

## ON THE TIBETO-BURMAN LANGUAGES OF THE EASTERN HIMALAYAN AREA IN CHINA\*

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### 1.0. INTRODUCTION

For the language researcher, investigation and research in Himalayan areas is arduous but attractive. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1956, there has been a series of linguistic surveys organized by the government. The most commonly spoken languages in China, including those of the Himalayan region, have basically been identified. At present, the main task facing linguists is to fill in the details of the local patois and dialects in the Himalayan area that belong to the Tibeto-Himalayan family.

For small languages that are spoken by relatively few people, only introductory sketches had been completed. In 1976, however, a team organized by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences undertook a comprehensive investigation of minority languages in the eastern Himalayan area. I was the team leader of the language research group. We investigated these languages and recorded each of them except Tibetan. During one year of investigation, we recorded the languages spoken in twelve localities. In each location, we recorded material including the three thousand most commonly used words, five hundred sentences illustrating the basic grammar, stories, and texts. We also worked out the phonemic systems of these languages.

In this investigation, the following languages were recorded:

1. *Monba*, distributed in Cuona, Motuo, and Lingzhi counties of Tibet (two dialects with thousands of speakers);
2. *Tsanglo*, distributed in Motuo county (thousands of speakers);
3. *Daruang*, distributed in Dzayu county (used by at least one thousand people);
4. *Geman*, distributed in parts of the Daruang-speaking area (used by hundreds of people);

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5. *Idu*, distributed in the areas of Daruang and Geman (used by hundreds of people);
6. *Bogar* (or *Bengni Bogar*), mainly distributed in the areas of Miling, Longzhi, and Motuo counties (used by thousands of people).

All of these languages except Idu have been introduced in Sun et al (1980). Idu was introduced in Sun 1983a. Subsequently, we organized two complementary investigations on the Monba, Tsanglo, and Bogar languages. During these investigations we also discovered a new language, Sulong, which is mainly distributed in Longzhi county in the Shannan region of Tibet. The number of speakers of Sulong is small, and it is used primarily as a home language; in social activities they usually use the Tibetan language. Information about Sulong was published in Sun et al. (1991). In this book, about one thousand vocabulary items as well as the phonological system of Sulong were presented.

## 2.0. CLASSIFICATION OF THE TIBETO-BURMAN LANGUAGES OF THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS

The language situation in the Eastern Himalayan area is very complicated. Nevertheless, our ten years of investigation have enabled us to learn the general language structure of this area. On the basis of comparative study, we have developed the chart shown in Figure 1 to illustrate the internal relationships of the Tibeto-Burman languages.

The Tibeto-Burman languages may be classified into five major linguistic divisions and ten sub-branches. The Tibeto-Burman languages found on the Chinese side of the Himalayan area belong to the Bodic branch (e.g., Monba and Tsanglo), to the Himalayic branch (e.g., Bogar and Sulong), and to the Kachinic branch (e.g., Daruang, Idu, and Geman). However, this classification is preliminary and may be somewhat one-sided, since we do not yet understand the languages well and have limited comparative material, especially for languages spoken outside of China.

The following points are of special importance:

1. In our research, we found that Idu and Daruang are almost identical, although the names are different and are taken to represent two different nationalities. Based on the analysis of historical migration patterns, we think that these two languages differentiated themselves not less than one thousand years ago.

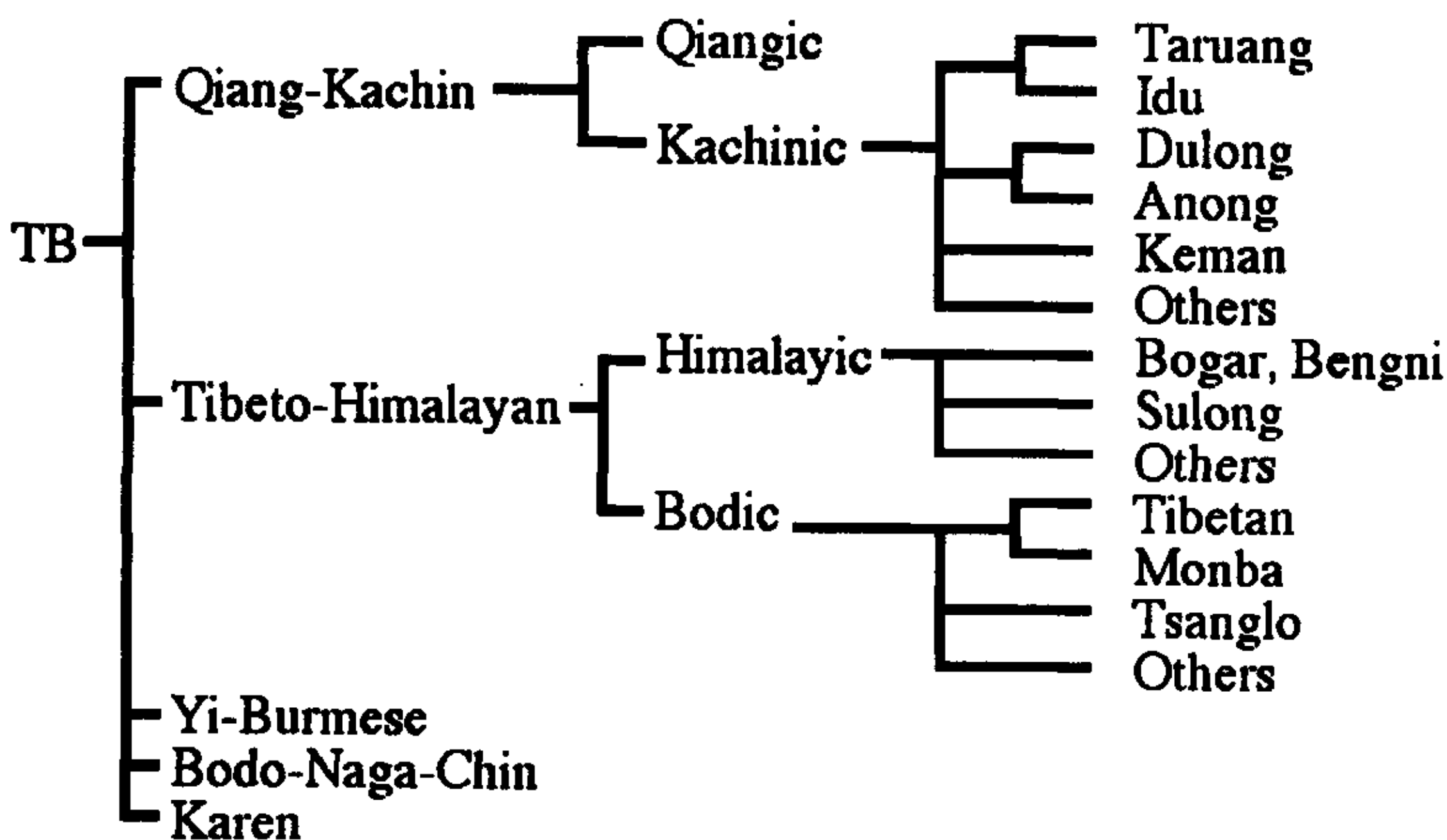


Figure 1. Internal Tibeto-Burman Relationships

Sun, H. 1999, "On the Himalayan languages of the eastern Himalayan area in China", in *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 61-72. ([purl.org/sealang/sun1999himalayan.pdf](http://purl.org/sealang/sun1999himalayan.pdf))

2. The Sulong language has a special status. We have recorded no less than two thousand vocabulary items in common use, and have noted that the percentage of cognate Tibeto-Burman words is lower than in other TB languages. Furthermore, it is hard to find common points of grammar. In the chart in Figure 1, we classified Sulong tentatively in the Himalayic branch, but after more in-depth research its classification may very well change.
3. The Monba and Tibetan languages have a close relationship. In fact, some scholars think that Monba is a dialect of Tibetan, not without reason. However, even if it classified as a dialect of Tibetan, it is highly aberrant, and such a classification makes the differentiation of Tibetan dialects difficult. Therefore, we classify it as an independent language. The apparent closeness between Monba and Tibetan requires further investigation, in order to determine whether it is due to close genetic relationship or to intense contact.
4. In this chart, we use the names people apply to themselves (autonyms) rather than the official names of nationalities, or names applied to them by other groups (exonyms). The name of a language and the name of the group that speak it are frequently different in China (see the detailed discussion in Sun 1992). Moreover, there are more than thirty group names current in this area, and it is difficult to know the relationships among them.

### 3.0. THE DZA LANGUAGE

In Dzayu county, the local people told me that there is a group named "Dza" that uses a special language, which no outsiders had any knowledge of. Feeling the curiosity and responsibility of a language researcher, I visited this Dza people and recorded their language.

I determined that the language of the Dza is not a new language, but rather a mixture of Geman and Tibetan in both vocabulary and grammar.

#### 3.1. *The vocabulary*

Part of the vocabulary is Geman, but the culture and vocabulary in daily use are Tibetan. Tables 1-4 illustrate some of these relationships among Dza, Geman, and Tibetan.

<i>English gloss</i>	<i>Dza</i>	<i>Geman</i>	<i>Local Tibetan</i>
<i>water</i>	a <sup>31</sup> ti <sup>55</sup>	a <sup>31</sup> ti <sup>55</sup>	t̥chu <sup>55</sup>
<i>mouth</i>	nt̥chu <sup>55</sup>	nt̥chuu <sup>53</sup>	kha <sup>55</sup>
<i>we</i>	kin <sup>55</sup>	kin <sup>55</sup>	ŋã <sup>55</sup> tsho <sup>55</sup>
<i>tree</i>	a <sup>31</sup> suŋ <sup>35</sup>	a <sup>31</sup> suŋ <sup>35</sup>	çin <sup>55</sup>
<i>sleep</i>	ŋui <sup>55</sup>	ŋui <sup>55</sup>	ni <sup>55</sup>
<i>weep</i>	ŋai <sup>55</sup>	ŋai <sup>35</sup>	ŋu <sup>55</sup>
<i>good</i>	ku <sup>31</sup> su <sup>55</sup>	ku <sup>31</sup> su <sup>55</sup>	ja <sup>13</sup> po <sup>55</sup>
<i>big</i>	ku <sup>31</sup> tai <sup>53</sup>	ku <sup>31</sup> tai <sup>53</sup>	t̥chen <sup>55</sup> po <sup>55</sup>
<i>language</i>	lai <sup>55</sup>	lai <sup>55</sup>	ke <sup>53</sup>
<i>pursue</i>	poi <sup>53</sup>	poi <sup>55</sup>	te <sup>35</sup>
<i>vegetable oil</i>	ta <sup>31</sup> si <sup>55</sup>	ta <sup>31</sup> si <sup>55</sup>	ma <sup>55</sup>

Table 1. Identical with Geman, different from Tibetan

<i>English gloss</i>	<i>Dza</i>	<i>Geman</i>	<i>Local Tibetan</i>
<i>fair</i>	a <sup>31</sup> mboi <sup>55</sup>	mbu <sup>35</sup>	po <sup>55</sup>
<i>section</i>	thai <sup>55</sup>	thal <sup>55</sup>	t̥cha <sup>55</sup>
<i>louse</i>	sai <sup>55</sup>	säl <sup>53</sup>	çi <sup>55</sup>
<i>pull out</i>	phai <sup>55</sup>	phal <sup>53</sup>	pe <sup>35</sup>
<i>feet</i>	to <sup>31</sup> pi <sup>55</sup>	pla <sup>55</sup>	kaŋ <sup>55</sup> ba <sup>55</sup>
<i>snake</i>	ɹui <sup>35</sup>	ɹuul <sup>55</sup>	dz̥y <sup>55</sup>
<i>bedbug</i>	ma <sup>31</sup> kɹap <sup>53</sup>	klap <sup>55</sup>	dz̥ə <sup>13</sup> çi <sup>55</sup>
<i>human</i>	ku <sup>31</sup> tsoŋ <sup>55</sup>	tsoŋ <sup>35</sup>	mə <sup>55</sup>
<i>hand</i>	a <sup>31</sup> ɹu <sup>55</sup>	ɹău <sup>53</sup>	la <sup>13</sup> pa <sup>55</sup>
<i>I</i>	ka <sup>35</sup>	ki <sup>55</sup>	ŋa <sup>35</sup>
<i>he</i>	u <sup>55</sup>	wi <sup>53</sup>	kho <sup>55</sup>

Table 2. Obvious (but not identical) correspondence with Geman, different from Tibetan

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<i>English gloss</i>	<i>Dza</i>	<i>Geman</i>	<i>Local Tibetan</i>
<i>leopard</i>	zi <sup>35</sup>	tu <sup>31</sup> puu <sup>55</sup>	zi <sup>55</sup>
<i>deer</i>	ɕa <sup>55</sup> wa <sup>55</sup>	tu <sup>31</sup> său <sup>53</sup>	ɕa <sup>55</sup> wa <sup>55</sup>
<i>iron</i>	tɕa <sup>55</sup>	tu <sup>31</sup> gli <sup>53</sup>	tɕa <sup>55</sup>
<i>goat</i>	za <sup>35</sup>	ku <sup>31</sup> tɕi <sup>53</sup>	za <sup>35</sup>
<i>Han Chinese</i>	dza <sup>31</sup> zi <sup>55</sup>	khi <sup>55</sup>	dza <sup>13</sup> zi <sup>55</sup>
<i>ten</i>	tɕu <sup>55</sup>	kiap <sup>55</sup> mu <sup>53</sup>	tɕu <sup>55</sup>
<i>hundred</i>	dza <sup>55</sup>	wa <sup>55</sup> je <sup>55</sup> mu <sup>53</sup>	dza <sup>55</sup>
<i>moon</i>	da <sup>31</sup> wa <sup>55</sup>	lai <sup>53</sup>	da <sup>13</sup> wa <sup>55</sup>
<i>star</i>	ka <sup>55</sup> ma <sup>55</sup>	ŋa <sup>55</sup> tɕi <sup>55</sup>	ka <sup>55</sup> ma <sup>55</sup>
<i>copper</i>	zoŋ <sup>35</sup>	khiau <sup>53</sup>	soŋ <sup>35</sup>
<i>door</i>	gu <sup>35</sup>	mphun <sup>53</sup>	go <sup>35</sup>
<i>hurry</i>	dzo <sup>35</sup>	kla <sup>55</sup>	dzo <sup>35</sup>

*Table 3. Similar to Tibetan, different from Geman*

In addition, there are some fundamental Dza lexical items that are different from both Geman and Tibetan. These differences are well worth noting. Table 4 provides some examples:

<i>English gloss</i>	<i>Dza</i>	<i>Geman</i>	<i>Local Tibetan</i>
<i>ear</i>	tɕin <sup>55</sup>	iŋ <sup>55</sup>	na <sup>55</sup> tɕo <sup>55</sup>
<i>intestine</i>	au <sup>31</sup> ti <sup>35</sup>	ha <sup>31</sup> lai <sup>35</sup>	dzu <sup>55</sup> ma <sup>55</sup>
<i>child</i>	ni <sup>31</sup> ŋe <sup>55</sup>	sa <sup>55</sup>	a <sup>31</sup> ŋo <sup>55</sup>
<i>pig</i>	jau <sup>35</sup>	li <sup>55</sup>	pha <sup>55</sup>
<i>see</i>	tɕi <sup>31</sup> ɕu <sup>55</sup>	thon <sup>55</sup>	ta <sup>55</sup>
<i>dig</i>	pot <sup>55</sup>	ŋgua <sup>35</sup>	ko <sup>55</sup>
<i>spray</i>	wan <sup>55</sup>	phăŋ <sup>55</sup>	tau <sup>55</sup>

*Table 4. Basic vocabulary different from both Geman and Tibetan*

In the more than one thousand Dza vocabulary items recorded, slightly more than 20% are identical or similar to Geman, 70% are identical or similar to Tibetan, and about 7% are similar to neither Geman nor Tibetan.



### 3.2. The grammar

The morphology of the Dza language has been greatly simplified, but traces of Geman are still visible. The following points provide some examples.

1. The Dza particle indicating the noun plural is identical with that of Geman:

	<i>Dza</i>		<i>Geman</i>	
(1) <i>children</i>	ni <sup>31</sup> ŋe <sup>55</sup> child	sen <sup>55</sup> PRT	sa <sup>55</sup> child	sǎn <sup>55</sup> PRT
(2) <i>teachers</i>	gĩ <sup>31</sup> gĩ <sup>55</sup> teacher	sen <sup>55</sup> PRT	lau <sup>55</sup> suw <sup>55</sup> teacher	sǎn <sup>55</sup> PRT
(3) <i>humans</i>	kuw <sup>31</sup> tsoŋ <sup>35</sup> human	sen <sup>55</sup> PRT	tsoŋ <sup>35</sup> human	sǎn <sup>55</sup> PRT

2. The numerals one through five are identical with Geman; above six they are identical with Tibetan. (Examples are omitted.)
3. The personal pronoun in Dza has three numbers: singular, dual, and plural. Each of these numbers is found in the first, second, and third person. In this respect, Dza is identical with Geman:

	<i>Dza</i>	<i>Geman</i>
(4) <i>1st sing. ('I')</i>	ka <sup>55</sup>	ki <sup>53</sup>
<i>2nd sing. ('you')</i>	na <sup>35</sup>	ŋo <sup>53</sup>
<i>3rd sing. ('he / she')</i>	u <sup>55</sup>	wi <sup>53</sup>
<i>1st dual ('we two')</i>	kuw <sup>31</sup> tçin <sup>55</sup> kuw <sup>31</sup> nin <sup>55</sup>	kuw <sup>31</sup> tçin <sup>35</sup> kuw <sup>31</sup> jin <sup>53</sup>
<i>2nd dual ('you two')</i>	i <sup>55</sup> tçin <sup>55</sup> kuw <sup>31</sup> nin <sup>55</sup>	ŋo <sup>31</sup> tçin <sup>35</sup> kuw <sup>31</sup> jin <sup>53</sup>
<i>3rd dual ('they two')</i>	u <sup>55</sup> tçin <sup>55</sup> kuw <sup>31</sup> nin <sup>55</sup>	wi <sup>53</sup> tçin <sup>35</sup> kuw <sup>31</sup> jin <sup>53</sup>
<i>1st pl. ('we')</i>	kin <sup>55</sup>	kin <sup>55</sup>
<i>2nd pl. ('you')</i>	ni <sup>55</sup>	ŋo <sup>53</sup> nin <sup>35</sup>
<i>3rd pl. ('they')</i>	mi <sup>35</sup>	win <sup>55</sup>

4. There are inflectional changes for person, number, and tense in Geman. In Dza, however, there are no changes for person and number. The Dza morphemes expressing tense are identical with those of Geman:

(5)		<b>Dza</b>	<b>Geman</b>
	<i>present tense</i>	mu <sup>55</sup> / mai <sup>55</sup>	mu <sup>55</sup> / mai <sup>53</sup>
	<i>past tense</i>	kie <sup>55</sup> / tci <sup>55</sup> / le <sup>55</sup>	ki <sup>55</sup> / ka <sup>35</sup> / kua <sup>53</sup> / li <sup>55</sup> ka <sup>31</sup>
	<i>future tense</i>	ma <sup>55</sup> / maŋ <sup>55</sup>	mi <sup>35</sup> / mǎŋ <sup>55</sup>

5. The basic use of the existential verb is identical in Dza and Geman. That is, the existential verb used for human beings and animals is tɕau<sup>53</sup> in Geman, tsak<sup>55</sup> or tsau<sup>55</sup> in Dza (with some correspondences in pronunciation). The existential form for other referents is kam<sup>35</sup> or ka<sup>55</sup> in Geman, ka<sup>55</sup> or ka<sup>55</sup>mu<sup>31</sup> in Dza. It is clear that here, too, there is some relationship.
6. Many grammatical particles are identical:

		<b>Dza</b>	<b>Geman</b>
(6)	<i>agent</i>	ka <sup>35</sup>	ku <sup>55</sup>
	<i>instrumental (vessel)</i>	lit <sup>55</sup>	lit <sup>55</sup>
	<i>instrumental (non-vessel)</i>	ka <sup>35</sup>	ku <sup>55</sup>
	<i>locative</i>	li <sup>55</sup> / lit <sup>55</sup>	li <sup>55</sup> / lit <sup>55</sup>
	<i>accusative</i>	wi <sup>35</sup>	wu <sup>31</sup>
	<i>source</i>	nǎŋ <sup>53</sup> hi <sup>55</sup>	wi <sup>55</sup> na <sup>31</sup>

On the whole, there are abundant derivational and inflectional morphemes in Geman. For example, there are grammatical categories to express aspect, tense, mood, directionality, and so on, as well as many expressive forms. These forms are greatly simplified in Dza. Many of them have disappeared completely in Dza, especially inflectional forms, which are almost nonexistent.

From the above comparisons of grammar and vocabulary we can see that the language of the Dza people is built on a substratum of Geman. Putting this information together with the present-day geographic distribution and oral legends, we can postulate that the Geman people were early inhabitants of the downstream region of the Dzayu river. After the Tibetan people entered the southern part of this area, they took the lead in politics, economics, religion,



and culture. Every aspect of the life of the Dza people was affected, gradually resulting in assimilation to the Tibetan nationality. Only the language used in the family life of Dza villages survives. In recent decades, there has been continuous Geman migration from the downstream area to the upstream reaches of the Dzayu river; these people have retained their own linguistic characteristics.

The Dza language in Dzayu is an interesting phenomenon. We cannot know the exact time of their contact with Tibetan peoples, but the following statement may provide some evidence. A Qing Dynasty general, Zhao Erfeng, used military force in this area. At this time, some Tibetans migrated from Xikang to this region and became the dominant nationality, greatly influencing the local Geman people. If this historical evidence can be taken as proof, we can see that in the two-hundred-year process of contact, the language that became dominant in politics and economics gradually reduced the scope of usage of the language that was now disadvantaged in these spheres. Finally, the disadvantaged language lost its own character. At the same time, the Dza national character seems to have already been assimilated into the Tibetan pattern. However, the character of a language is relatively stable, and changes occur relatively more slowly than in other aspects of culture. Although the Dza speakers live together with the Tibetans, the Tibetans still feel that there are some important differences that characterize the Dza people. Foremost among these is the special language they use in their villages and families.

## **OTHER INTERESTING LINGUISTIC PHENOMENA**

We also found some other interesting language phenomena during our fieldwork. For example, when we arrived in the Daruang area, we gradually became able to communicate with the inhabitants by using the local language in daily life. One day I found that they were quietly preparing grain, arrows, and other hunting tools. They were going to go hunting. I asked to accompany them in order to acquire more knowledge about their daily life and more vocabulary items. After prolonged negotiations, they agreed that I could go with them, but insisted that I should comply with their orders.

After a half-day's walking, we reached the hunting area. Without a word, the hunters' expressions became serious, and everyone walked faster. When we arrived at the base of a certain cliff, the oldest hunter ordered us to stop and take a rest. Each person ate some food and drank the spring water. I wanted to use the time to ask the old hunter some questions about hunting, but he stopped me. I was a little disappointed. Suddenly, the old hunter spoke some sharp words to his companion. I could not understand what he said, but when I

asked the other hunter to explain, his only response was a silencing gesture. At last he said that he would tell me after we returned.

During the hunt, I could not understand anything they said. Although we had accomplished something with the hunt, I was still not happy. After returning to the village, I asked the old hunter some further questions. He still did not want to talk to me or tell me the reason for his refusal. Finally, however, after a talk with the primary teacher of the village, I learned the secret.

The Daruang people practice a "primitive" religion. They believe that everything has a spirit. Because of this, they have special hunting regulations. When they approach the hunting area, they cannot use their ordinary language to communicate. They must use a secret language, because the mountain spirit can understand the daily form of the language, and if he knew the hunting plan he would tell the animals to run away. I eagerly wanted to learn this secret hunting language, but the primary teacher did not know it. I had to ask the young hunter again. Finally, I was able to acquire some information about it.

It is not a very complicated language. It replaces some of the vocabulary used in daily life with other terms. The grammar does not change. The lexemes are completely different. Therefore, it was not strange that I could not understand anything. Table 5 provides some examples:

	<i>In daily use</i>	<i>In hunting</i>
<i>cow</i>	ma <sup>31</sup> tsau <sup>53</sup>	tur <sup>31</sup> plon <sup>35</sup>
<i>water</i>	ma <sup>31</sup> tçi <sup>53</sup>	tur <sup>31</sup> pe <sup>53</sup>
<i>knife</i>	ta <sup>31</sup> ja <sup>55</sup>	ta <sup>31</sup> sai <sup>53</sup>
<i>speak</i>	ma <sup>31</sup> jo <sup>55</sup>	gu <sup>31</sup> ba <sup>53</sup>
<i>language</i>	tur <sup>31</sup> ku <sup>55</sup>	ta <sup>31</sup> we <sup>53</sup>
<i>eat</i>	tha <sup>53</sup>	ma <sup>31</sup> tçau <sup>35</sup>
<i>what</i>	çim <sup>55</sup>	ta <sup>31</sup> si <sup>55</sup>
<i>sleep</i>	n <sup>53</sup>	mon <sup>55</sup>
<i>rain</i>	ka <sup>31</sup> ja <sup>53</sup>	ma <sup>31</sup> tium <sup>35</sup>
<i>walk</i>	tçi <sup>55</sup>	ta <sup>31</sup> çan <sup>35</sup>

*Table 5. Daily-use versus hunting vocabulary in Daruang*

I only recorded about forty words of the hunting language; maybe the young hunter did not know any more. I tried my best to find the source of these terms. However, except for a few words that are found in hunting descriptions in old stories, most of the terms are simply accepted through common practice, and it is said that different villages use idiosyncratic secret

hunting languages. Therefore, I do not think it would serve much purpose to study these terms in detail.

#### **4.0. CONCLUSION**

It is important to investigate and study the languages of the Himalayan area of China. However, our investigations are still preliminary, and we do not yet understand them thoroughly. There remain many linguistic mysteries without any clues. Nevertheless, for the preservation of languages that are spoken by only a few people, for the reconstruction of Proto-Tibeto-Burman, and for research on the relationships among groups of Tibeto-Burman nationality, research on the languages of this area is of fundamental significance.

I therefore make the following suggestions:

1. In the past there have been four Yi language symposia, with the most recent having been organized in the Liangshan Yi nationality area in China in 1991. There have also been three Himalayan symposia, including the one in Santa Barbara in 1997 at which this paper was first presented. Such symposia stimulate further research on Tibeto-Burman. Explicit statements of the geographical distribution of the Himalayan languages, such as that made by the organizer of the Santa Barbara symposium, are useful for attracting the participation of researchers and for deepening the scope of research.
2. The Himalayan languages are spoken within many different countries. In the past, many researchers have done fieldwork and collected and published materials, but the symbols used to represent the languages have still not been standardized. The problems that arise from this situation are widely recognized. Therefore, we should discuss the possibility of organizing a serious conference to discuss the situation and reach a consensus about solutions.
3. In the future, we should organize more seminars on the Tibeto-Burman languages. Since some languages are disappearing quickly as the numbers of speakers are decreasing, we should act to rescue and preserve these language resources. There are still many unsolved questions about the history, mutual contact, and internal evolutions of these languages. I hope that scholars will pay increasing attention to these issues in the future.

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