

**A GUIDE BOOK TO**  
**ETISU**  
**LANGUAGE**


**ASIM MAITRA**



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This guide book which examines among other things the kinship terms, social usages and conversational analysis of the Lisu language is in a sense a study of anthropological linguistics.

In addition, it provides an abridged note on the Lisu, a little known mongoloid tribe of the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. The Lisu language falls in the Proto-Loloish category of the Proto-Lolo-Burmese sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. Roman script written reversely is used as the script of the language; it has 28 consonants and eleven vowels, but no semi-vowels. All the vowels are nasalised which are resolvable into five front and six back vowels. This is a tone language. Three distinctive tones—rising, falling and level are observed which split apart giving rise to seven tones.

This book is purposed to help administrators, officials and teachers who are serving in Arunachal Pradesh to carry on conversation in Lisu. Besides, a first hand knowledge of the Lisu language may induce the anthropologist and the linguist to do further research on the Lisu and their language.

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Shri Maitra has two books to his credit entitled **Magahi Culture: A Monographic Study** (1983), and **Religious Life of the Brahman** (1986), and has published a number of papers in both the disciplines (Physical and Cultural) of Anthropology in departmental bulletins and national journals (social sciences) in India. He participated in the scientific deliberations in the Xth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences held in New Delhi in December, 1978 where he presented a paper entitled "Magic and Witchcraft among the Maithil Brahmins" in the seminar on Local Religions in Asia. Shri Maitra is the Life Member of the Indian Anthropological Society, Calcutta and the N. K Bose Memorial Foundation, Varanasi.

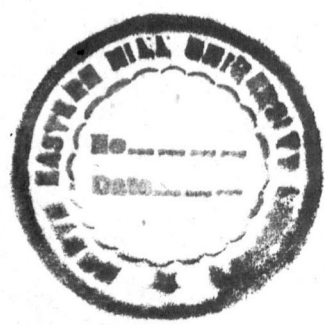
The area of his research interest is ethnographic, religious and linguistic studies, and his present field of investigation is Arunachal Pradesh

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A GUIDE BOOK TO LISU LANGUAGE

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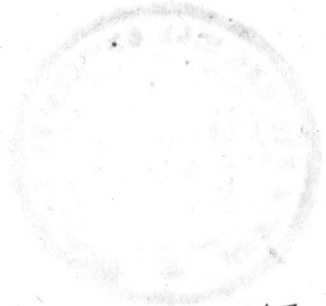


ASIM MAITRA

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*TO*

*Arunima & Anupama  
My Dear Daughters*

## Preface

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In 1981, Dr. Ajit K. Danda, the present Director, Anthropological Survey of India, set afloat rightly and timely too, a research project entitled "Ethnography: Structure and Process" to fill up the blank in the ethnographic studies on the ethnic groups in India from the anthropological point of view. In order to facilitate the studies, he scientifically divided the ethnic groups in India into three categories—fully researched, less researched and unresearched. The purpose behind this categorization or classification as well as the project was to delineate the distinctive characteristics, the shared cultural traits, and the elements of pan Indian importance that constitute an ethnic group a component of Indian civilization; and to sort out more elements of diversity in the culture of India than its unity. As one of the researchers in the project I studied an unresearched ethnic group designated as Lisu, located

in inaccessible and inhospitable hilly terrain near Burma border in the present state of Arunachal Pradesh. I am thankful to Dr. Ajit K. Danda, Director, and Dr. P. K. Dasgupta, the then Regional Officer, Shillong, for assigning me the project and thereby providing all the facilities to successfully complete the field investigation on the Lisu. Collection of ethnographic information on the Lisu emanated me to gather basic data on their language as well following 'Mahalanobis method of data collection'. This method stresses the need to collect materials on the aspects which are beyond the immediate concern of the researcher. Moreover, the Lisu language as spoken in India, has not been studied by any linguist. This is also one of the reasons that drag me to study the Lisu language and thereby to write a grammar. I was inspired and guided by the works of K. Dasgupta, an expert in the study of Tibeto-Burman group of languages, the retired Deputy Director, Phonology, Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Besides his personal guidance, his book entitled "A Phrase Book in Singpho" helped me enormously. My debt knows no bound to K. Dasgupta. I am grateful to D. Dasgupta, Linguist, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, for meticulously going through the manuscript and the valuable suggestions and corrections made therein. Thanks are also due to A. R. Das, Linguist, Shillong, who encouraged me to write this small book in the form of Lisu grammar. My wife, Ranjita assisted me in cons-

tructing some of the sentences of this book and in correcting them as well. I am obliged to her. I cannot forget to record my sincere gratitude to Phusa Lisu, the first undergraduate of the Lisu community who helped me from every conceivable angle. Without his willing cooperation and keen interest, this book would have never come into existence. Shri Phusa Lisu was my guide, interpreter and key informant who provided all the relevant data on the Lisu language. I am indebted to him.

This book is purposed to help the administrators, other officials and teachers who are serving in Arunachal Pradesh to carry on the conversation in Lisu. Again, this first hand knowledge of the Lisu language will induce the anthropologist and the linguist alike who would like to do further research on the Lisu and their language. With utmost care and sincerity, I have tried to give a systematic exposition of the grammar of Lisu language as spoken in the state of Arunachal Pradesh; but my untrained ears may sometimes fail to record the correct sound or the pronunciation of a word even all the words of a sentence though I verified them repeatedly from the informants of different age groups. And I tried to write the words and sentences in their own script as far as practicable. The Lisu have evolved their own script which is nothing but Roman script written reversely. This script is not suitable enough to communicate their ideas,

emotions, desires and actions, says Phusa Lisu, the learned informant.

I express concern for the lapses, if any, in the contents of the book.

I am thankful to Mrs. J. Paswett who gladly typed out the introductory portion of the manuscript of this book.

Mis S. Sen, our librarian, provided me with valuable information on the topic with keen interest, utmost sincerity and honesty. She immediately complied with my request for the books needed urgently. I express deep gratitude to her.

Lastly, I would like to register my gratitude to Mr. K. M. Mittal of Mittal Publications, Delhi, for publishing this small book in a very short period.

ASIM MAITRA

## Contents

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<i>PREFACE</i>	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
PHONOLOGY	25
NOUN	29
GENDER	32
PRONOUN	34
ADJECTIVE	36
VERB	37
ADVERB	41
SENTENCES	42
GLOSSARY	60
NUMERALS	82
FEW MORE TERMS	84
<i>REFERENCES</i>	95
<i>INDEX</i>	97

## Introduction

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Before starting the discussion on the Lisu language and its grammar let us have a brief introduction to the Lisu as an ethnic group or as a community.

The word *lisu* is articulated with two syllables—*li* and *su*; *li* means four, it also means to wrap the waist with a piece of long cloth prepared specially having four folds; and *su* means person. Hence, literally, *lisu* means the group of people who customarily wrap or tie their waist with a long piece of cloth having four folds just like a big belt. Yobin is another term used to identify them which has no meaning in their vocabulary.

The Lisu are located at the present Vijaynagar circle in Miao sub-division in the district Tirap

of the state of Arunachal Pradesh, the fascinating land of rising sun, the [so called North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Vijaynagar circle is situated in an altitude of about 7000 feet in the extreme east of Arunachal Pradesh and its three sides—west, east and south are surrounded by international border and the hill tracts of Burma. Vijaynagar circle is the home of the Lisu. Almost the entire area of this circle is hilly and mountainous. The land region is covered with evergreen forests.

High mountains and peaks are somewhat dry, rocky and snow-clad. Its valleys are covered by the long corridor of plain grassy land. There are rivers and rivulets that flow through land of the Lisu. Noteworthy of them are Noa-Dihing and its tributaries and Burma *nala*. Inhabiting this part of the sub-Himalayan region, the Lisu have gained varied experience of life which enabled them to foster a life-style of their own. Nature in this part of the planet is rigorous and hostile. The rugged terrain, the high hills, the rocky mountains, sky piercing peaks, incessant rainfall, dense forests, slippery slopes and the like stand against smooth sailing of human life. Killing of life by snow, storm, rolling boulders, sliding lands, falling trees, poisonous snakes, ferocious carnivorous animals and the dashing current of the rivers are common happenings in the day-to-day natural life of the Lisu. Nature reigns supreme here. One requires to live a life

of adjustments with the vigour of nature, otherwise, living becomes very hard and often miserable.

According to the household census conducted by the author at Vijaynagar circle in the month of March 1981, the population strength of the Lisu was 1016. The Lisu migrated to their present habitation from Putao area in Burma during Second World War around 1942. The Lisu is a literate community. Majority of them can read and write in their language. They were christened during 1921 to 1927 by an American missionary. They belong to a Christian sect called "Church of Christ" which is marked by the absence of cross symbol, photograph or any image of Jesus Christ in the church.

The Lisu are good looking mongoloid people with prominent epicanthic fold and cheek bone. They have different types of skin colours like dark brown, brown, yellowish, yellow and so on. They possess good health, their stature is medium with well built body. From the physical appearance, the Lisu seem to be a heterogenous population or a hybrid population, some of their men and women have curly hairs, very fine noses and thin lips, and there is less similarity and uniformity in their stature and skin colour despite they speak the same Lisu language and follow the same style of life.

The Lisu are organised into a number of consanguineal or patrilineal descent groups re-

ferred as *chowo* such as *ngawza*, *jayza*, *heyza*, *nofa lema*, *jali*, *lafufa*, *fuche*, *meche* and *dafulu*. But these descent groups of the Lisu do not fully connote the features of a clan. They do not follow clan exogamy, *i.e.* marriage is permitted within the clan as well as outside the clan. There is no clan hierarchy, and the stories connected with the origin of these groups mostly depict different types of occupations or specializations in certain jobs such as expertising in fishing (*ngawza*), in collecting honey or bee keeping (*jayza*), in catching mouse (*heyza*) and so on. These groups or divisions, as it appears, are nothing but occupational categories originated from the specialization in certain spheres of life. The Lisu term *chowo*—connotes different meanings in comparison to English term—clan. *Cho* means man and *wo* means stock or bundle; hence literally, *chowo* means a group of the Lisu or people who originated from the same stock. The term *chowo* is appended in following manner—Lisu + *Chowo* = Lisuwo, Bengali + *Chowo* = Bengaliwo, Assamese + *Chowo* = Assamesewo and so on. Lisuwo or Bengaliwo or Assamesewo means the entire community of the respective group wherever they may live. So, it will not be justified if the Lisu term *chowo* is called clan, which has no equivalent term in English. But besides *chowo* there is no other term in the Lisu language comparable to clan. Similarly, the Lisu do not have the term for the kin group called lineage.

The smallest unit of Lisu social organization is *chohi*. *Chohi* does not mean what is meant by the anthropological concept of family. The term *Chohi* means both husband (*hisifa*) and wife (*hisime*) with their married and unmarried children, the place of living (house, household, home, etc), the livestock, the trees and all the movable and immovable properties that belong to them. Authority in the *chohi* is vested in husband who in consultation with wife takes major decisions for all outside business, but inside the house, wife predominates, husband cannot dispose or lend anything without wife's permission. In ideal *chohi* called *chojihi* husband and wife always eat, work and move together. The characteristic feature of the *chohi* is that the first son *i.e.* first male issue, after marriage before any issue, rarely after an issue, makes a separate *chohi* which is aided by his parents in all respects. Similarly, the second, the third, the fourth and so on except the youngest son, makes a new or separate *chohi*. Youngest son referred as *zadi* remains with the old *chohi* to look after the old parents who inherits all the movable and immovable properties. In *chohi*, the rule of inheritance is ultimogeniture.

Non-christian Lisu consider marriage a civil contract but never a religious sacrament. Therefore, religious solemnization does not take place in the traditional Lisu marriage called *chozadi*. But after christianization, the Lisu marriage has acquired the merit of religious sacrament; and the

marriage is now known as *lepecha*. The Lisu consider human beings, like animal and plants, rock and hills, river and forest, a part of nature. To get married and to procreate children is also considered a part of nature. Several types of marriages are extant among the Lisu. Every type of marriage is associated with bride price in the form of several cows and household goods. Except *di*, the marriage by negotiation, all other types of marriage are regarded as a social offence, and it needs to be settled by the *chowu*, the village headman for getting social sanction. Marriage is allowed with anybody within the community beyond three ascending or descending generations. Age is not a factor for effective marriage in the Lisu community. The custom of bride price is no longer in vogue in the present Lisu society. Monogamy is the form of Lisu marriage and the rule of residence after marriage is neolocal and patrilocal.

Divorce is permitted in almost all human societies, it is nothing new. But the way divorce comes about among the Lisu is unique. At the time of dissolution of marriage it is customary for both the divorcee and the divorcer to appear before the *chowu* with their respective relatives. When a divorce is socially approved or accepted by the *chowu*, the divorcer *i.e.* divorce-suitor brings one cup of rice beer called *majasapi*, and drinks it with the divorcee at a time from the same cup; and then the empty cup is permanently offered

to the divorcee which indicates the dissolution of marriage.

The Lisu kinship terminological system is classificatory. Because, they use the same term of designation for more than one relative—affinal, consanguineal, lineal and collateral. For example, the Lisu put father's father, mother's father, father-in-law's father and mother-in-law's father in one category or class called *apaa*, in other words, the term *apaa*, is used to address all the male persons of grand father's age. The Lisu terms of address and reference are one and same. There is taboo or restriction for uttering the names of father, father-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, and senior men and women. In the Lisu society, joking relationship is allowed only with the siblings of father's elder or younger sisters, and mother's elder or younger brother.

The Lisu have a unique custom of making friends. Friendship may be established with a person of their own community as well as outside the community. Friendship is established between male persons only. A particular day is fixed for the occasion; and the man or the boy to be designated as a friend is invited to the residence of the man or the boy intending friendship. Then three *Kuju* (cup or mug) of rice-beer called *jiphu* are brought in. A fixed quantity of liquor taken out from any two cups is poured into the third cup. Then two drops of blood collected

from each male's thumb are mixed with it. The ricebeer or country liquor mixed with human blood is then taken by them in a *sapheta* way. *Sapheta* means the drinking of country liquor by two persons from the same pot or cup simultaneously. A grand feast with beef and pork is arranged to mark or celebrate the occasion. The relationship or friendship is kept alive till death.

The economic organisation of the Lisu is of subsistence of type, it falls into the broad category of production-consumption economics. The Lisu follow different kinds of occupations to supplement their subsistence; they are at various levels of economic development. The Lisu are food gatherers, hunters, fishermen, agriculturists—both shifting and settled cultivators, business men and service holders. The distinctive feature of their economic organization is that the Lisu do not abandon one occupation or economy to adopt another. For example, some Lisus are doing good business of essential commodities and stationery articles, but side by side, they pursue agriculture jobs with equal importance.

Political organization of the Lisu centres round a very keen institution known as *chowuship*. In *chowuship* all the powers for social control—maintenance of peace, law and order are delegated to a single male person designated as *chowu*, the so called village head man. *Chowu* is a keeper of the Lisu society. He acts as an adminis-

trator or a magistrate, a judge, an advocate, a leader and great soldier of the Lisu community. In nut shell, he is secular head of the Lisu. The most important function of the *chowu* is to give impartial judgement in adjudicating disputes. He is required to exercise the vested authority in the maintenance of right, in punishing the offenders or wrong doers, and rewarding the righteous persons. *Chowu* is selected by the village elders applying trial and error method. Any Lisu who can give impartial judgement may be chosen for the post of *chowu*. And if a *chowu* is incapable of dispensing justice to his people, he is immediately removed from the post. The Lisu never tolerate a corrupt *chowu*. A Lisu to be appointed as *chowu* should be intelligent, courageous and physically strong. The man should have presence of mind, sharp memory, imaginative power, sufficient knowledge of the traditional rules and customs, and the ability to understand or judge the intention or psychology (*swakush*) of the mob. According to their belief, a man to be designated as *chowu* is born with all these noble qualities. The typical feature of the Lisu political organization is that it never applies physical force or coercion for settling disputes thereby maintaining law and order and peace in the society. *Chowu* has no office, no special privilege, he gets fees for adjudicating disputes in specific cases. At the time of settling disputes, *chowu* wears a cap made of hog's hairs and gets all kind of help from the young men of the

village. Authority seems to be of centrifugal type.

The life or the religious life of the Lisu is dominated by evil spirits commonly known as *ni*. It is said that the evil spirits or *ni* originated from the same mythical pumpkin. The only difference between *ni* and the Lisu is that *ni* did not get the physical shape of human beings whereas the Lisu did. There are several types of *ni* such as—*musuni*, *sizini*, *nicheni* and the like. These evil spirits have specific place to reside as well as specific functions to perform. *Ni* can see everything done by the Lisu, and punish them in accordance with the type or nature of offences or wrongs done. Because of the painful emotion caused by the impending danger of *ni*, the Lisu society is devoid of sorcery or witchcraft.

The Lisu term for the village is *chokha*. *Chokha* is a human habitation consists minimum five *chohis* (households). The term *chokha*, according to the definition given by the Lisu, is limited to the human settlement of five to one hundred households. The Lisu habitation to be designated as *chokha* must contain a *chowu*, a leader of noble qualities, with his helpers called *zijasus*, *nifa*, an expert to deal with evil spirits, *dashifa*, a detector of diseases, and a burial ground. Human habitation consists of more than one hundred households is termed *Chokhadama* or *chokhafa* by the Lisu. The Lisu villages

are of two types—scattered and compact or nucleated. A Lisu house is a large one, rectangular in size and supported on wooden or bamboo pillars which vary in height usually from three feet to ten feet from the ground. Bamboo, cane and wooden planks or bamboo mats are used for its construction. Roofs of the house are made up of jungle leaves, wooden planks and very rarely with tin. The front is an extension of the floor in the form of very small varandah which is used as entrance. The Lisu house is partitioned into cubicles and each has a name, and each room has a hearth. First room is meant for the guest, and the last room allotted the husband and wife. All the houses are in fenced compounds, it is fenced with bamboo or wooden sticks. Common vegetables like potato, cabbage, cauliflower and so on are grown in the fenced compound. The Lisu village named Gandhigram is very neat and clean, it is traversed by a number of roads and lanes; houses are constructed more or less in uniform pattern. The village—Gandhigram has an Inspection Bungalow meant for the government officials who come to stay for a short period.

The society of the Lisu is characterised by the preponderance of nuclear families. The Lisu are labelled as a lettered community as majority of them can read and write in the Lisu language. They have rich heritage of oral traditions. The Lisu have plenty of tales on the orphan boy and

girl which are termed *jachi-mani*. The Lisu profess Christianity, they belong to a sect called 'Church of Christ' which is, as mentioned before, marked out by the absence of cross symbol, photoraph and any image of Jesus Christ, in the church. Deads are disposed by the method of burial, including that of babies. Before consigning the corpse in the grave, priest known as *mafa* prays for the deceased.

The Lisu have a unique system to name their children. They name their children in serial order of birth. Clan's or village's name is not associated with their names. To mark the birth order, different terms are used. In case of male issues or sons, the names are as follows: *afu za*—first son; *adiza*—second son; *akhiza*—third son; *atse za*—fourth son; *atiza*—fifth son; *aphiza*—sixth son; *ayo za*—seventh son; *agee za*—eighth son; *chepu za*—ninth son; *nyethu za*—tenth son; *chechu za*—eleventh son; *chefu za*—twelfth son; and *chekhu za*—thirteenth son. These terms are also used to mark out the order of birth for girls suffixing *zamuza*. To mark the birth order above thirteenth there is no term, this is due to the fact that no Lisu parents have been able to produce more than thirteen male children. Generally, the name of the community is siffixed to their individual or personal name. For example, Phuza Lisu or Phusa Yobin.

Every human society or community however advance it may be educationally, industrially and

technologically, imposes certain restrictions on the behaviour of its members or on their food habits. This restriction or prohibition is known as taboo (*jamudu*). Taboos may be good or may not be good for the society or community, nevertheless, they are followed. The Lisu also observe some taboos to control the behaviour of its members. They are as follows:

- (a) It is a taboo to argue or counter-argue with the parents or with any senior members of the household. It brings misfortunes in the household if this rule is violated as they believe.
- (b) Children must not cross over the head side of the bed while their parents sleep. It is a bad omen.
- (c) Wife must not cross over the hunting and agricultural implements with which her husband works. Husband will not be successful in hunting games or will face an accident if the wife does otherwise. Husband may lose *shiphu*, a divine power, if possessed by him.
- (d) It is a taboo for menstruating women to sow seeds in the vegetable garden or in the *jhum* field. If they do, seeds will not germinate.
- (e) During menstruation period a wife must

not cross the road by which her husband goes for hunting. If it is done, all the games for hunting will disappear.

- (f) One must not do any work on the day a person dies. It brings bad luck.
- (g) Feast given in the name of a deceased must not be taken by a person whose parents are alive.
- (h) It is a taboo to cut the grass grown on a grave.
- (i) Pregnant women must not cross a rope by which animals are tied up. During delivery troubles may occur if this taboo is not followed.
- (j) During pregnancy a woman must not eat fruits or any thing which are bitter in taste.
- (k) It is a taboo for the guests to enter the Lisu house from back door.
- (l) One must not cut the tree that branches out from the earth.
- (m) It is a taboo to eat the portion of the flesh of a hunting game on which arrow has been pierced.
- (n) One must not take the meat of unborn animal whose mother has been killed by a hunter. If taken, the eater may suffer from vision troubles.

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- (o) It is a taboo to cross over a dead body. It is supposed to be a bad omen.
- (p) One must not keep the belongings of a deceased in the house or use it. The user may face troubles in life.
- (q) The trunk by which a coffin is made has two ends—branch and root. It is a taboo to place the head of the deceased towards root end of the coffin. It brings misfortunes in the household if violated.
- (r) It is a taboo to place head end of the coffin downward, and leg end upward in the grave. Future generations of the deceased may face financial crisis if done otherwise.
- (s) Bride must not eat the foods that are meant for her father or father-in-law. She will face troubles during delivery if this taboo is violated.
- (t) It is a taboo for married or unmarried Lisu girls to eat *agaphuchu*, particular portion of a hen.

The Lisu believe that the girl who eats this meat called *agaphuchu* will die as a result of multiple pregnancies.

Both pre-marital and post-marital sex relations are reprobated in the community. Cross-bow, made of wood, named *chey* is typical of the Lisu.

Christianity, as a means of education, cleanliness, mental solace, brotherhood, putting away with the prejudices and superstitions, curing diseases and counteracting malevolent spirits, and lastly, as a great reformatory force has firmly spread its roots in the Lisu community. As a result a lot of changes in almost every aspect of their life have come about. The Lisu may be labelled as a "receptive community" as they have tremendous imitative power and adaptive resilience. This completes the brief ethnographic accounts of the Lisu. Now we turn to say few words on the relationship between language and culture, language situation in India, and the place of Lisu language in Tibeto-Burman group of languages, as an introductory.

One of the most important and characteristic forms of human behaviour is language which is considered a vehicle of culture by the anthropologist: The sciences of man and language are mutually inter-dependent or inter-related for certain basic concepts and necessary data. While the linguist studies language mainly from the view point of its internal structure the anthropologist studies language not only for practical purposes—a thorough insight into a culture cannot be gained without a practical knowledge of its language, but for the fact that linguistic researches may often prove essential to a clear understanding of the deeper problems of personality, culture and society as well. The peculiar

characteristics of language are clearly reflected in the views and customs of the people who speak it. To the anthropologist, the importance of the language lies obviously in the fact that all linguistic forms have meanings, and these meanings represent not single items of experience, but one or more categories of experience as observed by Boas (1911:73). All such classifications or categories of experience represent the end result of a long historical tradition and are indissolubly tied to a particular cultural milieu. It is therefore obvious that societies that differ in culture differ as well in the categories that attach to their linguistic form.

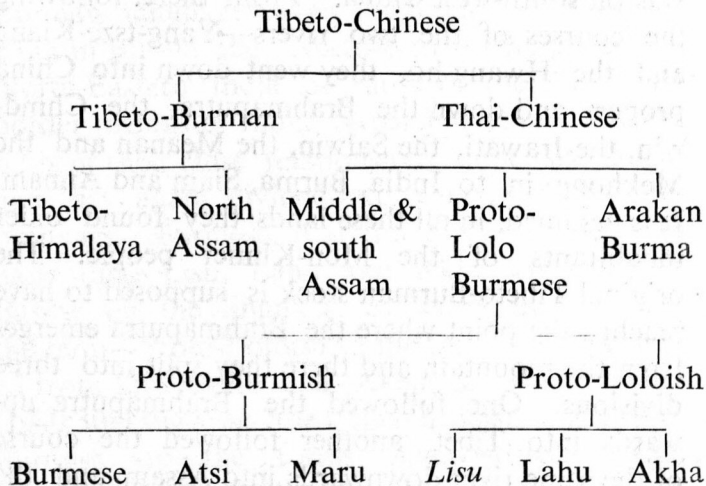
According to Sapir (1929:209) language acts far more importantly in a culture than simply as a neutral device to represent or symbolize the flow of experience. It provides the categories and divisions of experience in terms of which its speakers cope with the universe about them.

With this brief general introduction on the relationship between culture and language, let us have a brief look on the language situation and its classification in India. With her enormous diversity of culture and vast heterogeneity of ethnic groups, India presents an amazing collection of languages and dialects—with as many as 1652 mother tongues (Census, 1971). Very few of them possess written records with highly developed literature and a great many of them do not

posses even the script and the rudiments of a literature. Out of them, only a few are recognised in Indian Constitution as regional or state languages. No Indian State or Union Territory is monolingual. Except Assamese, Oriya, and Kashmiri, all the major regional languages occur as either second or third numerically most important languages in one or more states or Union Territories, besides the states where they have a predominant position. Out of 360 districts (1971 Census), in 105 districts in the country, Hindi is numerically the most important first language. Urdu is the second numerically important language spoken in as many as five states in India, though not a predominant language in any state.

The linguists have classified the vast number of languages in India into four language families or groups namely, the Austric, the Dravidian, the Indo-European (Indo-Aryan) and the Tibeto-Chinese. Only the Indo-Aryan sub-family of the Indo-European languages is found in India. Out of the 20 Indo-Aryan languages found in India, eleven have been constitutionally recognised. Fourteen languages are included in the Dravidian family of which four have been recognised by the Constitution. The Austro-Asiatic sub-family of the Austric family of languages is represented in India. Fourteen of these languages are spoken by seven million people. Twelve of these languages are in the Munda-group spoken in the central and eastern India by

the tribal people. Of the Tibeto-chinese family of languages only Tibeto-Burman sub-family is found in India which includes as many as 51 languages that are distributed mainly in the north-eastern fringes of India. The language spoken by the Lisu is included in the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. The phylogenetic relationship or the position of the Lisu language may be diagrammed as follows:



### **Tibeto-Burman Languages**

According to the linguists Tibetan proper is a language with a very considerable literature. A great deal of this consists of translations from Sanskrit works on Philosophy, Buddhism and kindred subjects; and many of these are of great value for the cultural history of India because the

Sanskrit originals have been lost. These translations were made in the early centuries of the Christian era. The remaining languages of this group, except Burmese, are without any literature. The various branches of this group are connected in a rather complex manner which may throw a good deal of light on the migrations of the tribes speaking these languages. Linguists are agreed on the view that original home of these languages was on south-west China. From there, following the courses of the two rivers—Yang-tsze-Kiang and the Hwang-ho, they went down into China proper; and down the Brahmaputra, the Chindwin, the Irawati, the Salwin, the Meanan and the Mekhong in to India, Burma, Siam and Annam. It is assumed, in all these lands they found older inhabitants of the Mon-Khmer people. The original Tibeto-Burman stock is supposed to have reached the point where the Brahmaputra emerges from the mountain and there they split into three divisions. One followed the Brahmaputra upwards into Tibet, another followed the course of the same river downwards into Assam and the third branch followed the courses of the Chindwin and Irawati into Burma. The North Assam group is an amorphous collection of languages which represent intermediate stages between Tibetan and Burmese. According to Grierson, their territory is supposed to be a kind of back-water over which various waves of Tibeto-Burman immigration have swept, each leaving its record in the speech of the inhabitants.

### Proto-Lolo-Burmese

Burling (1967) has constructed a new sub-group called Proto-Lolo-Burmese under Tibeto-Burman group of languages. Six representative languages—Burmese, Ata, Maru, Lisu, Lahu and Akha fall into this sub-group. All are spoken in Burma today and several of them overlap the borders of Yunnan, Laos or Thailand as well. These six languages are more closely related to one another than they are to most other Tibeto-Burman languages such as Jinghpaw, Karen or Chin in Burma, the Tibeto-Burman languages of North-Eastern India or those of the Himalayan border regions of India, Nepal and Tibet. On the basis of their close relationship, these six languages are again divided into two co-ordinate sub-branches, Burmese, Atsi and Maru on the one hand, and Lisu, Lahu and Akha on the other. Basing on the linguistic evidence, Burling uses the term—Proto-Loloish to the forms reconstructed from Lisu, Lahu and Akha to which Shafer (1940:308) suggested the term—Loloish; and Proto-Burmish to the forms re-constructed from Burmese, Atsi and Maru to which Shafer suggested the term—Burmish. The scholars who have interested themselves in these languages are in general agreement about their phylogenetic grouping.

Lisu, known also as Yawyin, Lahu (Muhso) and Akha (kaw) are three representatives of the

Lolo group of languages. They are spoken primarily in the northern Shan state in Burma and across the international borders in both China and Thailand.

According to Burling (1967) the three Loloish languages—Lisu, Lahu and Akha differ in a number of rather marked ways from the members of the Burmish group. Final consonant contracts are reduced, for only Akha has any remnant of final nasals, and the glottal stop is the only final stop in any of the languages. The number of vowel contrasts is greater in the Loloish languages than in the members of the Burmish group. Speakers of the Loloish languages have had close ties with the speakers of Shan-Thai, and it is worth noting that the complex vowel systems of the Loloish languages are typologically like the characteristics of Thai. The Loloish languages lack the weak syllables found in all the three Burmish languages. In all the six languages the syllable occupies a unique role. Morpheme boundaries and syllable boundaries generally coincide and the syllable is normally the shortest item that can be readily articulated in isolation. Each syllable has a vowel and a characteristic tone. In all the six languages, the array of syllable initial (pre-vocalic) consonants, is more extensive than that of syllable final (post-vocalic) consonants; and the phonological characteristics of the two sets are often quite divergent. Final

consonants tend to be sharply limited in their distribution with respect to the preceding vowels.

With these stray information on the Proto-Lolo Burmese languages, let us begin the discussion on the Lisu language in particular on the basis of the present study.

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