

WRITING RIGHT: LANGUAGE STANDARDIZATION AND ENTEXTUALIZATION¹

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Abstract

Literate Lahu, speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language in the ethnically and linguistically diverse uplands of Southeast Asia and southwest China, inscribe their language in an ecology of literacies shaped by the imbrication of a number of ideologies. As members of the larger category of *chao khao* or mountain people, the Lahu belong to a group which is persistently labeled as Other. (Laungaramsri 2001: 43-4). Lahu are also a people-without-writing (Pine 1999), despite the fact that at least three writing systems exist for Lahu, with a fourth in somewhat limited use and at least one other system in development. The ideological diversity of the entextualization of Lahu benefits seeing it within a particular historical and ecological context. This paper historicizes particular literacy practices within the context of the development of a particular form of written Lahu. It also traces the influence of a phenomenon termed "proprietary orthographies" which permeates the ecology of literacies in mainland Southeast Asia and, I argue, has a significant impact on Lahu language literacy practices. Focusing on a subtle issue of the representation of tone, and also drawing on self-reporting of literacy, as well as making use of Keane's concept of "semiotic ideologies", I argue that orthographies enjoy a complex form of indexicality in this region which differs in small, but important, ways from other areas.

Keywords: Lahu; Entextualization; Language ideology; Writing systems.

“A writing system, in our terms, therefore, is a consistent system for representing a natural language in visible symbols on a physical surface, with sufficient flexibility and scope such that people can use it to record substantially everything they can say” (Smalley 1990)

“My hypothesis, if correct, would oblige us to recognize the fact that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery” (Levi-Strauss 1992).

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1. Introduction

The ecology of literacies in which literate Lahu, speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language found primarily in the mountains of Southeast Asia and southwest China, inscribe their language is one which has been shaped by the imbrication of a number of ideologies. As Feingold points out, "the frontier areas of highland Southeast Asia are both politically and economically interstitial... regions in which social systems rub against one another" (2000: 195). The Lahu are among those persistently identified as marginal or peripheral, in Thailand *chao khao* (mountain people), a term which is applied to widely diverse peoples regardless of their self-identification (Kammerer 1988: 262), and which can be paired with *chao rao* (we people) to assert the Otherness of those so labeled (Pinkaw 2001: 43-4). Lahu are also a people-without-writing (Pine 1999), despite the fact that at least three writing systems exist for Lahu, with a fourth in somewhat limited use and at least one other system in development. The links between each writing system and a particular ideological "civilizing project" (Harrell 1995) shape Lahu literacy practices in significant ways. The ideological diversity of the entextualization of Lahu must be understood within a particular historical and, if you will, ecological context. In this paper, I will place particular literacy practices within the context of a history of the development of a particular form of written Lahu. I will also trace the influence of a phenomenon which I term "proprietary orthographies" which permeates the ecology of literacies in mainland Southeast Asia and, I argue, has a significant impact on Lahu language literacy practices. Taking as my focus a subtle issue of the representation of tone, but drawing also on self-reporting of literacy, and making use of Keane's concept of "semiotic ideologies", I argue that orthographies enjoy a complex form of indexicality in this region which differs in small but important ways from other areas.

This approach is congruent with an ideological model of literacy (Street 1984), which cleared the ground for much needed exploration of practices associated with written language. The New Literacy Studies (NLS) school offers a view on the complexity which is masked by a monolithic view of literacy as autonomous from social contexts of reading and writing. NLS encourages scholars to reject the reification of the autonomous model, focus their attention on the social practices associated with reading and writing in the form of *literacy practices*, "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes" (Heath 1983: 9) and *literacy events* rather than "literacy-in-itself", and "recognize the ideological character of the processes of acquisition and of the meanings and uses of different literacies" (Street 1993: 7) The NLS model grounds uses of writing firmly in the materiality of contextual experience. This grounding resonates with Peircean semiotics, which likewise refuses to be disconnected from the material production of meaning, the actual physical communicative work. The context for this communicative work is ideological, not least the case of literacy as a social practice which "is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always "ideological", they are always rooted in a particular world-view" (Street 2003: 78). Street's "world-view" maps relatively well onto the concept of language ideology, which has taken a number of forms in the discourses of linguistic anthropology. I follow Irvine and Gal in thinking of language ideologies as "the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties

and map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them” (2000: 35). Language ideology, as a key concept, is often associated with a growing interest in applying the semiotics developed by Charles Sanders Peirce. Pursuing this connection, Keane proposes the concept "semiotic ideology", a concept which is "not just about signs, but about what kinds of agentive subjects and acted-upon objects might be found in the world"(2003: 419). Keane's concept provides a historicity which is vital to my own argument, noting that "it is a historically specific semiotic ideology that determines what will count for the interpreter and actor as objects and in contrast to what subjects" (Keane 423). Thus, the circumstances surrounding the entextualization of Lahu involve the loading of indexical associations onto various aspects of written Lahu, associations which have an impact on the actions of Lahu speakers with regard to writing.

Of course, the literature on orthographic choice recognizes the ideological and historical nature of the relationship between people and writing. Enwall's (2001) detailed discussion of the history of di- and trigraphia among A-hmao speakers in southwestern China is a marvelous example of the sort of detailed history which is necessary if we are to understand the complex forces involved in choices about and use of orthographies. Ahmad, writing about the adaptation of Devanagari script for writing Urdu, suggests that "the social and symbolic meaning of writing systems...are produced and maintained through the orthographic practices in which users of the writing system engage" (2011: 2), and the view of orthographic choice as practice, what might be termed the political deployment of writing systems, has of course been explored widely in other contexts (see for example Brown 1993; Schieffelin and Doucet 1994; Balhorn 1998; Fennigson 1999; Jaffe and Walton 2000; Ahmad 2011; Dickinson this volume). As Fennigson notes, the practice of language representation is an important site for the ideological labor which reproduces dominant systems of linguistic values (1999: 2), and many scholars have noted that the creation of orthographies is in no way ideologically neutral. As we know, language practices are crucial to the (re)production of significant sociopolitical differences (Gal and Woolard 2001), and points at which spoken and written language intersect are particularly active locations for struggle over authenticity and authority (Jaffe 2009). In the Lahu case, key elements of a pervasive semiotic ideology are illuminated by two points of struggle which I will describe below. These struggles involve the use of diacritics indicating tone², and a reluctance on the part of many Lahu readers to claim the ability to write. The representational economy which this semiotic ideology makes comprehensible is grounded in regional understandings of the nature of written language and a particular history of the entextualization of written Lahu language entextualization.

In a discussion of relations between peripheral peoples and “central, civilizing powers” in China, Harrell develops the concept of *civilizing projects*, “asymmetrical dialogues between the center and the periphery” which can be divided into “two components: The ideological discourse of the center (to which the members of the peripheral peoples may subscribe or contribute in varying degree), and the ethnic discourse of the periphery” (Harrell 1995: 7). The basis of the relationship, in a civilizing project, is the center’s claim to a superior sort of civilization, the assumption that the peripheral people are capable of achieving a higher level of civilization, and a

² Lahu has seven tones.

sense that the center ought to go about civilizing them. The framing of the semiotic ideology which I am exploring here occurs within the context of such civilizing projects, and indexes a civilized status closely associated with modernity.

The concept of semiotic ideologies grounds the practice of meaning to the material in ways which a Peircean focus make necessary. Recognition of the material existence of the representamen, what in Saussurian terms would be called the signifier³ Keane argues that "part of the power of material objects in society consists of their openness to 'external' events" (2003: 416). In this article, I am arguing that the written form(s) of Lahu, the orthographies and the tone marks, are material objects bearing a semiotic load shaped by both the events of their creation and the literacy experiences of Lahu in Thailand. Drawing on the Peircean semiotics, the development of the concept of indexicality in linguistic anthropology (of which Silverstein 1976 is a seminal example) and influenced by the practice theory promulgated by Bourdieu (1991), Keane has developed the concept of *semiotic ideology* to describe "basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world" (2003: 419). Semiotic ideologies, he further explains, "are not just about signs, but about what kinds of agentive subjects and acted-upon objects might be found in the world" (2003: 420), and mediate relations between words and things which exist within a "representational economy" (2003: 421). Below, I will describe two examples of literacy practices which seem to me practical realizations of a particular, historically specific, semiotic ideology within what I have terms an ecology of literacies within which a number of representational economies may be encountered.

2. The sites of struggle

The literacy practice which first called my attention to this semiotic ideology is subtle and potentially ambiguous. A Lahu woman I had asked for help revising my translation of an informed consent document⁴ asked if she could provide a version with no diacritics. The Lahu Baptist orthography which we were using for the document has six diacritics, called *hkaw mvuh hkaw neh*, to represent six of the seven tones which each Lahu syllable must include, leaving only the mid-tone unmarked. I knew that adding the tones myself would be quite time consuming, and asked that she include them in the revision. She then noted that she did not have the correct font for writing Lahu. I suggested we use the tone representation from an orthography developed by the PRC. This Chinese orthography uses the roman alphabet, and, taking advantage of the fact that Lahu words are CV with very few exceptions, marks tone with syllable final consonants for the same six tones. With my emailed instruction, she marked tone in this fashion, and I used the "find and replace" function of my own word processing software to find syllable final d, f, l, q, r and t and replace them with the appropriate diacritic. I

³ I will not here enter the debate over whether or not one can map Peircean signs onto Saussurian signs in a way which reconfigure the triad to fit it into a dyad, having made the comparison for the purpose of convenience here.

⁴ My quite conversational version became much more formal as a result, which was of course what I had asked for.

then took my netbook to my Lahu language instructor for his comments. He immediately corrected a number of the tone marks within the document.

This single instance of a very busy woman using an unfamiliar system would not in itself have caught my attention. However, in conversation with another linguist working with Lahu in Chiangmai I learned that he had also encountered a tone mark issue. His Lahu students, he told me, expressed reluctance to mark the tone of syllables unless they heard them in minimal pairs, despite the fact that they could understand the word they heard - which would seem to require that they recognize the tone. The issue of *hkaw mvuh hkaw neh* use, read through the lens of semiotic ideology, led me to reconsider an earlier issue which had puzzled me during my initial fieldwork. This has to do with the nature of literacy itself. During my dissertation fieldwork (1996-98), I frequently encountered individuals who claimed to be illiterate (*li ma shi*), but who I observed reading. I learned to ask Lahu individuals about literacy in terms of specific skills for specific practices. That is, I needed to ask "can you read?" and "can you write?". While I had conflated the two practices, Lahu speakers clearly did not. Many of the Lahu Baptists among whom I was conducting that research could and did read regularly, but relatively few claimed an ability to write. This puzzled me, as the orthography they were using enjoys considerable phonetic accuracy, such that writing seemed to me to resemble phonetic transcription. Nevertheless, the reason people gave me for not being able to write was that they did not know how to spell words correctly. These same Lahu speakers displayed great confidence in their ability to correctly pronounce words in their own and other dialects of Lahu.

2.1. Who are the Lahu?

Anthony Walker, foremost ethnographer of the Lahu, argues that they are "a collectivity of human beings who, despite their lack of common social, political or economic institutions, share a feeling of "Lahuness" which goes beyond their common language (albeit with considerable variation between the major dialects) to embrace the idea of a shared past" (Walker 2003: 52-3). The Lahu have traditionally made their living as swidden agriculturalists and hunters in the mountains of southwest China and Southeast Asia. Although they are identified in some discourses as an indigenous group, as when the International Work Group for Indigenous affairs asserts that they are among the indigenous peoples of northern Thailand by virtue of having "traditionally migrated over large areas", and also as a result of their "disadvantaged social and economic position within Thai society" (IWGIA 2004: 248), the Lahu are relatively recent arrivals in Thailand. The earliest reports of Lahu in what today is Thailand come from the late 19th century, and today the Lahu population in Thailand numbers only around 80,000. The majority of Lahu speakers, perhaps 500,000, live in Yunnan Province, China. There is no clear historical record of Lahu origins before the 17th century, although scholarly speculation and Lahu oral history seem to indicate origins on the northwest periphery of what today is the Peoples Republic of China. Steady movement to the south and west has resulted in a wide distribution of Lahu speakers throughout the mountains of the region. Today, some Lahu have moved to urban areas in the river valleys but most Lahu speakers continue to call upland villages home.

The Lahu in Thailand are subsumed within the category of *chao khao*, a term which is often translated as "hill tribes"⁵. The use of the term "tribe" seems in this case to share with the term "indigenous" a connection to political-economic status within the larger polity, rather than internal political organization. As Moerman notes when the term tribe was initially used in social science literature on Southeast Asia it was used to refer to "members of a set of societies that are not congregations for a great religion, that have little supra-village political organization, and that are only superficially involved in a cash economy" (Moerman 1968: 153). While these negative descriptors may have applied to many Lahu in 1967, the Lahu village in which I began my fieldwork in 1997 is peopled by Protestants, most of them Baptists⁶, who are actively involved in local and global cash economies.

The Lahu and other *chao khao* are generally seen as people without writing, despite the fact that all of the upland languages now have some written form. Tapp coined the term *aliterate* to refer to Southeast Asian upland peoples, including the Lahu, who "clearly demonstrate a long and intimate acquaintance with the characteristics of writing and the socio-political advantages which the use of writing may imply or ensure" without themselves having or developing a vernacular literacy (1989: 75). Elsewhere I have pointed out the indelible nature of what has been called a "tyranny of conceptual dichotomies" (Graff 1987: 24) which associates the possession of writing with knowledge, civilization and power. These "dichotomizing discourses" (Gal 1991: 444) associate a lack of writing with backward, primitive or traditional status, indirectly indexing the modernity of those "with writing". The Lahu oral literature which Nishimoto refers to as "narratives of inferiority" (1998) includes discussion of the loss of writing, and the loss of writing myth is ubiquitous among those Tapp (1989) has labeled aliterate, indicating Lahu participation in this dichotomizing discourse.

2.2. Civilizing projects, writing systems and proprietary orthographies

There are three writing systems in use for writing Lahu, each developed by representatives of a particular "civilizing project" (Harrell 1995) but the most widely used form in Thailand is the writing system I will refer to as the Baptist system, while I will refer to the other two as the Catholic and the Chinese systems. All three writing systems use the roman orthography. They differ slightly in the representation of some phonemes, and as noted above, each has its own distinct method of marking tone. The complex ecology of languages in Thailand has been comprehensively described (Smalley 1994), but the ecology of literacies remains less thoroughly explored. A key element of this ecology is a phenomenon which I refer to as "proprietary

⁵ This translation is flawed in that the Lahu and the other groups so named do not have a tribal political structure. Efforts to introduce alternative terms, such as mountain minorities or upland peoples must contend with widespread popular use of the term hill tribes. Today, claims to indigenous status are very likely enhanced by the "tribal" label, further complicating the situation. A Thai effort to use the term "chaw Thai phu khao" or Thai people of the mountains has also failed to gain much traction.

⁶ The entire village was affiliated with the Thailand Lahu Baptist Convention when I first lived there in 1997-98. In 2011, a second faction affiliated with the Thailand Lahu Evangelical Convention can be found, and other smaller factions may also exist.

orthographies”. In earlier work (Pine 1999) I have argued that the possession of writing is an ideological construct distinct from the ability to inscribe a particular language, constructed within a global discourse on literacy. As a result of this global ideological framework, speakers of languages such as Lahu are often labeled “without writing” despite the existence of writing systems and published texts, as when a UNESCO report on the literacy situation in Thailand asserts, of the “hilltribes” of the north, that “almost all are illiterate as they have no written languages apart from the use of Burmese, Roman, or Chinese scripts among the learned few” (UNESCO 1984: 6). The quite literate Baptist pastor with whom I study Lahu when I am in Thailand once mused that someday the Lahu would have a Lahu writing, as distinct from the three writing systems currently in existence for Lahu, demonstrating the hegemonic nature of the idea that writing is something to be possessed. The possession of writing may, I have noted, be primordial, an always already literate state which characterizes my own people. Alternatively, in some cases, the possession of writing may come about in historic time and still retain its legitimacy. These cases are what I refer to as proprietary orthographies, where “a proprietary orthography is a writing system which is associated with specific language, and usually a particular political entity” (Pine 1999: 180).

Dickinson (this volume) notes that some orthographies may be perceived as having more plasticity than others for ideological and historical reasons. The plasticity of roman orthographies in the Greater Mekong subregion⁷, in comparison with the relative lack of plasticity of proprietary orthographies, owes much to the fact that they are not viewed as plastic from a proprietary orthography perspective. Thus, during interviews in the 1990s I was told by Thai teachers that students who became literate in Lahu would more easily learn English, but that this Lahu literacy would not help them become literate in Thai⁸. More recently, at the International Thai Studies Conference, July 2011, presenters asserted that Thai based orthographies for non-Tai languages such as Pattani Malayu would help students learn Thai. As far as I am aware, no research has yet been conducted to determine whether it is easier for students to associate the same letters with sometimes dramatically different sounds or to learn separate sets of letters for those sounds. It is clear, however, that the concept of proprietary orthographies shapes assumptions which go on to influence pedagogy and language policy.

2.3. Writing in Thai history

The semiotic ideology within which proprietary orthographies play a significant role is particularly strong in Thailand. Thai national identity famously rests on the tripod of language, monarchy and Theravada Buddhism proposed by King Prajadhipok. However, the Thai orthography, proprietary to the Thai nation-state, does not appear to index a religious identity in the way the Baptist orthography cannot seem to escape. It may be the case that the link between writing and civilized status, a condition of

⁷ The Greater Mekong Subregion, composed of most of mainland SE Asia and southwest China, is a more widely used term in Southeast Asian studies.

⁸ This contradicted Smalley's (1994) argument that becoming literate in the language of the home would give students a familiarity with the concept of literacy which would aid them when they encountered both literacy and Thai in the school.

modernity, requires, in the context of proprietary orthographies, that a writing system index at least one, or perhaps only one, institution associated with modernity.

The history of Thai possession of a written language, and particularly the existence of the Ram Khamhaeng inscription⁹, is, I argue, central to the charter myth of modern Thailand, in which the possession of writing is intimately linked to the state of being civilized. Certainly, King Mongkut (Rama IV) did not hesitate to use this evidence of a long, unbroken line of civilization to his advantage in the international political arena, as can be seen in the following excerpt from a letter to Sir John Bowring:

I beg to send your Excellency also two copies of the ancient Siamese letters first invented at Northern Siam in the year of the Christian era 1282, which letters were copied out from a stone pillar which they were inscribed (as cited in Krairiksh 1991: 119).

The possession of writing here becomes a weapon in the struggle against European colonial forces. The power of this image has endured, and finds a place in the construction and maintenance of Thai civil society. The Thai language is very much a written language, and membership in the nation requires the acquisition of Thai language both oral and written.

The complexity with which written Thai represents tone contributes to the semiotic ideology I am describing as well. The Thai orthography represents the five tones of standard Thai through relationships between three classes of consonants, two types of syllable ("live" and "dead"), and three tone-associated diacritics. In addition, a particular tone may be represented by more than one combination of initial consonant type, syllable type, and diacritic or absence of diacritic. The literate Lahu for whom tone marks were set apart from the simple act of spelling are all fluent, literate users of Thai as well. Their command of Lahu writing is such that the claim of inability to spell would be ludicrous, but the Thai context makes an avoidance of tone marking quite sensible.

3. A history of Lahu entextualization

Beyond the Thai context, the origins of a semiotic ideology within which Lahu literacy practices can be understood centers on the work of American Baptist missionaries in Burma in the late 19th and early 20th century, but it is not a history of American Baptists. It is instead a history happening within the context of an encounter between American Baptists and Lahu. In order to understand the impact of these events, it is vital that the Lahu context be given full weight, and not simply made into a background on which non-Lahu act. In fact, the impact of these events owes much to a long history of charismatic political leadership among the Lahu, and to the fact that Lahu political

⁹ Controversy over the origins of this inscription are directly related to its nature as fetish, in which message content plays a role in that it creates of Ramkhamhaeng the ideal Buddhist king. Chamberlain (1991) provides a thorough treatment of this controversy, in a collection of papers representing the various positions taken in the debate.

structure is very fluid reacting to conflict through both efforts to achieve consensus and through relatively unproblematic schism. Sharp, describing a Lahu sense that everyone in a village ought to behave as siblings, asserts that this is "quite probably related to the frequent segmentation of their villages (1965: 86) and Delmos Jones describes the typical Lahu village as "a voluntary unit; that is, no household can be forced to remain within the village (1967: 73-74), further commenting that households could relocate at will within a group of related villages, and that order was maintained through a combination of kinship, age and religion (here traditional theistic animism).

When William Marcus Young began working with Lahu in what was then Burma, in 1903, he had no written Lahu to work with. Instead, he distributed texts in Shan, a Tai language, a Tai language. These texts arguably spoke to a late 19th century prophecy attributed to a Mahayana Buddhist Lahu politico-religious leader in China who spoke of a white man on a white horse with a golden book (Walker 2003: 513). The need to "reduce to writing" the languages of those with whom they worked, a process which Errington has so nicely linked to the colonial enterprise (2001: 21) was an important element of an on-going struggle between factions of Baptist missionaries in the region, in great part because of discomfort which other missionaries in the field and authorities at home felt with the fetishization of texts inherent in giving "sacred" books to people who could not read them, and in 1906-07, shortly after Young began his work, H.H. Tilbe, a missionary linguist and Pali Sanskrit scholar, developed the initial form of what has become the Baptist orthography, producing "a simple arithmetic book, a catechism, a few Bible passages and some hymns" (Walker 2003: 653). C.B. Antisdel, the first American missionary and likely the first Westerner to master the Lahu language (Walker 2003: 653) used his knowledge and Tilbe's writing system to produce "several religious tracts, an elementary Lahu reader and 'a complete narrative of the life of Christ from the four gospels'" between 1912 and 1918 (Walker 2003: 654), while James Telford and A.C. Hanna¹⁰ arrived in the Lahu "field" at the end of 1916 and focused their missionary efforts on education (Hunter 1946) resulting in a highly successful school at Pangwai and the first generation of Lahu speakers literate in their own language. In 1926, after considerable lobbying and making the argument that life in the lowlands damaged the health of upland Lahu, Telford was able to move the Lahu mission headquarters up into the hills at Pangwai. At Pangwai, Telford developed a school which provided the first formal education in Lahu, using Tilbe's orthography. Students, both men and women, from Telford's school at Pangwai went on to get college educations and, according to Walker, became "a core of educated young Lahu men and women was being formed, who would lead the Christian Lahu community in Burma through the Japanese War period, when all their foreign missionaries had to flee, and after, when a new, less foreign-dominated, Christian community began to emerge (2003: 663). The existence of an educated elite associated with literacy can be traced back to this point, and forms one element of the semiotic ideology which influences both tone marks and literacy claims among late-20th and early 21st century Lahu Christians.

¹⁰ Hanna, a grandson of Baptist missionary pioneer Adoniram Judson who with his first wife Anne founded the Baptist mission in mainland Southeast Asia (Anderson 1956; Bruberg 1980), worked with ethnic Karen Baptist pastors Ba Te and Po Tun to produce a hymnal *Bonkaw Shinkaw Kamui Tu Li*, but was unable to realize plans for a Bible translation.

The majority of early Lahu literature involved the translation of sacred texts. A Karen¹¹ Baptist pastor, Po Ton, did the first gospel translations into Lahu, and Telford, with the assistance of Sa la Da Ví (Ca Hupei), the first ethnic Lahu Baptist pastor, produced the first New Testament translation in 1930, published by the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society. Telford was reportedly not satisfied with this translation, and intended to revise it. He took a furlough in 1941, however, and the Japanese invasion prevented his return. He did publish a translation of Book of Psalms in 1939, with help from Sa la Da Ví and Sa La Ai Pun (who later helped missionary linguist Paul Lewis with his translation of the New Testament). Telford also produced a series of readers from “infant to senior grades” for use in the school at Pangwai (Walker 2003: 664).

While Telford was building his school, William Marcus Young’s sons were growing up and joining him in missionary efforts. Both sons became involved in the production of written Lahu using Tilbe’s orthography. Harold Young, with wife Ruth, produced a revised Lahu hymnal with musical notation in 1939. Vincent Young (William Young’s other son) “revised and retranslated the New Testament in Lahu”, working from 1948 (in Yunnan) through the late 1950s (finishing in the US). This New Testament was “published privately in Taiwan” (Walker 2003: 665), having become a casualty of an extensive political conflict which I will follow Walker (2003) in calling the “orthography controversy”.

The controversy began shortly after Paul and Elaine Lewis, a missionary couple who had been students of Telford, arrived in Kengtung State. A month after they arrived, they began publishing the first Lahu magazine (*Lahu Li^ sa tan*). They also began revision of a Baptist catechism, with particular attention to staunching a widespread belief in salvation through baptism which they found deeply troubling (Walker 2003: 665). This conflict is significant in the discourse within which the semiotic ideology I am exploring has developed. The Shan language books, acting as fetishes rather than sources of enlightenment, clearly belonged to the sort of practice against which the couple began to work. The Lewises continued to produce literature in the existing orthography, but reported that the Lahu they were in contact with complained that the orthography as it existed did not accurately represent the sounds of Lahu. This became a political battle between Paul and Elaine Lewis and Vincent and Vera Young, who from Bana (in Yunnan) actively resisted the Lewises’ request to make revisions. Young reported overwhelming Lahu objection to the Lewises’ changes. The Lewises saw Young’s resistance as imposing his will on the Lahu.

The Youngs were ousted from Yunnan by the Communists in 1950 and ended up in Burma with the Lewises. In 1951, the executive committee of the American Burma Baptist Mission attempted to convene a meeting of Lahu Baptist leaders and have a secret ballot to sort things out. Walker reports that either the meeting never occurred or the ballot was never taken (Walker 2003: 669). Elaine Lewis reported in a letter that Vincent Young blocked the vote. In 1958, the Baptist Board of Publications called a meeting of Lahu Christian leaders, specifically NOT inviting foreign missionary personnel, but there was no resolution. Members of the Pangwai faction were

¹¹ Karen is, like Lahu, a Tibeto-Burman language, but the two languages are fairly distantly related and by no means mutually intelligible.

committed to the revised orthography, while Young's faction remained committed to the old orthography.

In conjunction with their battle over writing, Vincent Young and Paul Lewis brought out rival revised New Testament translations. Young produced his translation on his own (he was brought up in "Lahu-land" and was a native speaker). Lewis assembled a "New Testament Revision Committee" in 1956 - this committee included "members from the various Burma-based Lahu Baptist Church associations and representatives of the refugee community from China" (Walker 2003: 671). Lewis outmaneuvered Young, who was finishing up his own revision in 1956. Lewis informed the missionary leadership that he would use Young's revision, along with three Burmese translations, a Kachin translation and the old (Telford) Lahu translation. The Youngs had thought that the Revision committee would be a Review committee, to give comments and corrections before Young's revision went to press, and were furious to learn that Lewis intended to use it only as one data source in his own entirely new translation. The Youngs then contacted their supporters on Lewis's committee and all of those people left the Revision committee, leaving only "Pangwai men" (Walker 2003: 671).

The orthographic controversy centered on how allophones of particular phonemes ought to be written, and so concerned itself primarily with accuracy of phonemic representation, with the Pangwai faction struggling for an orthography which took into account the rules of Lahu phonology while their opponents maintained support for the traditional forms. Certainly the history of contention over writing within the Baptist missionary community, and the clear link with factional contention among Lahu individuals, is reflected in the reluctance of (some) Lahu to claim or even feel confidence with regard to their command of the written form.

It is clear from the contentiousness of the battle that more was at stake than the representation of sounds, and the echoes of this controversy can be heard in current Lahu concerns about correctness in writing. As Hoffman-Dilloway points out in her discussion of standardization in Nepali Sign Language, social authority "can be derived from the ability to create and reinforce particular metasemiotic discourses" (2008: 208), and the struggle over orthographic forms for use in writing Lahu makes more sense when the link between the semiotic and the political is clearly in focus. Certainly the battle durably constructed correct writing as a potential location of contention and dispute within the Baptist community. The link which I argue exists between the context in which the Baptist orthography developed and the issue of the representation of tone lies in the relationship between authority and authenticity.

The difficulty over writing *hkaw mvuh hkaw neh* reflects, to some extent, the history of Lahu writing as a skill which might elude even modern, educated folks. This is part of a language ideology which is influenced both by the context -- an ecology of literacies, or a representational economy, characterized by proprietary orthographies -- and the history of the entextualization of Lahu, which is associated with civilizing projects that place an emphasis on standardization and "correctness". Furthermore, learning to write and read Lahu does not fall within the traditional Lahu educational framework which would involve asking people to do things they had observed being done, and commenting on the outcome, as when my hostess instructed her 12 year old daughter to make rice for the family supper and then commented critically on the result to the gathered family as we ate our meal. The potential for school literacy and vernacular literacy to influence one another seems to be

realized here, in a somewhat different way from that which Maybin (2007) describes in her distinction between “over the desk” and “under the desk” practices, where vernacular literacy practices are “under the desk” in the school. In the Lahu case, the line between vernacular and formal literacy exists in a context outside the school altogether, yet not outside of formal institutions which we associate with standardization.

3.1. *Proprietary orthographies and the possession of writing: Lahu Nyi and Lahu Na Shehle*¹²

Further support for the significance of proprietary orthographies in this semiotic ideology can be found in efforts, as yet unsuccessful, to develop distinct writing systems for Lahu Nyi and Lahu Na Shehle dialects. Lahu Nyi is quite closely related to Lahu Na (Bradley 1979) and Lahu Nyi Christians readily read and write Lahu using the Baptist orthography. There are, as far as I have been able to determine, no Lahu Nyi in China. This sub-group very likely originated in a division from Lahu Na Meu Neu in Myanmar/Burma. Lahu Na Shehle is distinct from the Lahu Na Meu Neu for which the orthographies have been developed. Differences in dialect are not the primary factor behind on-going efforts to develop distinct writing systems, possibly based on Thai orthography, for these dialects. Rather, the issue lies in the relationship which is so clearly marked by the term “Baptist writing” which spurs both Lahu speakers and some Thai and Western scholars to push for a Thai based writing system. Most Lahu Nyi and Lahu Na Shehle are non-Christians, practicing traditional Lahu theistic animism, a significant factor in this orthographic strategy.

The fact that Lahu Na, generally referred to as the standard or central dialect, is the dialect of Lahu used in the vast majority of publications leaves speakers of other dialects at a disadvantage. This in turn has resulted in some political tension, and at least one schism among Lahu Baptists resulted from a group of Lahu Shi Baptists who expressed a desire for their own script. Speakers of Akha, a related Tibeto-Burman language, have been formally engaged in the creation of a Common Akha Orthography, using the Roman alphabet, in an effort to develop a writing system which can be used by, and belong to, all speakers of Akha and Hani and allow for joint efforts to preserve language and culture. This effort, which involves Christians and non-Christians, has met with resistance from at least one group of Christian Akha in Kengtung (Pannada Boonyasaranai, personal communication).

¹² This group refer to themselves as the Lahu Na, however another group speaking a quite different dialect also refer to themselves as the Lahu Na. The Na (Shehle) refer to the other Lahu Na as Lahu Bali or Lahu Meu Neu (this last being a term Na Meu Neu use themselves as well), and are referred to by these people as Lahu Shehle, a term used by scholars to refer to them as well. The Lahu Na dialect which is referred to as the “central” dialect belongs to those referred to also as Bali or Meu Neu.

Conclusion

This region, in which orthographies may index not simply modernity or standardization but also the existence of a state, has been an environment within which, as I have argued elsewhere (Pine 1999, Pine 2008), the possession of writing is effectively prevented for Lahu and other state-less minority peoples because they cannot claim either primordial status as "with writing" or possession of a fully realized proprietary orthography. The context is changing however. In 2006 the Thai Royal Institute formed a groundbreaking language policy committee, with six sub-committees, including a sub-committee on regional languages including ethnic minority languages. The Research Institute for Languages and Cultures in Asia (RILCA) at Mahidol University in Bangkok has been very active in the development and promotion of writing systems for ethnic minority languages. Interestingly enough, the Thai orthography has been a source of several writing systems. In the several panels discussing ethnic minority languages at the 11th International Thai Studies Conference (July 26-28, 2011) the issue of representation of tones, as well as the accurate representation of non-Tai phonemes, was a frequently discussed issue with regard to the development and use of these systems.

In this paper, I have traced the many factors that have produced the ecology of literacy in which Lahu speakers make choices between different modes of entextualization. Social practices surrounding reading and writing Lahu can neither be separated from the historical conditions under which different writing systems came into use; neither can an instance of writing be interpreted outside of the semiotic ideologies that make choices between writing systems meaningful. The subtlety with which language ideology may operate leads me to the conclusion, at this point in my pursuit of Lahu, that correctness as a site of contest remains a significant influence on the production of written Lahu. The way in which tone is or is not written, or whether an individual claims the ability to write at all, can be interpreted as a reflection not only of the contested nature of what is correct, but how divergent writing practices connect to semiotic ideologies of who can claim the authority to entextualize Lahu "correctly".

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