

The standard form of the script

The Ahmao script was invented so that hitherto illiterate people might be able to read and write their own language. It had to be accurate enough to achieve these ends, but otherwise simplicity was paramount, so that both adults and children with no previous education might be able quickly to master it. Over a number of years the system was developed and refined and reached its definitive form in the 1938 edition of the New Testament. It is this standard form that has been used in the glossary. For the person who knows and speaks the language any further elaboration of the script would simply cause confusion and be self-defeating, but for the “foreign” student seeking to learn the language, some further help is required. Accordingly the glossary provides additional information in two areas, first in respect of emphasised or accented words and second with reference to the tonal system.

Emphasised or accented words

The Pollard script took over the Wade-Giles tradition of Romanising Chinese using an apostrophe to mark aspirated initials. Thus ㄐ is pronounced b, and ㄐ' is pronounced p, ㄒ is pronounced d, and ㄒ' is pronounced t etc. This arrangement greatly reduced the number of initials that had to be learned. With the passing of time it was gradually realised that there was an additional step between the voiced initials, ㄐ, ㄒ, etc., and the aspirated initials, ㄐ', ㄒ', etc. This intermediate group of initials is best described as “emphasised” or “accented”, since they are pronounced with a little more voice together with a slight expulsion of breath. The ordinary Ahmao speaker may be quite unaware of these accented words, as he is unaware of the actual tones that he is using, but it is essential for the foreign student to be able to recognise them. How then should they be marked? Wang Ming-ji used an inverted apostrophe, while some scholars in Kunming tried writing a tiny circle in the middle of the initial. Neither system was very satisfactory. The former got mixed up with the aspirate and the latter could be confused with the final that followed it. Our solution, which works perfectly, was simply to place a dot on the line between the initial and the final. In ordinary Miao texts, as for example the New Testament or the Old Miao Songs, it can be omitted, but in those places where it is required, as in this glossary, it is quite easy to include.

Marking the tones

As in Chinese, tones are important. For the person who knows and speaks the language, the four positions used in the Ahmao script are normally sufficient indication, but again the foreign student needs rather more exact information. Professional studies have shown that the various Miao languages have an inter-related and highly complicated tonal structure which has evolved over the centuries. In the glossary we have adopted the pattern advanced by Wang Ming-ji, which distinguished seven tones, and which, for all practical purposes, works reasonably well. Again following the Wade-Giles system, it uses the numbers from 1 to 7, written, like mathematical index numbers, beside each word. Thus in the glossary there are two systems of tone marking, the four positions of the standard Ahmao script, which suffices for all normal purposes, and in addition Wang Ming-ji's seven tone scheme, indicated by index numbers. The two systems are related as follows,

Ahmao standard position	Covers Wang Ming-Ji's tone positions
1	1
2	2, 3 and 4
3	5
4	6 and 7

For the sound values of these tone markings, see the attached list describing the sounds of the Ahmao script. In the Pinyin form of writing Miao languages eight letters of the alphabet which are regularly used as initials in the writing, are also attached to the ends of words, where, rather confusingly, they have an entirely different function as tone markers. In the glossary, to avoid unnecessary complication, these markers have not been used.