

**TRIBAL
Languages
and
Literature
of North-East India**

**Edited by
Dr. Lalitluangliana Khiangte**

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Edited by

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Chapter – 1

LANGUAGE

THE TIBETO-BURMAN LANGUAGE FAMILY

- Prof. Scott DeLancey, University of Oregon, USA

North-East India, as is well-known, is home to an astonishing array of peoples, cultures, and languages. We do not have an exact, or even a very good approximate, count, but in the seven states of the Northeast there are well over 100, perhaps as many as 200 or more, languages spoken. (Adding Sikkim gives at least another dozen). We find languages representing four of the major language families of Asia: Indo-Aryan, Tai, Austro-asiatic, and Sino-Tibetan. But the overwhelming majority of North eastern languages, well over 90%, belong to the Sino-Tibetan family, and more specifically to Tibeto-Burman. In this paper I will try to give some idea of exactly what this means, by describing the extent and composition of the Tibeto-Burman family.

The Concept of a Language Family : When we speak of languages as being in the same family, we are not necessarily implying that they are particularly similar. For example, English and Assamese both belong to the Indo-European family, but needless to say they are quite dissimilar in their structure and vocabulary. What it means to say that they are both Indo-European is that they can both trace their ancestry back to a single language, which we call Proto-Indo-European, which was spoken 6-8,000 years ago, probably in the Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

In the intervening time, by normal processes of language change, they have drifted apart to the point where their relationship is barely discernable. In fact, if we had only English and Assamese to look at, we would have a hard time demonstrating that they are related; we are confident of this claim because we know from history that Assamese is descended from Sanskrit, and English from

something similar to Gothic, and when we compare Sanskrit and Gothic the relationship is much more obvious.

Language families divide into branches, or, put otherwise, smaller language families can be gathered into larger ones. For example, the Indo-European family divides into about a dozen branches, including Germanic, which includes English and German, Italic, which includes all of the Romance languages (the languages which have descended from Latin), Balto-Slavic, which includes Lithuanian, Russian, Polish and others, and Indo-Iranian, which includes the Indo-Aryan languages descended from Sanskrit as well as most of the languages of Iran and Afghanistan. The epic accounts of the Aryans coming into India are a record of speakers of the Indo-Aryan sub-branch of Indo-Iranian moving into South Asia from the original Indo-European homeland north of the Black Sea.

The Tibeto-Burman family consists of some hundreds of languages – we cannot be more precise, both because of lack of knowledge and because of the difficulty of defining exactly what we mean by “a language”. We will return to both of these points later. They are spoken from northeast Pakistan and Himachal Pradesh in the west to north-western Vietnam in the east, and from Qinghai Province of China in the north to the southern end of the Thai-Burma border in the south. In terms of the number of languages included, Tibeto-Burman is one of the largest language families in the world, and its geographical extension likewise ranks it as one of the more widespread language families.

Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman

In the mid-nineteenth century, European scholars for the most part believed that most, or all, the non-Indo-European languages of Asia belonged to a single huge family, sometimes called “Turanian”. As more detailed data from various Asian languages became available, scholars began to recognize more and more

distinct families in the region. The relationship of Tibetan and Burmese was recognized quite early, and gave us the term “Tibeto-Burman”, but the real milestone in our understanding of the Tibeto-Burman family was the huge body of data collected in the *Linguistic Survey of India* at the beginning of the 20th century.

When the LSI work on Tibeto-Burman classification is mentioned, it is often credited to Sir George Grierson, the editor of the entire project, but in fact credit should properly go to Sten Konow, a Norwegian linguist who was responsible for the Tibeto-Burman volumes, including all the analysis and classification reported in them.

Konow, like other scholars of the time, believed in an “Indo-Chinese” family with two branches, one consisting of Chinese and the Tai languages of Southeast Asia, and the other consisting of the Tibeto-Burman languages. This was the predominant view in the field until 1942, when Paul Benedict published proof that the shared vocabulary which links Chinese and Tai is all borrowed from one language into the other (in both directions), and that the two groups therefore cannot be considered to be related in one family.

This is the beginning of “Sino-Tibetan” as we know it today – a family with Tibeto-Burman as one branch and the Chinese languages as the other. Recent research by the Dutch linguist George van Driem (1997, 2005) suggests that this view of the family is incorrect. Van Driem proposes that Chinese does not represent a distinct branch of Sino-Tibetan, but rather a Tibeto-Burman language that has changed radically under the influence of Tai and other languages in Central and South China. This is a very important hypothesis, and, although it has yet to achieve widespread acceptance, it is probably correct; but it is not directly relevant to our present concern, which is focused on the languages of North East India.

Tibeto-Burman classification : From the time of Konow and the *LSI* on, a number of scholars have proposed different schemes for sub-classifying the Tibeto-Burman family (Benedict 1972, Shafer 1966, DeLancey 1987, 1992, Matisoff 1996, Bradley 1997, Thurgood 2003, inter alia). These differ considerably in detail, and often in fairly basic ways, but each of them has its own useful aspects which should be taken into account by the student. Bradley's is probably the most useful of these classifications, but for students interested specifically in the languages of North East India, the best resource is Burling 2003.

The centre of dispersal from which Tibeto-Burman languages moved into their modern locations is probably the area which Sun Hongkai (1985) calls the "Six Rivers" region of the eastern Tibetan plateau, where the upper reaches of the Huangxe (Yellow), Jiang (Yangtze), Mekong, Irrawady, Salween, and Brahmaputra rivers all flow within a range of a few hundred kilometres of one another. Thus, as Burling (2003) suggests, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland are very much at the centre of gravity and diversity of the family; the central area of TB runs from Arunachal and Nagaland and adjacent areas of Tibet and Burma eastward into Yunnan and Sichuan.

Low-level units : There is general agreement on what linguists call "inspectionally obvious" branches, that is, groupings of languages which are so similar that we can see that they are related immediately when we compare their vocabularies or morphology. On this basis there is no controversy about considering Mizo-Kuki-Chin to be a subgroup of Tibeto-Burman. Other similarly uncontroversial groupings include the Bodo-Garo languages of Assam, the Qiangic languages of south west China, the Lolo-Burmese languages of Yunnan, Burma, and Thailand, and the "Bodish" languages of the Himalayas – Tibetan, the Tamang-Gurung-Thakxhali languages of Nepal, and the East Bodish languages of Bhutan.

We have a much more difficult time grouping these low-level language groupings into higher-order branches. There are a number of reasons for this, but the most basic one is simply lack of data. For a majority of the Tibeto-Burman languages of India, the only data we have is the fragmentary, poorly-recorded century-old data from the *Linguistic Survey of India*, and this is simply not adequate for the task of classifying several hundred languages into genetic units.

We have a different problem at the lowest level of classification, and that is the question of what to consider a language. This is an old and vexed problem in linguistics, and there is a growing modern consensus that it is a false issue which has no linguistic solution.

Basically, the problem is, when do we consider two closely related forms of speech to be two distinct languages rather than two dialects of a single language? This question is often one of great importance to the speakers of the two varieties, and can have real political significance. People often turn to linguists for an authoritative opinion on such questions, but the truth is that we cannot give one. The traditional answer is that if two varieties are "mutually intelligible" we will call them dialects of one language, and if not we will consider them distinct languages.

But as we all know from experience, "mutual intelligibility" is not a simple either/or question, but a continuum. And we cannot quantify precisely how much intelligibility is necessary to consider two varieties to be linguistically the same language.

We cannot pursue this question here; the point I want to make is that in classifying the Tibeto-Burman languages, we need to make some effort to keep our units at a comparable level. For example, we speak of the Bodo-Garo branch in Assam, consisting of a dozen or so languages, including Boro, Garo, Rabha, Dimasa, Atong, and so forth, and of Old Kuki languages in Manipur such

as Purum, Thadou and so forth. On the other hand we speak of "Tibetan" as a single language. But in fact the different so-called "dialects" of Tibetan – Dbus-gTsang (which includes Lhasa), Khams, Amdo, Balti, Ladakhi, and more – are even more different from one another than Boro is from Garo, or Purum from Paite, or, for that matter, Assamese from Bengali.

The reason why we think of Tibetan as a single language is because all the different varieties share a common writing system and literary tradition, not because they are all very similar. But a Tibetan from Lhasa and a Ladakhi who knows nothing of the Central dialect cannot communicate; these two "dialects" are completely unintelligible to one another. Thus in constructing our classification of Tibeto-Burman languages it makes sense to consider Tibetan as a low-level branch at the level of Bodo-Garo or Mizo-Kuki-Chin, not as a language at the same level as Boro or Mizo.

A Tentative Classification : I will present here a tentative outline classification of the Tibeto-Burman languages, specifically highlighting some of the problems which we have yet to solve. We can divide the Tibeto-Burman languages into three large groups, Western, Eastern, and Central. These groupings are essentially geographically defined, and none of them is accepted as a genetic unit by all contemporary scholars. There is, nevertheless, good reason to think that at least the Western and Eastern groups are also genetic units; the status of the proposed Central group is still quite speculative.

The Western branch : We will begin with the Western languages, a group more-or-less equivalent to what Shafer and others after him have called the "Bodic" branch of the family. These are the languages of the Himalayas, spread across from western Arunachal to Himachal and Baltistan in Pakistan. Let us begin with the Tibetan languages: dBus-gTsang or Central Tibetan, Khams,

Balti, Ladakhi, and Spiti in the far west, Amdo in the far east of the Tibetan region, Sherpa and others in Nepal, Dzongkha in Bhutan, and others as well.

We do not know exactly how many languages we should count in this unit, but Nicolas Tournadre has suggested that, by the same kind of criteria that gives us a dozen Bodo-Garo languages, and distinguishes Assamese from Bengali as a distinct language, there may be as many as 25 distinct languages in the Tibetan group.

The closest relatives of the Tibetan group are the “**East Bodish**” languages of Bhutan, southeast Tibet, and Arunachal: Bumthang, Kurtöp, Dzala, Dakpa, mTsho-na, and others. Several of these are referred to as “Monpa”, but it is clear that not all the languages which are called Monpa or Memba belong in the same sub-group.

The next closest unit is a group of languages spoken in Nepal, including Gurung, Tamang, Thakhali, Chantyal, Narpu, and others. A slightly more distant relation is Tshangla, spoken in eastern Bhutan and to some extent in western Arunachal.

Next we come to the Western Himalayan languages, including Kinnaur, Bunan, Manchad, Rangpa, Chaudangsi, and several others from the southern slopes of the Himalayas in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Many of these languages are disappearing, and it is important that we document them before they are gone.

The last Bodic subbranch is the Kiranti languages of eastern Nepal, a group of several dozen languages including Limbu, Sunwar, Hayu, and many others. The Newar language of the Kathmandu Valley is probably closely related to this group (see van Driem 2004).

The Eastern languages

I will follow David Bradley (1997) in grouping together in one branch the three easternmost units of Tibeto-Burman: the Karen

languages of southeastern Burma and southwestern Thailand, the Qiangic languages of Sichuan and Yunnan, including notably Qiang and rGyalrong, as well as a dozen or two smaller languages, and the Lolo-Burmese group, which includes Burmese and a number of small languages spread across Yunnan, northern Burma, and northern Thailand, including Lahu, Lisu, Akha or Hani, and others. The largest Lolo-Burmese language other than Burmese is Yi, formerly called Lolo, in Yunnan.

The Central residue : The remaining Tibeto-Burman languages present us with major problems in classification. These are the languages of Northeast India, western and northern Burma, and adjacent areas of China. We can recognize here a number of inspectionally obvious low-level groups – Nungish, Tani, Naga, Konyak, Mizo-Kuki-Chin, Bodo-Garo, and others – as well as a number of puzzling isolated languages which do not fit into any of these, such as Jinghpaw in Burma and Yunnan, Karbi in Assam, and Meitei in Manipur. And there are several widely-accepted proposals for joining certain of these into higher groupings, e.g. Naga and Mizo-Kuki-Chin, or Bodo-Garo, Konyak and Jinghpaw. But beyond that classification is very speculative. There is a temptation, which several linguists, myself included (DeLancey 1992), have at one time or another fallen into, to simply lump all or most of these together into a “Central” branch, parallel to the Western and Eastern branches.

Unfortunately, there is no real evidence for this. The Western, or Bodic, languages, in particular, are connected by substantial similarities in vocabulary, morphology, and phonological development, and thus we are on solid comparative ground in considering them to be a genetic unit. The relationship of what I have called the Eastern languages has not yet been demonstrated to the same degree of confidence, but seems very plausible. But for the set of languages spoken in the Brahmaputra drainage and northern and western Burma, it seems unlikely at this point that

any such demonstration will be possible. It may well be that substantial parts of this set can be classified into groups – I suspect, for example, that Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw and Kuki-Naga form a larger unit, which probably also includes Karbi and Meitei. But at present such suggestions are little more than speculation.

The Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeast India : We have noted the amazing linguistic variety and complexity of Northeast India. But this complexity is of two different types, in two different geographical regions. The greatest complexity is in the highlands surrounding the Brahmaputra Valley, in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.

We find tremendous diversity among the Tibeto-Burman languages in these regions. The well over a hundred different Tibeto-Burman languages in these states represent several distinct branches of the family, from Mizo-Kuki-Chin in Mizoram and Manipur through the Naga, Konyak, Jinghpaw, Mishmi (which is clearly not a single genetic unit), and Tani, to the East Bodish languages of western Arunachal. These groups are dramatically different from one another in lexicon, grammatical organization, and even phonology, so that, as we have already noted, we are far from understanding where many of them fit within the Tibeto-Burman tree.

In the plains the situation is different. We can assume, as I will discuss below, that several thousand years ago the inhabitants of this region spoke languages which were not Tibeto-Burman; probably at least some of them were Austroasiatic languages, related to the Munda languages to the south-west and/or the Khasi languages of Meghalaya. In recent times, of course, the population speaks mostly Indo-Aryan languages, Assamese and Bengali.

Over the intervening millennia the area was dominated by Tibeto-Burman languages. If we restrict our attention to these, we see that, while we find some spillover in the surrounding hills of

communities speaking languages which are primarily represented in the upland areas, the main players in the plains and near surrounding hills are only three: the very compact, low-level Bodo-Garo branch, and two individual languages, Karbi and Mising. Mising clearly belongs to the Tani group, otherwise located in Arunachal. The classification of Karbi is not yet settled, but it is probably most closely related to the Mizo-Kuki-Chin languages to the east.

The Languages of the Hills : The greatest diversity of Tibeto-Burman languages in the Northeast is found in a belt surrounding the Brahmaputra Valley. Let us go through these in a clockwise direction, beginning in Sikkim. (This discussion is based in substantial part on the work of Burling 2003). For the most part the languages of Sikkim relate to the Western branch, which we have already discussed. The striking exception is Lepcha, the major language of the state. Lepcha is a major classificatory puzzle; various linguists have tried to connect it with different Western subbranches or with the Naga languages of Nagaland, but at the present time we simply don't know where to put it in the family.

Arunachal Pradesh is probably the most linguistically diverse state in India, although all of the tribal languages of the state are Tibeto-Burman. In the west we have a few "Monpa" languages: Tshangla we have already mentioned, as spoken primarily in Bhutan; the Dakpa or Takpa language of Tawang is very close to Dzala of Bhutan and mTsho-sna (Cuo Na) of Tibet, all of them belonging to the East Bodish group which is also primarily spoken in Bhutan. Then we come to a small group of little-understood languages, Sherdukpen, Lishpa, and Puroik (formerly Sulung); these seem to form a genetic unit, but we have no idea where they fit in the Tibeto-Burman family tree. Nearby we find two related languages ^Uruso (formerly Aka) and Miji, which again we cannot classify further.

The largest group in Arunachal, both in terms of number of languages and number of speakers, is the Tani group (in older

literature called “Abor-Miri-Dafla”, all three are terms which today are rejected by the speakers of these languages). Tani includes Nishi, Apatani, Galo, Gallong, Miri, Mising, and others. These languages dominate the central area of Arunachal, and Mising, spills over into the plains of Assam.

The languages of the east of Arunachal are Tibeto-Burman, but, again, difficult to classify. Several tribes of this area refer to themselves as “Mishmi”, and in the earlier linguistic literature we sometimes find reference to a Mishmi subgroup of languages. But with better documentation – the best descriptions of these languages to date are in Chinese (Sun et. al. 1980) – we can see that this is not a linguistic subgroup. Idu and Taroan (also called Digaru) are closely related to one another, but the third “Mishmi” language, called Kaman or Miju Mishmi is a completely distinct language, whose nearest relations are probably to be sought in the Jinghpaw or Nungish languages of northern Burma rather than among its geographically and ethnographically closer neighbours.

Traditionally, in the linguistic literature, the languages of Nagaland and the adjacent parts of Burma have been divided into two main groups: the Naga languages Tenyidie (formerly called Angami), Ao, Lhota, and Sema, and the Northern Naga or Konyak languages, including Konyak, Tangsa, Nocte, Phom, Chang and others. However, recent research on these languages has cast doubt on the existence of a “Naga” linguistic group. It appears that, as is the case elsewhere in Tibeto-Burman, an ethnic designation has been adopted uncritically as a linguistic category, without any real evidence. It may be that we will eventually decide that Tenyidie, Ao, Lhota and Sema do form a relatively close genetic unit, but for the present it seems that the more data we have for these languages, the weaker the case becomes for considering them to all belong to a single subgroup.

The Konyak group, on the other hand, still appears to be a legitimate linguistic unit, but we desperately need better documentation for at least two or three of these languages. Two other languages of Nagaland, Yimchunger and Khamngugam, are clearly distinct from either of the other sets (Kuolie and Keyho 2009); at present these languages are so little-known that we cannot say anything more than that.

There are also “Naga” languages spoken in Manipur, in the sense of languages spoken by communities who consider themselves Naga.

However, “Naga” is an ethnographic rather than a linguistic designation (see van Driem 2008), and it is not clear at present to what extent these languages are especially related to languages of Nagaland. The Tangkhul dialects, at least, seem to be a distinct subgroup.

Meitei (or “Manipuri”), the dominant language of Manipur, and the important Karbi (formerly “Mikir”) language of Assam, have always represented a problem in classification. Both show similarities to the Mizo-Kuki-Chin and the Naga languages, and these are generally considered to be their nearest relatives, but this problem requires further investigation.

Aside from Meitei itself, the other languages of Manipur, and the languages of Mizoram, belong to the Mizo-Kuki-Chin branch, which is also spoken by substantial numbers of people across the border in Burma. Most linguists have considered this branch to be closely related to the Naga languages, but this cannot yet be considered to be proven. There is also some evidence to suggest a special link between Mizo-Kuki-Chin and the Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw group (below), but this suggestion too requires further research and substantiation.

Finally we come to the Bodo-Garo branch, a group of about a dozen closely-related languages spoken primarily in Assam, but also in Tripura, Meghalaya, and West Bengal, as well as in Bangladesh and Nepal. BG languages include Boro or Bodo, the largest tribal language in the Northeast, Dimasa, Rabha, Deuri, Garo, and others. Most linguists consider Bodo-Garo to be most closely related to the Konyak languages of Nagaland and the Jinghpaw languages of Burma in a group called "Sal" (Burling 1983) or Bodo-Konyak-Jinghpaw.

Problems and Prospects : Perhaps the major obstacle to further progress in Tibeto-Burman classification is simply lack of information. We determine the relationships among languages by comparing their grammar and vocabulary, and tabulating what they have in common and how they differ. This process requires that we have sufficient grammatical and lexical data for the various languages which we are trying to compare. And, further, the data must be of a certain level of quality and reliability.

As we have seen, for the majority of Tibeto-Burman languages of India, the only data which we have is from the Linguistic Survey of India. This information was compiled by sending out questionnaires to British colonial officers around the country, and asking them to fill out the questionnaire for any languages in their jurisdiction. There are two major problems with this method.

First, even under the best of circumstances, the questionnaire was not sufficiently detailed to provide necessary information. In particular, it did not ask for systematic data on morphology and grammar, which is crucial information for classification. And, second, hardly any of the officials who filled out the questionnaires had any knowledge whatsoever of linguistics, or any experience in this sort of research. As a result we cannot trust the reliability of the LSI data, again particularly in the area of grammar.

For a few of the languages, particularly of the Northeast, we have a more extensive grammatical description of a language written by a more ambitious administrator or missionary.

In the absence of anything better, these are very useful, and we must be grateful to these individuals who put so much effort into so unfashionable a task. But most of these men, educated as they were in the European classical languages, approached the task by thinking about their secondary school Greek or Latin grammar book and trying to organize their grammar along the same lines.

Since the structure of Tibeto-Burman languages is radically different from that of Indo-European languages, this approach necessarily distorts the description, sometimes almost beyond recognition.

This situation is slowly beginning to change. Over the last couple of decades, a number of Indian and foreign scholars have begun to give us more modern, reliable descriptions of languages of the Northeast. Still, there is an immense amount of work to be done, and we have only begun to scratch the surface. Of the hundred or two hundred Tibeto-Burman languages of the northeast, we have reliable modern grammatical descriptions of possibly a dozen, and only maybe half of those can be reasonably described as complete grammars.

The tribal languages of Northeast India are changing under the impact of modernization, urbanization, and globalization. Many of them will eventually disappear, some very possibly within a generation or two. From the point of view of scholarship the proper documentation of these languages is extremely urgent: it must be done, and it must be done as soon as possible. And the bulk of this work will have to be done by scholars and students from the Northeast itself. If it is left to scholars from the Centre, and foreign scholars from abroad, it will never get done—there simply are not enough linguists in either of those pools to adequately deal with the scope of the job.

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