

BOOK REVIEW

Ratanakul's *Ruam botkhwam wichakan lem 1: Kariang [Collected papers I: Karen]*

This book is a collection of articles on the language and culture of the Sgaw Karen, an ethnic group now numbering over 400,000 (REF) living in the western part of Thailand. The product of Ratanakul's laborious fieldwork from 1976 to 1981, it contains two papers written in Thai and six in English published or presented at various occasions in the early eighties. All of them, however, address issues in the linguistic and cultural study of the Karen people that are of interest to readers regardless of their linguistic background.

The first article, *Ahan kariang* or *Karen food*, written in Thai, describes different types of traditional food eaten by the Sgaw people of Huay Bong subdistrict, Mae Chaem district, Chiangmai province. Not only does the paper provide basic descriptions and recipes of common Karen dishes not generally known to outsiders but close reading also reveals interesting observations on Karen food culture. For example, Ratanakul observes that only one curry or soup dish [tà su] is served in combination with one spicy dipping dish [mi?sàtò] at each meal. She suggests that the relatively small meal set is related to the fact that Karen families are typically nuclear families in contrast to the extended families found in the other ethnic groups of Thailand. Particularly interesting ethnolinguistically is how types of meat are categorized. Unlike Thai, in which meats are classified binarily, Karen have a ternary classification: grilled meat [nə xo], fishy meat [nə chyì], and old-smelling meat [nə pya]. This article thus provides

good documentation on one important aspect of Karen culture.

The second article, *Phleng kariang* or *Karen songs*, also written in Thai, is another piece of descriptive ethnological work included in this volume. Ratanakul starts off with a concise review introducing the different Karenic groups followed by the phonemic inventory of Sgaw Karen, necessary for a systematic transcription of the Karen songs recorded. Not only does this article describe the structure of the different song types and their usages in the community but it also documents traditional practices with which each type of song is associated, e.g. funerals, courting, nursery etc. Most valuable, perhaps, are the systematically transcribed and interlinearly-glossed samples of Karen songs included at the end. Of special interest are two modern Karen songs showing Karen-Thai code switching. As Ratanakul points out, these songs are clear manifestations of the dynamism of Karen culture.

Unlike the previous two, *Wikhro kham wa (ta) nai phasa kariang sako* or *Analysis of Sgaw Karen /tà/*, written in Thai, is a linguistic study. It examines the meaning of /tà/, one of the most functionally diverse grammatical morphemes in Sgaw Karen. Ratanakul identifies seven different usages of the morpheme and characterizes it as polysymous. Furthermore, she groups the usages into two functions: 1) generic designator, and 2) impersonal pronouns. She concludes that [tà] has a rather vague core meaning as it denotes an entity generally without specifying its identity and is used in cases when the subject is deemphasized. In my opinion, /tà/ as an impersonal pronoun is very interesting typologically. It is used with verbs denoting natural phenomena, e.g. rain,

thunder etc. as well as in sentences describing personal feelings, e.g. hunger, desire, pain etc. These usages are curiously reminiscent of dummy subjects and the impersonal *se* in Romance languages. This descriptive account of the Sgaw Karen morpheme is thus an important contribution to both Karen linguistics and linguistic typology in general.

The fourth article *Numeral classifiers in Sgaw Karen* presents, in English, the inventory of numeral classifiers and measure words in Sgaw Karen. It is, essentially, a catalogue of classifiers listed with examples of the nouns with which co-occur. In addition to the list of classifiers, this article also includes a brief discussion of the classifier constructions at the end. Ratanakul groups the eighty-some classifiers according to their etymological origins: 1) those functioning only as classifiers e.g. /di2/ for four-footed animals, 2) those derived from nouns e.g. /pa2/ from 'side' used with one side of things that typically come in pairs, and 3) those derived from verbs e.g. /khliʔ3/ from 'to fold' used with cloths and blankets. From an areal point of view, the last type is perhaps most intriguing as verb-derived classifiers are rather rare in Southeast Asia. In short, this article adds to our knowledge about the taxonomy of classifiers in the linguistic area.

The next article *Transitivity and causation in Sgaw Karen* describes different structures related to causativity in Sgaw Karen. Ratanakul does not offer a working definition of causatives but seems to be very inclusive. She first shows that passivization is not possible in Sgaw Karen. She then proceeds to show that the main strategy for causativization is using auxiliary verbs /ma/ 'to do, to make',

/maʔeʔ/ 'to cause', /mə/ 'to send, to use', etc. In addition to the periphrasis, she also shows that verb serialization and cause-effect bi-clausal sentences are also used to convey causative meaning. As intended by Ratanakul, these different ways of conveying causativity shows that Sgaw Karen is highly analytic despite its Sino-Tibetan affiliation.

The sixth article *Prolegomena on traditional wisdom in Karen folklore* turns again to culture. It presents selected aspects of Karen culture including proverbs and sayings, traditional beliefs, view on life and death, and traditional entertainment. Ratanakul addresses these cultural issues by way of reflecting on key examples from oral texts collected in her fieldwork. A curious example is the Karen concept of "weird wicked" behavior, or [kòchù]. She cites examples like "to separate the little monkey from its mother, to fell too many trees in the forest is [kòchù]," and interprets them as showing that the Karen are non-acquisitive non-capitalist people. Even though alternative interpretations for the examples cannot be ruled out, the article successfully raises cultural issues that need to be further studied.

The last two articles are rather short pieces. The first one *Sgaw Karen color categories* is an ethnolinguistic one. It identifies and describes basic color terms in the language. The six categories claimed to comprise the set of Sgaw Karen basic colors are /wa/ 'white, light', /su/ 'black, dark', /ɣɔ/ 'red', /bɔ/ 'yellow', /la/ 'green', and /fiʔ/ 'purple'. It then characterizes Karen as type 6 in Berlin and Kay's typology (1969). The last article is a shorter presentation in English of the materials on Karen food presented in first

article of this volume. In the conclusion of the article, Ratanakul expresses concerns about the worrisome way Karen food culture is changing due to outside influences.

In short, Ratanakul's *Collected papers I: Karen* is a great contribution to Karen studies as well as Southeast Asian Studies as whole. The papers each present invaluable materials on the language and culture of the Sgaw Karen not previously available. More importantly perhaps, this scholarly work will lead to public awareness of and respects for the cultural rights of ethnic minorities.

References

Berlin, Brent and Kay, Paul (1969). *Basic color terms; their universality and evolution*. Berkeley; University of California Press.

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