UNCLES AND AUNTS:
BURMESE KINSHIP AND GENDER[1]

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Introduction: The position of Burmese in Sino-Tibetan

Burmese is the Sino-Tibetan (ST) language with the
second largest number of speakers after Chinese. It was the
fourth to develop an orthography -- preceded by Chinese, Tibetan,
and extinct Xīxìa (Tangut); surviving Burmese inscriptions date
from 1112 AD onwards.

Its historical linguistic position within Sino-Tibetan
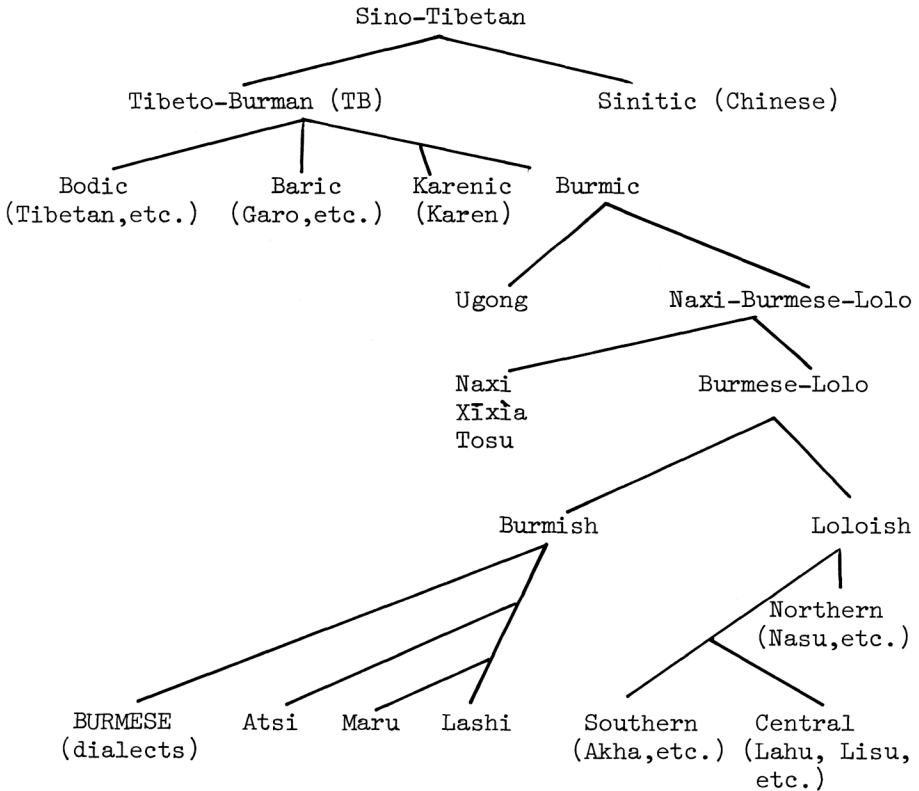is represented in the following language tree:

Fig.1: *Sino-Tibetan language tree*

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This classification is based on patterns of sound correspondence found in non-borrowed vocabulary, and on proportions of shared basic vocabulary.[2]

        Burmese has a number of regional dialects. The 'standard' language, or central dialect, has subdialects: that of Upper Burma centred on Mandalay, and that of Lower Burma centred on Rangoon. The Arakanese dialect, spoken along the north-western coast and into Bangladesh, has the second largest number of speakers, and is archaic in a number of ways; there are also several other dialects.

        Quite closely related to Burmese are Atsi (Tsaiwa), Maru (Lawngwaw) and Lashi, spoken in north-eastern Burma by smaller groups which are part of the 'Kachin' culture complex. These languages show extensive influence from Jinghpaw ('Kachin'), a Baric Tibeto-Burman language according to Burling (1971), and of particular interest within these languages is the wide range of terms used for uncles and aunts.

Terms for Uncles and Aunts

A. Burmese

        The system of kinship terms for parents' siblings is an area of substantial dialect difference in Burmese, and of extensive changes observable by comparing older and more recent sources on these dialects. Inscriptional data, mostly summarized in Luce (1981), with some data in Ba Shin (1962) and Than Tun (1958), provide early evidence for some forms though the exact referents of the terms are often hard to determine. Judson (1953) provides early nineteenth century data, and Tun Nyein (1906) gives normative early twentieth-century forms. Two anthropological studies have investigated modern Rangoon usage: Brant and Mi Mi Khaing (1951), and Burling (1965). Most recently, Spiro (1977) discussed the kinship system in depth, with 1960s usage for a village near Mandalay in Upper Burma, reporting 'old' Upper Burma forms, and current Rangoon forms. The three last sources disagree extensively and, indeed, my Burmese informants have always had trouble with these terms, which are in a state of flux: Tun Nyein (1906) actually contains a basic error, calling the father's sister terms 'maternal' and the mother's sister terms 'paternal'. Table 1 below summarizes the data:

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	Early	Late	c.1850	c.1900	'old' (Spiro)	c.1960 (Spiro) Village		
Period:							Mandalay	Rangoon
Source:	Inscriptions		Judson	Tun Nyein	Upper Burma	Upper Burma		
ùyî	X	X	MeB	MB			MeB₁	
ùyîjî					MeB₁			
weyîjî					MeB₂			
ùjî						MeB	MeB₂	PeB₂
ù			MB	MB				
ùlèjî								PeB₃
ùmìn								
ùlè			MyB			MyB	MyB	PyB
weyîlè					MyB			
bájî		X	FeB	FeB	FeB	FeB	FeB	PeB₁
bábá						FeB (address)		PeB₄ (intimate)
bábájî								PeB₅ (intimate)

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Period:	Early	Late	c.1850	c.1900	'old' (Spiro)	c.1960 (Spiro) Village		
Source:	Inscriptions	Inscriptions	Judson	Tun Nyein	Upper Burma	Upper Burma	Mandalay	Rangoon
bá thwὲ		X	FyB	FyB	FyB	FyB	FyB	
míyî	X							
eyî	X	X	FS	MS	FS	FyS	FS	
eyîjî					FeS	FeS		
eyîlὲ					FeS			
míjî		X	MeS	FS	MeS_1	MeS	MeS_1	
jídɔ				FS	MeS_2			PeS_1
jîjî				FS		FeS (address)		PeS (intimate)
ejî				FS				PeS_2
(e)dɔjî				FS			MeS_2	PeS_3
míthwὲ	X		MyS	FS	MyS_1			
thwὲdɔ				FS				
(e)dɔ	X			FS	MyS_2	MyS_1		PyS_1