʔu⁵⁵]

Use of the three Lisu scripts

Huang Renpo script is now completely out of use; it was only ever used by a very small number of traditional religious practitioners in his own area.

'Fraser' script is widely used by all Christian Lisu, who are about a third of the Lisu in China, about two-thirds of the Lisu in Burma, all in India and about 10% in Thailand, a total of over half a million people; degrees of literacy among Christians vary greatly.

Pinyin Lisu was taught in schools from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s (with gaps during the Cultural Revolution) and continues to be taught and used in some places.

Politics of Lisu scripts in China

Huang Renpo script is 'politically correct' in China as an indigenous script.

Pinyin Lisu was the official government script for Lisu (known as 'new Lisu' in China) from 1959 to 1983, and continues to be used alongside 'Fraser' Lisu by non-Christians.

'Fraser' script, known as 'Old Lisu' in China, became the official script in Lisu autonomous areas of China in 1983.

Politics of Lisu scripts in Thailand

Up to the mid-1970s, there was no literacy in Lisu in Thailand.

'Fraser' script came in then with the Christian Lisu and has spread with conversion, but is firmly regarded as a Christian script by non-Christian Lisu who reject it for that reason.

The Thai government requires scripts for its minorities to use the Thai alphabet, and one serious attempt was made to create such a script; however this has never been implemented.

Politics of Lisu scripts in Burma

The only Lisu script ever used in Burma is the 'Fraser' script. This is both because the Christians form the major part of the Lisu population, and because no competing script has ever been developed.

On the other hand, the government has never given any support of any kind to this script, and it can only be taught in churches and seminaries.

Politics of Lisu scripts in India

The only Lisu script ever used in India is the 'Fraser' script. All Lisu in India are relatively recent Christian arrivals from Burma.

'Advanced Lisu'

About fifteen years ago, an American Lisu missionary, David Morse, developed a set of five modified versions of the 'Fraser' script which replace the inverted letters with digraphs.

This has seen some limited use, but it has led to great confusion due to the five alternative versions.

It has also provoked very negative reactions from many Lisu who are already literate in 'Fraser' Lisu.

Takeaway Message

Don't mess with an existing orthography!

Community Ownership and Control

Transnational minorities: inappropriate to choose ONE national script for transfer (*pinyin*, Burmese, Nagari, Thai)

Unicode Lisu

Starting in 2006, I led the process for obtaining Unicode status for 'Fraser' Lisu. This required extensive consultation with Lisu in four countries and overseas, drafting a proposal (with the help of SIL International colleagues) and lobbying with members of the Unicode committee.

This ultimately succeeded in 2008, and it is now possible to use 'Fraser' Lisu for all normal computer and internet purposes, though not yet for texting; nearly everyone uses a font created by David Morse.

Lisu New Media

Religious materials (Bible, hymn book, commentaries, …)
Other print media:

    books, magazines, newspapers, story comics, traditional material, new literature, translations

Audiovisual media: cassette, VCD, DVD, …
    music (gospel, rock, karaoke…)
    traditional activities (dance, festivals, etc.)

Internet media
    web sites
    Facebook, QQ etc.

New Wine in Old Bottles

Traditional literature:
   (songs, proverbs, riddles, etc.)
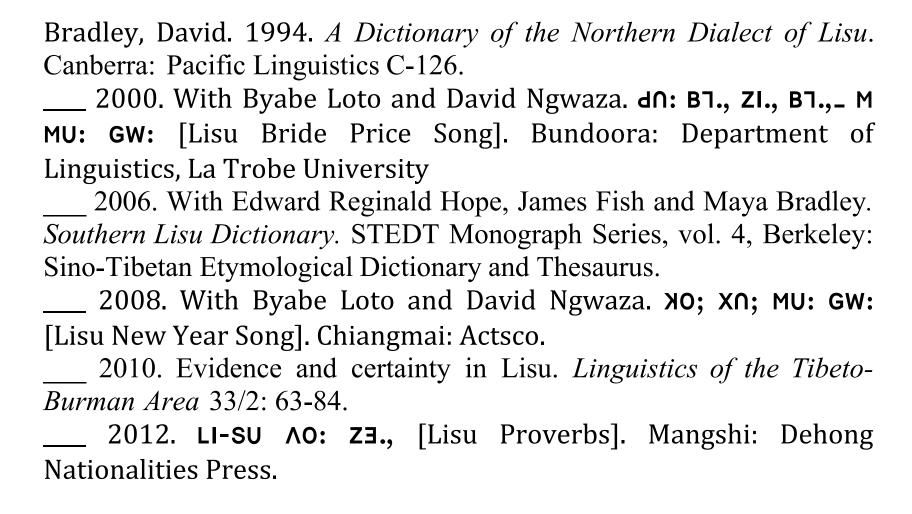   in 7-syllable line pairs (4 + 3 + pause)

Modern Christian literature, modern songs
   in 7-syllable line pairs

Language Study Materials

Primers (since 1920) – many!

Textbooks (China, since 1959)

Dictionaries (since 1983)

    Lisu to English/English to Lisu

        (1994 *pinyin,* 2006 'Fraser')

Text collections

    monolingual, Lisu/Chinese, Lisu/English, Lisu/
Chinese/English

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THANK YOU!

For references and further reading, see

http://latrobe.academia.edu/DavidBradley

which is accessible via the normal academia.edu website