

Note Section

The dialect of Bernatzik's (1938) "Yumbri" refound?

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Introduction

In the beginning of 1999 this author could for the first time realize a long-time plan of visiting a small hunter-gatherer group in the vast, now protected, forest area in Phiang District of Sayaburi Province in western Laos, close to the Thai border. The general purpose of the project, which is a joint Laos-Denmark venture¹, is to provide a general description of the hitherto unknown language and culture of this group.

The project had been in the planning stage for some years. The language aspect was the most interesting for me, as a long time student of Mlabri in Thailand. The group living in Laos might have a language-variety similar to one of the Mlabri groups extant in Thailand, or a distinct language. The language might throw light on the relationship between Mlabri and its Northern Mon-Khmer neighbours Tin (Lua') and Kmhmu (Khmu'). The most immediate objective was of course to provide a linguistic classification. Since my provisional observations may be of some interest to Mon-Khmer specialists, I present this short note now, only a few months after the first visit to the group².

In recent surveys, the hunter-gatherers known to live in western Laos are referred to as "Yumbri" or "Mlabri", although since Ferlus's vocabulary data of 1964 (Ferlus 1974), which represent a variety recently found in Thailand (Rischel 1989ff) no research seems to have been done on their culture and language(s) in

¹The project is jointly supervised by the Director of the Lao National Institute of Research on Culture, Mr. Houmpanh Rattanaovong, and myself. The linguistic aspects of the project are my responsibility alone. During my first field session of two weeks in the forest I was accompanied by a junior cultural anthropologist, Mr. Khammanh Siphanhxay, and by Mr. Viang Khamcan of the cultural division in Sayaburi Province as well as a local contact person, Mr. Souvan. I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to all persons involved, and to the Carlsberg Foundation for generous support of my Mlabri studies.

²A second visit to the Mlabri was undertaken in April of this year, unfortunately, the local river had now swollen because of early rains, and the Mlabri could not be located anywhere in the vast forest area. The continuation of the fieldwork has, therefore, been postponed till after the rainy season.

Laos. The terms “Yumbri” and “Mlabri” suggest links with languages observed in neighbouring provinces of northern Thailand. The use, in Laos, of the former term recalls the enigma associated with the earliest data on the speech of these hunter-gatherers, viz. those provided by the Austrian explorer Hugo Bernatzik in his book on the so-called “spirits of the yellow leaves” (1938).

Shortly before the Second World War, Bernatzik encountered a very evasive hunter-gatherer tribe close to the Thailand-Laos border and provided a short word list. It has since been a matter of dispute how much significance should be attached to his data, which he took down during a rather brief encounter in the forest and later published in a very infelicitous, home-made kind of phonetic notation. Any linguist interested in Northern Mon-Khmer languages, and more specifically in the sub-branch called Khmuic, will face a major challenge when approaching Bernatzik’s linguistic data.

Another matter of dispute has been whether this tribal language, which Bernatzik called “Yumbri”, is the same as the “Mra Bri”-language later encountered by Kraisri Nimmanhaeminda (Nimmanhaeminda 1963).

Kraisri assumed these two specimens to represent one language, whereas Smalley (1963) on a lexical count found them to be so different that they should be considered to represent two distinct and hardly mutually intelligible languages. The latter comparison was indeed inconclusive since the data to be compared were available only in two widely different kinds of notation made in a non-technical format by linguistic amateurs. This first research phase was rounded off by Schuhmacher’s comparative study (1969), which like that of Smalley was restrained by the nature of the then available data. More recent discussions, involving professionally gathered data in IPA notation, include Ferlus (1974), Rischel and Egerod (1987), and Rischel (1989). It is now probably generally assumed that the subgroups in question are branches of one hunter-gatherer group, which has often been called “Phi Tong Luang” (with an unfortunate and offensive traditional Thai term) in the scholarly literature, but which is more properly referred to as “Khon Pa” (Thai: ‘forest people’).

After Kraisri’s publication of his data it was definitively established that the language recorded by him should be referred to as *Mla’ Bri*, or, in simplified notation, *Mlabri*, meaning ‘forest people’ or more accurately: ‘people of the wild forest’, this autonym being the exact equivalent of Thai “Khon Pa” (cf. Rischel 1982, Egerod and Rischel 1987). The alleged ethnonym “Mrabri” is simply phonetically erroneous.

Ferlus (1964, 1974)³ and Rischel (1995) have encountered a tiny group speaking a language variety, in my terminology β -Mlabri or “Minor Mlabri”, which is somewhat different from the Mlabri recorded by Kraisri and by Egerod and Rischel (1987). For clarity I refer to the latter, which is spoken by a rather larger group of more than 100 people, as ∞ -Mlabri. As noted by Ferlus, β -Mlabri is on

³Mr. Michel Ferlus of the CNRS collected a short word list in Sayaburi Province of Laos in 1964; it was mentioned in a later survey paper (Ferlus 1974) but never published. When I established contact with the same ethnic subgroup - indeed with other members of the same family - in Thailand in 1988, Mr. Ferlus generously put his list at my disposal.

various points similar to the “Yumbri” of Bernatzik (1938). In recent writings (Rischel 1989, 1995) I have suggested (i) that the alleged autonym “Yumbri” is not a noun but a misunderstanding of a Mlabri verb phrase *jɔm brii?* meaning ‘(I/we) live in the forest’, and (ii) that Bernatzik’s data reflect a third variety of Mlabri, which is to some extent intermediate between the two extant varieties which have been studied in Thailand in recent years.

Such a claim would seem bold in light of the forbidding transcription used by Bernatzik and the general assumption that his data are of very questionable value, i.e. that the differences from extant varieties of Mlabri may simply reflect errors on his part. A careful analysis and comparison with present-day Mlabri, however, lend support to the assumption that many of Bernatzik’s data are trustworthy if properly interpreted.

This made it an interesting issue whether the seemingly ternary dialect branching is real or spurious from a synchronic perspective. Until the 1999-data became available, it seemed warranted to assume a scenario of very recent historical change, with Bernatzik’s “Yumbri” as a possible pre-stage of both of the extant varieties of Mlabri. Considering that the differences are mainly lexical, such an assumption might seem at first glance plausible, since lexical innovations and/or idiosyncratic borrowings from neighbouring languages might well cause very rapid lexical splits among small tribal subgroups. An external reason for such an assumption would be that since 1937 and up through 1998, nobody ever recorded linguistic data quite similar to those of Bernatzik.

Specimens of linguistic evidence

It would be entirely premature to present an overall comparison of Bernatzik’s 1938-data with the just collected and so far unprocessed raw data from Phiang District. Still, I feel that the very encounter with the tribe in Phiang has considerable information value both in itself and in relation to Bernatzik’s “Yumbri”. That is why I rush to present a few selected pieces of data which seem to bear crucially on the question of identity or non-identity between Bernatzik’s “Yumbri” and the Phiang language variety, although this account is by necessity very provisional.

One idiosyncratic feature of Bernatzik’s data is that his “Yumbri” speaker(s) sometimes inserted *la* ‘it is’ when translating or explaining a word, with the result that Bernatzik entered wordforms which erroneously begin with “la-”, e.g. ‘dog’: “laš⁴”; the proper, traditional word for ‘dog’ is *chɔɔ?* in all extant varieties of Mlabri (∞ -Mlabri also has a neologism *bran*). I have not found this use of *la* in explanatory replies to be typical of either ∞ - or β -Mlabri but it occurs all the time in the usage of the Phiang speakers. In fact, even before entering the forest we were told by a villager who had met tribal people and conversed with them, that “Water is called *lawryk*⁴ in their language”. The word for ‘water’ that actually occurs both in ∞ -

⁴Vowel length, which is phonemic, is indicated by doubling the vowel symbol, like in Rischel (1995) (in my 1982-paper and some later papers I used the symbol “:” for length; note that Egerod and Rischel (1987) and Rischel and Egerod (1987) do not indicate vowel length at all). The symbols *w* and *r* (rather than the *ɻ*, *ɞ* of our earlier paper) stand for unrounded back vowels in

Mlabri and Phiang speech, is *wɾɾk*; Bernatzik has the somewhat defective representation “wǫ” (β-Mlabri has a quite different word).

More interesting evidence is provided by words in Bernatzik’s list which do not match any word in any of the two recently recorded varieties of Mlabri, ∞-Mlabri and β-Mlabri, but which unexpectedly do match words retrieved in the Phiang variety. The spectacular examples which I have been able to spot so far, will be presented below:

Bernatzik’s word for ‘head’ is “ākǫ”, which in Rischel and Egerod was matched with ∞-Mlabri “ʔak glɾʔ”, i.e. *ʔak glɾɾʔ* ‘the head’. This is undoubtedly a wrong identification: the Phiang data now attest to the existence of a quite different word (*ʔat/ʔak*) *hwɾɾ* in the meaning of ‘(the) head’, which is compatible with Bernatzik’s form (his spelling conventions did not account consistently for aspiration; this should be kept in mind also when appraising the other data below).

This reinterpretation of Bernatzik’s entry for ‘head’ also helps to account for his strange form “wǫǫkǫ” ‘skull’. We suggested already in Rischel and Egerod (1987) that that word actually meant ‘hair (on the head)’ rather than ‘skull’. In the light of the above evidence one can now segment it as (?)wǫǫ + kǫ, the second part being the word *hwɾɾ*. As for the first part, I have found that some Phiang speakers say *nujnuj* or even nasalized *wǫ̃wǫ̃* for ‘hair’, which may be what Bernatzik heard (such forms have not been encountered in either ∞- or β-Mlabri; the former has *kl.muuj*, the latter *mujmuj*). As for the word for ‘head’, the finding that the Bernatzik and Phiang data share a word which is actually a loan, probably a fairly recent one⁵, which is not attested in other extant varieties of Mlabri, seems strong evidence in favour of a direct link between these two language varieties.

Bernatzik has a wordform “tšăkmrĕ” with the gloss ‘old’. In Rischel and Egerod (1989) we matched it with “chə.kmruç” ‘old’, which is now known to exist both in ∞- and β-Mlabri, the proper phonological representation of distinct pronunciation being *chak-km.ruujh*. It was a surprise to encounter in Phiang a seemingly very common word *chak-km.rĕh*, which does not exactly mean ‘old’ but rather ‘mature, grown-up person’⁶. There can hardly be any doubt that this is what Bernatzik heard; it remains obscure whether he has a slightly inexact gloss or whether the word meaning has changed slightly over the time span of sixty-two years.

Bernatzik has a wordform “tškăntŭy” with the gloss ‘fire’. The odd spelling (“tšk-”) shows that his rendering of this entry is seriously distorted. In Rischel and Egerod (1987) we totally failed on this word because we had not yet elicited its

accordance with the IPA framework.

⁵The form *hwɾɾ* is obviously a direct or indirect loan from a Thai dialect, **ua* > *uɾɾ* or **ua* > *wɾɾ* being well-attested in other data; *ʔat* and *ʔak* are variants of the definite article in Mlabri, cf. below.

⁶The two wordforms are obviously closely related; the first part is probably the word *chak* ‘chest; body’, which is also used with the transferred meaning of ‘person, oneself’.

proper match in ∞ -Mlabri, where it occurs only in conservative speech. In Rischel (1989, p. 69), however, I suggested an identification with the extant Mlabri expression *chingañ ʔuulh* ‘glowing embers’ (literally: ‘glowing embers’ + ‘firewood’). This analysis also provided a solution to another entry in Bernatzik’s list, viz. ‘blow’ “bũñũy”, which contains a well-known Mlabri word *puŋ* ‘to blow (with the mouth)’ and whose second part must be the same word for ‘firewood’, **ʔuulh*, as in *chingañ ʔuulh* (Bernatzik’s entry obviously refers to the act of blowing to excite the fire). What had to be left open in 1989 was whether Bernatzik’s consistent spelling with “-y” in both occurrences of the word meant that he had misheard the final *-lh*, or whether he had actually heard something different, possibly a palatal. I have later experienced that Mlabri *-lh* is easily misheard and reproduced by Lao-speakers as something like [-jh] or [-ç], so Bernatzik’s form might well represent his helpers’ imperfect imitation of the Mlabri word. The Phiang evidence, however, suggests that Bernatzik may have been right on the palatal. Although the prevalent pronunciation in Phiang is *ʔuulh* as in the other varieties of contemporary Mlabri, one of our best male speakers consistently substituted a palatal glide for the final lateral, and thus he also said *ʔuujh* instead of *ʔuulh*. Altogether there is a lot of idiolectal variation in the pronunciation of final liquids in the Phiang usage, unlike both ∞ - and β -Mlabri. It is conceivable that this is a phenomenon which goes back some generations. If so, Bernatzik may have encountered a person with the same idiosyncratic pronunciation of **-lh* as our Phiang speaker.

If we use glosses, i.e. word meanings, as entries, there are cases of semantic match between Phiang and Bernatzik as against ∞ -/ β -Mlabri. A case in point is Bernatzik’s “sĩĩ” which he glosses ‘to sing’ in perfect agreement with Phiang *chiʔih*, whereas the word is attested with a different meaning ‘to chat’ in ∞ -/ β -Mlabri. Another example is Bernatzik’s *dalaw* ‘bamboo cooking utensil’ (i.e. a big bamboo section). Although this is called *tariŋ* in ∞ -Mlabri and *diŋ* in β -Mlabri, the Phiang people say *talaaw*, which agrees with Bernatzik. That is not the whole story, however, for the bamboo species from which the utensil is cut, is *dəlaaw/dalaaw/talaaw* (at least in male speech) everywhere; what seems characteristic of Bernatzik+Phiang is the monopoly of this word in the *transferred sense* of ‘bamboo section for cooking’.

Occasionally, Phiang seems to side with one of the extant Mlabri varieties in Thailand against Bernatzik. A case in point is the Phiang word for ‘tooth’: *cañ*; this occurs identically in ∞ -Mlabri whereas β -Mlabri has (*ʔat*) *threɛŋ*, which is consistent with Bernatzik’s form “ătrɛñ”. Such evidence is inconclusive, however, since the various word lists are in no sense exhaustive. As for *threɛŋ*, this word is not unknown to Phiang Mlabri speakers, and it occurs in conservative ∞ -Mlabri with the more specific meaning of ‘front tooth’. Mlabri probably used to have both words as near-synonyms although Bernatzik retrieved only one of them (obviously by pointing at the front teeth), and although one of these words was eventually generalized in β -Mlabri but the other in Phiang Mlabri.

A provisional word list made on the basis of my immediate field notes confirms that, by and large, Phiang usage sides with Bernatzik’s data with respect to

lexicon. Both are in some sense intermediate between ∞ - and β -Mlabri. Using Mlabri,⁷ I found it possible to engage in basic conversation with the Phiang people after some exposure to their speech which enabled me to adjust lexically. This adjustment was often a matter of choosing between known alternatives, e.g. when conveying meanings such as 'not', 'eat', 'water' (where Phiang usage sides with ∞ -Mlabri), or 'sit', 'bathe', 'chicken' (where Phiang sides with β -Mlabri).

Although there is so far no cultural evidence in favour of contact between the Phiang group and any of the now well-known Mlabri groups in Thailand, one certainly cannot exclude the possibility of some language contact between ∞ -Mlabri and Phiang speakers after the ternary split. This might account for one strange phenomenon: the variation of the definite article over the forms *?at* and *?ak* in both of these language varieties, whereas β -Mlabri exhibits the form *?at*. It is clear that *?at* is the older form and *?ak* the younger form; in ∞ -Mlabri *?at* is found only in the speech of middle-aged or elderly people. It is, on the other hand, possible that there has been a tendency ("drift") toward such vacillation in finals in the language for a long time although the change *?at* > *?ak* has not made it to β -Mlabri. As for Bernatzik's list, most of his examples are suggestive of *?at* but some may be construed to reflect *?ak*, as in *?ak hwɿɿ* above; also cf. discussion in Rischel and Egerod (1987, p. 23).

Conclusion

A number of general, albeit still tentative, observations can be made by way of conclusion:

(i) The tribal group in the national forest of Sayaburi Province speaks not only the same language but apparently essentially *the very same dialect* (or, as I would like to put it: "ethnolect") as that of which Bernatzik produced a sample in 1938. If we put aside those several entries in Bernatzik's list which look quite spurious, and if his notation is properly interpreted (allowance being made for Bernatzik's imperfect grasp of phonological distinctions), we arrive at a good overall match and, what is more significant, at some highly non-trivial correspondences. Considering that there is a time gap of sixty-two years between his data and the fresh data of this year, this seems a fairly stable dialect.

(ii) There is now solid evidence that *Mlabri comprises at least three varieties*: one represented by data in Kraisri (1963) and Egerod and Rischel (1987), another represented by the data of Ferlus (1964, unpubl.) and Rischel (1995), and a third represented by Bernatzik (1938) and Rischel (this note). Each of these dialects or "ethnolects" appears as fairly stable within the time depths of some decades for which we have linguistic data. This suggests that *the present ternary branching may reflect a scenario of some age*. One might otherwise have surmised that the lexical diversity is the result of recent and rapid innovations and borrowings since the three

⁷The Mlabri in Laos were reported by local villagers to speak Lao - and possibly other languages - in addition to Mlabri. It was our immediate impression, however, that the persons we approached had a very limited command of Lao except for smalltalk of a practical and concrete nature. In actual practice, therefore, the elicitation of linguistic and cultural information was difficult and heavily dependent on our efforts to use Mlabri as the language of communication.

ethnolects are otherwise very similar.

(iii) Although both Bernatzik and contemporary officials in Laos speak of “Yumbri” as if this were an ethnonym, this expression seems to reflect the frequent use of the phrase *jɣm brii?* meaning ‘(I/we) live in the wild forest’. Members of the various subgroups can all refer to themselves as *m̩la? brii?*, i.e. ‘people of the wild forest’. Thus, *their proper ethnonym seems to be the autonym Mla’ Bri’* or, in simplified rendering, *Mlabri*. This is also the proper cover term for all varieties of their language.

(iv) Seemingly spurious phonetic representations in Bernatzik’s list are sometimes matched by *aberrant idiolectal pronunciations* in the language variety still spoken in Phiang District. That is, there is a great variation in the pronunciation of several words, and some of the puzzling spellings in Bernatzik’s list may be due to the elicitation of rather idiosyncratic pronunciations of individual words, particularly when it comes to certain unexpected substitutions among tongue-tip and front-tongue consonants (i.e., *r-l-n* and *lh-jh*). This suggests that the high degree of variation which I have observed in Phiang, goes back many decades.

(v) The now transparent data show a remarkable ability on Bernatzik’s part to elicit words and to get across to their meanings, also in the case of verbs which according to our experience are not quite easily elicited. As for pronunciation, some essential features were neglected by him or are grossly misrepresented in his transcription. Still, as a caveat, I would recommend to any comparativist to *discard only the obvious and trivial misunderstandings and take other data in Bernatzik’s word list seriously, even those that so far defy interpretation.*

As co-author of Rischel and Egerod (1987), I must warn readers that our 1987-paper contains several erroneous identifications of words on Bernatzik’s list. Some of these errors could be spotted and remedied only two years later (Rischel 1989), others can now be spotted and remedied thanks to the lexical data which are already emerging from the project in Laos, and which will hopefully expand considerably as the project proceeds. There is now every reason to qualify our sweeping conclusion of 1987 about Bernatzik’s data:

(...) the proportion of matches with Kraisri’s list (and now with our data) reflects the relative success of Bernatzik’s linguistic work rather than properties of “Yumbri” and Mlabri. (p. 24)

In fact, I had to revise that appraisal shortly afterwards (Rischel 1989, p. 73-74) after having gained access to data on β-Mlabri (Minor Mlabri) which on several points matches his “Yumbri” more closely than does the variety we had studied up to then, i.e. ∞-Mlabri.

After meeting the Mlabri speakers of Phiang District who seem to speak his “Yumbri”, I can now state with even fuller conviction that, notwithstanding Bernatzik’s lack of professional training which makes it forbiddingly cumbersome and extremely risky for comparativists to use his data, he deserves to be ranked as an outstanding pioneer in the study of tribal Mon-Khmer.

The main point of our conclusion of 1987, however, stands more solidly than ever. "Yumbri" is indeed Mlabri, although its lexical usage is somewhat different from the hitherto most well-known variety of this language.

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Received: 15 March 1999

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