



University of Kentucky Linguistics Colloquium

The Chin Languages Research Project: Community Collaboration (and linguistically rare phenomena) in Indiana

This talk provides an overview of the Chin Languages Research Project, a collaboration between speech scientists and members of Indiana's large Burmese refugee community. Indianapolis, just an hour north of the IU Bloomington campus, is home to a community of more than 20,000 Burmese refugees. Many are originally from Chin State in western Myanmar and speak under- and un-documented Tibeto-Burman languages from the Kuki-Chin branch. Our best estimate is that upwards of 30 Kuki Chin languages are being spoken in Indianapolis. For the most widely spoken of these—Hakha Lai, also called Laiholh or Hakha Chin—syntactic and morphological work exists, but phonetic and phonological work is minimal. Other languages, such as Zophei and Lutuv, are completely undocumented: their names have been mentioned by previous scholars, but no prior linguistic work exists. Yet Zophei, spoken by 20,000 people worldwide (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig 2019), is spoken by 4,000 people in Indiana, including more than a dozen students on the IU campus. Lutuv, with 15,000 speakers worldwide (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig 2019), is spoken by perhaps 1,000 people in Indiana and several students on the IU campus.

Against this backdrop, at least two observations can be made: (1) IU linguists have an invaluable opportunity to engage in intensive fieldwork with many speakers of under-resourced languages just an hour's drive from campus; (2) Chin community members regularly face communication challenges in both urgent and daily settings which speech scientists are uniquely positioned to help address. I describe how our team of IU speech scientists, student members of the Indianapolis Chin community, and community partners from churches, social organizations, and local businesses is working to engage in scholarship and address practical needs in tandem. I discuss several ongoing initiatives, including translation of Covid-19 information, documentation of traditional knowledge through in-language ethnographic interviews, development of Lutuv literacy materials, and an NSF-funded collaboration that seeks to develop health-related materials for linguistically underserved communities. I also touch on several of the typologically rare phenomena exhibited by Chin languages, in order to highlight the sheer volume of linguistic research that can be done right here on the ground in Indiana. Throughout, I highlight ways in which our undergraduate Chin students are the MVPs on our team—they are incorporated into the research process from the ground up, serving as a bridge between the university and the community and helping to determine new research and service directions.

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September 16 @ 1pm
UK Esports Lounge Theater

Zoom Link: <https://uky.zoom.us/j/84689898506>

