

How Do You Write Lisu?

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Abstract

This paper will first introduce the Lisu, a Tibeto-Burman group of approximately 800,000 people residing mainly in Thailand, Myanmar and China, with a small Lisu population in northwestern India.

Second the current systems for writing Lisu will be described very briefly, the principal one being a Roman based orthography with modifications in the orientations of certain letters and some punctuation marks used for tones. This orthography was introduced by James O. Fraser about 1907 and finalized over the next decade. The Lisu alphabet is comprised of 40 Roman characters, all capitals: 30 consonants and 10 vowels. Fifteen of the letters are inverted letters. Six basic and eight combination tones are indicated using English punctuation marks, such as ‘.’ ‘;’ ‘,’ (period, semicolon, comma) etc.

Third a development of the Fraser system (called ‘advanced’ at the moment by the Lisu) will be described. The Lisu want to be able to do more with and in their own language, but they are hindered by the input system. New orthographies have been introduced using Burmese, Thai, Hindi and Chinese Pinyin alphabets, each of which have limitations. Many Lisu desire to be able to write the language with the typical English alphabet. This would enable the use of cursive writing, as well as the use of all standard writing devices that use English including the typewriter and computer keyboard. It would also provide a motivation and facilitation for non-literate Lisu to learn to read and write Lisu, since it uses the English alphabet that the children are learning in schools.

Fourth, we present five stages in the gradual moving of Lisu orthography from the present Fraser orthography to a completely compatible English-like orthography. Care is taken to preserve the literacy of current speakers, so that they will have a high rate of transference in learning the new English-like orthography. There is also a high degree of transfer for those who read English.

The five stages that are currently being tested in a few selected villages are:

0. Traditional Fraser Script (upper case only, inverted letters, punctuation marks for vowels, no cursive writing)

1. Removal of inverted letters, substitution of various other letters for inverted ones. Upper case only. No cursive.
2. Use of both lower case and upper case letters.
3. Introduction of cursive writing.
4. Regularization of habits: Capitalization of proper nouns, beginnings of sentences. Removal of spaces between each syllable to allow spaces to mark words. Punctuation decisions.
5. Decisions on tones: [a] preserve the traditional system of periods, commas, etc., [b] use diacritics, or [c] use final letters so that no special font should be used.

Lastly, reports on the current attempts to introduce this advanced script are surveyed. Future actions will also be discussed.

Introduction

Lisu is spoken in China, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, India and perhaps Laos. It has been referred to by many alternate names, such as: Lissu, Lisaw, Li-Shaw, Li-Hsaw, Lu-Tzu, Lesuo, Li, Lishu, Leisu, Leshuopa, Loisu, Southern Lisu, Yao Yen, Yaw-Yen, Yaw Yin, Yeh-Jen, Chung, Cheli, Chedi, Lip'a, Lusu, Khae, Lip'o, Liso and Central Lisu.

Lisu belongs to the Central Loloish group of Tibeto-Burman languages. The Ethnologue lists 26 Loloish languages, some of which are: Akha, Lahu, Lipo, Naxi and Bisu. Lipo and Lolopo (Central Yi in China) are probably the most closely related languages.

The current homeland of the Lisu is in NW Yunnan, China (along the Nu (Salween) River), where the largest number of Lisu speakers still resides. In China, it is currently spoken in West Yunnan, in the upper reaches of the Salween and Mekong River valleys, and in Sichuan in China by 575,000 people (1990 census). In Burma, Lisu speakers live around Lashio, in Wa State, around Myitkyina and Bhamo, around Putar towards Assam border, and around Loilem area in Shan States by 126,000 people (1987 estimate). In Thailand, over 25,000 Lisu speakers live in Chiangmai, Chiangrai, Maehongson, Tak, Sukhothai, Kamphaeng and Phet provinces. Some have migrated to northwest Thailand from Burma. There are

over 1000 Lisu speakers in India too (Bradley 1994). Total population is estimated to be 657,000 by the Ethnologue, 635,000 by Wurm and Hattori (1981), and 900,000 from by Bradley (1994).

Analyses of Lisu dialects vary. The Ethnologue lists Hwa (Hua), Lisu (Flowery Lisu), White Lisu (Pai Lisu) and Lu Shi Lisu as dialects, with all four dialects being spoken in Burma. The Lisu often use geography to distinguish among the subgroups of Lisu. For instance, they might refer to themselves as Salween River Lisu, or ...

David Morse prefers to use a classification into Northern, Central and Southern dialects, with a Union dialect that borrows from all three and allows Lisu speakers from different dialects to speak with and write to speakers of other dialects of Lisu. Bradley (1994) locates Northern Lisu speakers (75% of total Lisu speakers) in NW Yunnan with some speakers in South Sichuan in China, N. Myanmar and NE. India. He locates Central Lisu speakers (20%) in Western Yunnan (Baoshan and Dehong Prefectures) and adjacent areas of N. Shan State in Myanmar; this dialect is the basis of the Fraser orthography. He locates Southern Lisu speakers (<5%) in SW Yunnan, S. Shan State, and Thailand. The dialect situation is complicated by national language borrowings from Chinese, Burmese or Thai.

Lisu is an SOV language; that is, in a simple Lisu sentence, the Subject is followed by the direct Object which is followed by the Verb. A clause consists of one verbal proposition and its associated words. In an unmarked sentence, it is normal for the verb to be the last word in a sentence. Particles (separate words) that follow nouns and verbs carry most of the grammatical marking; for instance, noun phrases contain required words to indicate topic *nya*, possession, location, instrument, etc. These particles are optional following subjects and objects. The use of numbers with or without nouns requires use of classifiers.

Lisu Orthographies

Many books and booklets have been written in Lisu using two orthographies. A PinYing based orthography is taught at the Kunming Institute in China. An older script designed by Fraser is in use in Burma and Thailand. Additional orthographies using Hindi, Thai and Burmese scripts have been designed, but they have not seen much use.

The first Lisu alphabet was first designed around 1907, primarily by James O. Fraser, a British missionary, and was in serious use by 1918. It is comprised of 40 Roman characters: the normal Roman upper-case characters, with 15 additional characters that are inverted Roman upper-case letters. It has 30 consonants and 10 vowels. Six basic and eight combination tones are indicated using English punctuation marks, such as period, comma, colon and semicolon. These 6 markers and combos allow for all 14 tones occurring in Lisu to be correctly expressed.

In the late 1980's a modified alphabet using only "standard" Roman characters was starting to be used in China. This essentially changed only the 15 inverted characters plus the "ah" slide tone. All the other tones were left as before (period, comma, etc.).

Lisu has 4 primers, many graded readers, health books, folktales, a Bible, religious instructional material, hymns and Bible commentaries that are available. A Lisu-Chinese dictionary with an partial English-Lisu index was published in 1985; it represents Northern Lisu, especially that spoken in Nujiang Autonomous Prefecture of NW Yunnan.

Explanation of the original (Fraser) alphabet

There have been some refinements over time. The description below refers to the current usage of the Fraser alphabet.

The Lisu Alphabet set - Fraser script

(1) Consonants

B	P	d		D	T	L
G	K	ʁ		J	C	ɕ
Z	F	ɟ		M	N	L
S	R	ʀ		ʌ	V	H
ɕ	ɹ	X		B		

(2) Consonants/Semi-vowels

W	Y
---	---

(3) Vowels

A	ʌ	E	ɛ	I	O
U	ʊ	ɪ	ɔ		

(4) Tones

single	.	,	..	;	:	;
double	::	;	::	::	::	::

(5) Punctuation

-	·	=	?	!	“”	()
---	---	---	---	---	----	----

(The question and exclamation marks are recent inclusions, beginning around 1985.)

(6) The "ah" slide and nasal tone

-	,
---	---

Several changes have occurred over the last 90 some years. First the order of letters in the alphabet has been changed.

A second change is the awareness that not all letters in the alphabet are the same - some are consonants and the rest are vowels.

A third change is that the inverted "B" is now considered a consonant, not a vowel (formerly it was the last letter in the alphabet).

(formerly)	(now)
ʌ V H ɕ ɹ W X Y	ʌ V H ɕ ɹ X B W Y

A fourth change is the awareness that consonants the W and Y are also sometimes used as vowels, and are now the last two letters in the consonant set. (This makes for easier teaching)

Proposed “Advanced” Fraser Orthography

Why Change?

A development of the Fraser system (called ‘advanced’ at the moment by the Lisu) has been proposed. The Lisu want to be able to do more with and in their own language, but they are hindered by the input system. New orthographies have been introduced using Burmese, Thai, Hindi and Chinese Pinyin alphabets, each of which have limitations. Many Lisu desire to be able to write the language with the typical English alphabet. This would enable the use of cursive writing, as well as the use of all standard writing devices that use English including the typewriter and computer keyboard. It would also provide a motivation and facilitation for non-literate Lisu to learn to read and write Lisu, since it uses the English alphabet that the children are learning in schools.

Pro and Con

	A	F
	LS	L
		S*
easily learned	x	x
accommodates all dialects	x	x
can mark all occurring tones (for all dialects)	x	x
can allow borrowed words to be written	x	x
can be typed readily on any machine	x	
can use lower case and caps (for proper names)	x	
can use longhand	x	
can use any font style /family of typeface	x	
can join syllables	x	
can use spell-checker (option is there)	x	
can enhance learning other Roman script languages (similarity)	x	
one-time change (conversion) is good for foreseeable future	x	
attracts users not yet familiar with Fraser	x	
revives interest in Lisu writing with users already familiar with Fraser script	x	

* ALS - Advance Lisu Script; FLS - Fraser Script

Goals behind the implementation of this advanced Fraser script:

1. To show respect for the previous script as "heritage"; it is the foundation for the next stage but Lisu recognize the need to move on.
2. There is high transfer from previous script because only what is essential is changed.
3. The advanced level can be implemented one change at a time, so future of the script is secure, but it is also

open as far as being able to use typewriters, computers and even internet.

Introduction to Advanced Lisu Script

The fact that there was a general limitation in using the Fraser script in writing Lisu became very real to David when the letter "M" flipped off the machine on the only manual typewriter in the whole isolated valley. This incident (August 1968) got David seriously thinking about an alternative way to write Lisu. At various times, several sheets of a "different" way of writing Lisu were handed out to a few acquaintances.

In the mean time, many Lisu going for higher education were leaving home and going to the larger towns or cities, using the major (government) language more than their own. Many married non-Lisu and the major/national language became the language the children became the most familiar with. Many felt that learning the Lisu script was a dead-end effort, though many families still used Lisu in the home. Besides, English was being taught in the schools, and that had more promise for the future in jobs and opportunity.

With the introduction of the Apple II computer in the early 1980's, it became even more evident that Lisu script was in a tight spot. After changing systems and word processors a number of times, a more serious look was given to a possible change — a second script that could be used if the normal one could not be used. At the same time, caution was used not to push the issue. David was content just point out some advantages.

By late 1990's, a number of Lisu were using computers and even using email. Many found the advanced script very usable in writing Lisu. Those familiar with any language using a normal Romanized script (English, Lahu, Jingphaw, Rawang, etc.) found the advanced Lisu script very easy to understand, and began to get excited that their own language could now be typed on any machine, and could be written in longhand as well. Those of middle age, concerned with a steady loss of interest of the mother tongue, were also excited about this revival in interest in one's own language.

One point of interest: Due to some incident early on in the introduction of the Fraser Lisu script, non-Christian people did not take to the it as a general rule. It is hoped that the non-Christian population will take an interest in this "advanced Lisu script", and care is being taken to promote the idea that this script is for all Lisu. Non-religious reading material, such as old Lisu folk stories, Aesop's Fables, etc. is also being readied for the general Lisu population to read.

Finally, care is being taken to make sure that people are aware that the advanced script is built upon the foundation of the old script (the old script is our heritage), and that change must happen slowly, with modifications if necessary.

Advancing to the "next stage" in Lisu writing

The following is a translation and summary of what is currently in the Lisu booklet used to implement the next step in Lisu orthography.

These levels should be taken in order - it is best not to "jump" too far ahead. If at least Stage 2 or Stage 3 is reached, the user can achieve a good level of proficiency and experience a great deal of satisfaction at his new capabilities. The five stages that are currently being tested in a few selected villages are:

- (0) Stage Zero -- Traditional Fraser Script (upper case only, inverted letters, punctuation marks for vowels, no cursive writing). This is what is currently being used. It is the "root" level.

(using all caps Roman letters, with 15 additional letters inverted plus and "ah" tone slide symbol - a period-level dash; the letter Q is unused)

- (1) Stage One advancement (Removal of inverted letters, substitution of various other letters for inverted ones. Upper case only. No cursive):
1. Using regular Roman letters to replace the original 15 inverted ones. (see chart)
 2. Adding "a" to all consonants instead of an "inherent 'a'"
(M = MA NY = NYA L = LA)
 3. Replacing the "ah" slide symbol with a final consonant (BI_ LO = BIX LO)
- (2) Stage Two advancement:
Use of both lower case and upper case letters.
- (3) Stage Three advancement: This is the stage that most users feel is an essential to get to: Using longhand, i.e. cursive writing
- (4) Stage Four advancement: Regularization of habits
1. Being aware of words vs. syllables: Joining syllables that make up a word. Removal of spaces between each syllable to allow spaces to mark words.
 2. Capitalizing proper names, beginning of sentences, beginnings of sentences.
 3. Punctuation decisions.
- (5) Stage Five advancement: Decisions on tones: [a] preserve the traditional system of periods, commas, etc., [b] use diacritics, or [c] use final letters so that no special font should be used.
1. Replacing current tone symbols (6 basic, 8 combination) with final consonants
 2. Replacing current punctuation symbols (- , =), etc., with standard symbols (, .)

Stage 2: Some details of the changes / differences

There are two vowels that sound very similar, but are not the same in sound or usage, and is explained thus:

"ɔ" has a "soft" sound from the throat;

"ɾ" has a "hard" sound from the throat.

[Is this register? laryngelization?]

1. Regarding the (ɾ) vowel_

In the original script the /ɾ/ vowel is a single letter. However, during the development of the advanced script this vowel was a difficult one to deal with, until it was realized that it was actually a combination of (ɔɔ). In keeping with the concept of a high level of transfer from the original script, it was found that it was best to use "eu" for this vowel, but with the following "rules" for use:

- a.- if the vowel (eu) occurs after a consonant, only "eu" need be written.
(Bɾ. = BEU.. Dɾ: = DEU: Lɾ. = LEU.)
- b. - if the vowel (eu) follows another vowel, the letters "gh" must first be added before "eu" (e.g.: gheu)
(ɾO ɾ = THO GHEU Bɾ ɾ = BEW GHEU)
- c. - if the vowel (eu) stands alone, the letters "gh" must first be added before "eu" (gheu)
(ɾ: ɾ= GHEU: ZHA ɾ. Lɾ: ɾO= GHEU. LAE: KHO)

2. Regarding the "ah" tone mark

The original script uses a "dash" at period-level after a syllable to indicate an "ah" tone. In the advanced script, a final "x" is used.

TY_ LO	TYAX LO
JE_ LO	JEX LO
DV_ LO	DAEX LO
dU BŃ_ LO	PHU BUHX LO
YI; Mɾ_ LO	YI; MEUX LO
JE FI_ LO	JE TZIX LO
ɟ_ LO	TSAX LO
BI_ LO	BIX LO
BV_ LO	BAEX LO
ΛU_ LO	NGUX LO

Reports of Implementation

Lastly, reports on the current attempts to introduce this advanced script are surveyed. Future actions will also be discussed.

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Appendix A

Comparison Chart for the Lisu Alphabet

B	P	d	D	T	ɬ	G	K	ʁ
B	P	PH	D	T	TH	G	K	KH
b	p	ph	d	t	th	g	k	kh

J	C	ɕ	Z	F	ɸ	M	N	L
J	C	CH	Z	Tz	TS	M	N	L
j	c	ch	z	tz	ts	m	n	l

S	R	ʁ	ʌ	V	H	ɣ	ɾ	X
S	R	ZH	NG	V	H	Q	F	X
s	r	zh	ng	v	h	q	f	x

B	W	Y
GH	W	Y
gh	w	y

A	ʌ	E	E	I	O
A	AE	E	EW	I	O
a	ae	e	ew	i	o

U	U	ɬ	ɸ
U	UH	EU	OE
u	uh	eu	oe

(gheu)

Appendix B

Level 3 - comparison of words

A: Nɛ ɬʌ:	a: new thae:	ɕI DU	chi du
ɸO Bɔ	tsobo	Z ɸɬ:	za pheu:
A Wʌ;	awae;	Sʌ; ɬU;	sae; thuh;
A N:	ana:	A: ʁɬ.	a: kheu.
ɬI XU	thi xuh	YI W	yi wa
A LI	a li	ɕI L	chi la
MY: NYI	mya: nyi	ɬ PO.	tha po.
N K,	na ka,	ɸYɛ; L	phyew; la
NI, XU	ni, xuh	ʌ LO	nga lo
SI.. ɸ	si.. pha	GO M	go ma
Bɛ ɬ	bew gheu	ɕI YE	chi ye
VU., Jɛ:	vuh., jew:	Gɬ: L	geu: la
GO Lɛ	go lew	ɸɬ. DU	peu. du
V MI	va mi	NYI. NYI	nyi. nyi
YI Zɬ	yi zeu	DO.. LE	do.. le
L: JE	la: je	JI GU	ji gu
GO ɬʌ	go thae	Z: DU	za: du
ɕI ɕɛ..	chi chew..	HO: JE	ho: je
Lʌ; ɕɛ..	lae; chew..	N, M	na, ma
ɸO, LO	pho, lo	LE BE	le be
YI; T	yi; ta	KO LE	koe le
BI LE	bi le	LO. NYI	lo. nyi
NI, ɸ	ni, tsa	Tɛ, NYI	tew, nyi
Mɬ: ʁɬ;	meu: kheu;	T. M	ta. ma
K. Nʌ.	ka. nae.	KO M	koe ma
HW. ɕI	hwa. chi	DO JE	do je
Sʌ; HO	sae; ho	M: JO	ma: jo
Sʌ; LE	sae; lew	M: ʌ	ma: nga
K. Lʌ;	ka. lae;	NI, XU	ni, xuh
GO PO.	go po.	HO: L	ho: la
GO ɬʌ	go thae		

Note: attention to a common mis-spelling

(INCORRECT)

ʌ Bɸ-
nga bgha

(CORRECT)

ʌ Bɸ-
nga boex

Appendix C

Examples of script changes through the five stages (step zero being the original stage):

Stage Zero

A: NƏ ɬʌ ʃO BŌ ɬI RŌ NY-. A.-WV; MI VŪ., T-. A.-N:- MI VŪ., T NY-. A LI ɬI XŪ: M dŪ:-. M: dŪ-. A LI ɬI XŪ: M Tʌ YI Z: DU MY: NYI JI., M Gɬ: Z: N K, M SŌ. NI, XŪ...-. JO:= YI SI.. ɬ BƏ ɬ VŪ JƏ: A LI ɬI XŪ: M MY: NYI JI., GU JO MA: JO M Tʌ SŌ. NI, XŪ...-. JO:=

Stage One

A: NEW THAE TSO BO THI RO NY-. A.-WAE;X MI VUH., T-. A.-NA:X MI VUH TA NY-. A LI THI XUH: MA PHUH:-. MA: PHUH:-. A LI THI XUH: MA TAE YI ZA: DU MY: NYI JI.,X MA GEU: ZA: NA KA, MA SOE. NI, XUH..X-. JO:= YI SI.. PHA BEW GHEU VUH JEW: A LI THI XUH: MA MY: NYI JI., GU JO MA: JO MA TAE SOE. NI, XUH..X-. JO:=

Stage Two

A: new thae tso bo thi ro nya-. a.-wae;x mi vuh., ta-. a.-na:x mi vuh., ta nya-. a li thi xuh: ma phuh:-. ma: phuh:-. a li thi xuh: ma tae yi za: du mya: nyi ji.,x ma geu: za: na kax ma soe. ni, xuhx-. jo:= Yi si.. pha bew gheu vuh jew: a li thi xuh: ma mya: nyi ji., gu jo ma: jo ma tae soe. ni, xuh..x-. jo:=

Stage Three

A: new thae tso bo thi ro nya-. a.-wae;x mi vuh., ta-. a.-na:x mi vuh., ta nya-. a li thi xuh: ma phuh:-. ma: phuh:-. a li thi xuh: ma tae yi za: du mya: nyi ji.,x ma geu: za: na kax ma soe. ni, xuhx-. jo:= Yi si.. pha bew gheu vuh jew: a li thi xuh: ma mya: nyi ji., gu jo ma: jo ma tae soe. ni, xuh..x-. jo:=

Stage Four

A:new thae tso bo thi ro nya-. a.wae;x mi vuh., ta-. a.na:x mi vuh., ta nya-. ali thixuh: ma phuh:-. ma: phuh:-. ali thixuh: ma tae yi za:du mya:nyi ji.,xma geu: za: nakax ma soe. ni,xuhx-. jo:= Yi si..pha bewgheu vuhjew: ali thixuh: ma mya:nyi ji.,gu jo ma:jo ma tae soe. ni,xuh..x-. jo:=

Stage Five

Apnew thae tso bo thi ro nya, atwaeqx mi vuhr ta, atnapx mi vuhr ta nya, ali thixuhp ma phuhp, map phuhp, ali thixuhp ma tae yi zapdu myapnyi jirx ma geup zap na kax ma soet nicxuhx, jop. Yi sispha bewgheu vuhjewp ali thixuhp ma myapnyi jirgu jo map jo ma tae soet nicxuhxs, jop.

Appendix D

Changes in Stage Five

Note on (; = Q)

The letter "Q" is not part of the former Lisu alphabet set, so it needs some explanation. It is to be used here as a final consonant to indicate a glottal stop.

NƏ. BƏ; Lʌ; JƏ
new. baeq laeq jew

Punctuation changes in Stage Five:

Stage Zero	Stage Five
(-)	(,)
(=)	(.)

Tone symbols in Stage Five: replacing Fraser symbols with final consonants

Single Symbols

.	t
,	c
..	s
..	r
:	p
;	q
-	x

Double Symbols

..:	m
..:	g
..:	v
..:	b
..;	j
..;	k
..;	f
..;	d

Example:

M. d:	MAT PHAP	mat phap
NV; NV	NAEQ NAE	naeq nae
VI; MŌ;	VIQ MOEQ	viq moeq
NV; KW	NAEJ KWA	naej kwa
LI LE; JE	THI LEK JE	thi lek je