CHAPTER ONE

DAVID BRADLEY AND TIBETO-BURMAN SOCIOHISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION*

Jamin Pelkey and Picus Sizhi Ding

Working at the forefront of Tibeto-Burman linguistics, Professor David Bradley’s exceptional expertise lies in his ability to blend comparative diachronic research with distinctions drawn from the sociology, anthropology, geography and descriptive-typology of language to open up new insights into hundreds of linguistic varieties and language relationships throughout the Southeast Asian macroregion. It is with great pleasure that we present this collection of original papers to celebrate his achievements and contributions, both to the science of language and to scholarship on Tibeto-Burman languages, over the past 40 years.

In addition to positions of distinction held within his own university over the years, Professor Bradley is UNESCO team leader for research on language endangerment in East and Southeast Asia, Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities, and current President of the Comité International Permanent des Linguistes (CIPL). In what follows, we provide a brief background sketch of David’s life and work, highlighting his academic achievements and relating the contents of the chapters that follow to his research themes.

1.1 The life and career of David Bradley

More than a leading international linguist, David Bradley is a consummate polyglot: a scholar whose detailed knowledge of human language is steeped in an extensive facility with actual world languages, large and small. In spite of living predominantly in English-speaking countries on three continents (the United States, England and Australia), David’s extensive international contacts and long-standing Asian fieldwork commitments have led him to develop professional fluency in

* We are grateful to Jim Matisoff for providing information about David’s early life during his college days at Columbia University.
French, Italian, German, Mandarin, Thai and other languages. Even more remarkable is the fluency he has achieved in Tibeto-Burman languages of lesser diffusion over the course of the last half century: Burmese, Lahu and Lisu in particular.

Though his facility with world languages has continued to expand, Bradley’s identification as a sociohistorical linguist, by contrast, and his chosen specialization in the Burmic branch of Tibeto-Burman, were both minted during the earliest stages of his career.

1.1.1 Background, education and position

Born September 7, 1947 in New York City, David was first introduced to the field of Tibeto-Burman Linguistics as an undergraduate student of James Matisoff at Columbia University. Matisoff’s influence led to David’s early fascination with Lahu—an interest which would soon expand to encompass all languages of the Burmic branch. Matisoff’s mentorship also facilitated Bradley’s analytic grounding in Historical and Comparative Linguistics.

A strong complementary feature of David’s approach to research and analysis is his grounding in the sociology of language. This too can be traced to his early days at Columbia, where he additionally studied under the great sociolinguist William Labov. Thus, by the time he had graduated with an A.B. in Linguistics in 1969, David Bradley was already in lock step with his destiny: opening up the Sociohistorical Linguistics of Tibeto-Burman languages.

His next steps toward Tibeto-Burman scholarship took him to the University of London, where he studied Burmese under the celebrated phonologist R. K. Sprigg. Here he was further introduced to the languages of Southeast Asia under the tutelage of pioneering field linguist Eugénie Henderson. During this period Bradley pursued his doctoral research on Lahu dialects spoken in Thailand. This work, coupled with his monumental reconstruction of Proto-Loloish (or Proto-Ngwi in the current terminology), was rewarded with a Ph.D. in Phonetics and Linguistics from the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1975.

The same year, David moved to Australia, where he began his life-long career as an academic linguist by teaching at the Australian National University and the University of Melbourne. In 1982 he was hired by La Trobe University, where he and his wife, Dr. Maya Bradley, went on to fortify the undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs in Linguistics in addition to establishing the La Trobe Modern Asian Languages program. Nearly 35 years later, in March 2016, David’s service at La Trobe culminated in his distinguished retirement as Professor and Chair of Linguistics.