

TIBETO-BURMAN LANGUAGES AND CLASSIFICATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages are the principal languages of the Himalayan region, spoken from Kashmir in the west, across the Himalayan and sub-Himalayan regions of India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Tibet and China, and into Southeast Asia across Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. There are several hundred languages known, and doubtless some others yet to be identified.

Various maps of the TB languages have been produced recently. For those in Southeast Asia, see Wurm and Hattori (1981/1983); concerning China, see Wurm et al. (1987/1991). A relatively comprehensive picture of TB and other languages in Burma is given in Moseley (1994). The TB languages which are used as languages of wider communication are discussed and mapped in Wurm, Mühlhäusler and Tryon (forthcoming), and those which are dying are found in Wurm (1996). Van Driem (forthcoming) deals with the languages of Nepal, and van Driem (1992) those of Bhutan. However, detailed maps of the TB languages of the rest of South Asia are provided here for the first time, as well as an appendix showing the names and approximate 1995 populations of all TB groups.

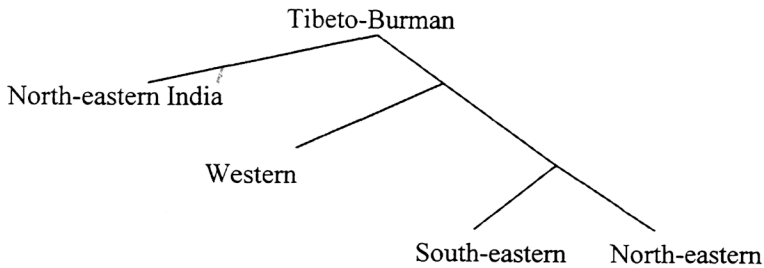
Hale (1982) is a recent and extremely useful bibliographical summary for all TB languages. A fuller bibliography of linguistic studies of all the TB and other languages of Nepal by Toba (1991) provides an excellent resource for languages of this area, including some which extend outside Nepal. In the discussion and references below, the major recent studies of TB languages of the Himalayan region, especially in South Asia, are cited. Two excellent recent compilation volumes for the TB languages of China, Sun (1991) and Dai (1992), have provided further data on some of these as well as many other TB languages.

There are two main classifications of TB languages in use; one is that of Shafer (1974), which splits it into four main parts: Bodic, Baric, Burmic and Karenic; the other is that of Benedict (1972), with eight subgroups plus an 'other' category. These nine subgroups have been reclassified by Benedict (1976) into three groups. For a comparison of these and earlier classifications, see Hale (1982).

With additional data on languages of China and north-eastern India, it has become clear that some revisions are needed; specifically, some of Benedict's 'other' languages, classified tentatively as Burmic by Shafer, form an additional group called the Qiang group by Sun (1983b), some of the Rong languages by Thurgood (1985), and here the North-eastern TB

languages. Shafer's classification of a number of specific languages and language groups has proven doubtful; for example, most languages of his Burmic group are here included in the Burmese-Lolo or Kuki-Chin subgroups of the South-eastern TB group, but some others such as Jinghpaw are in the North-eastern India TB group and others such as Qiang are in the North-eastern TB group.

The classification of some languages is uncertain, in most cases due to very extensive contact: Bai and Tujia with Chinese, the Nungish languages with Burmese-Lolo languages, Lepcha with a variety of TB languages and so on. It appears that the overall pattern can be summarised as below:



The North-eastern India group includes Shafer's Baric group, also known as Benedict's Bodo-Garo-Konyak group, now usually known as the Sal group from a name suggested by Burling (1983b); plus the Jinghpaw (Kachin) and Sak or Luish group; it has some lexical peculiarities not shared with other TB languages; most languages have some morphology including parts of that reconstructed for Proto TB by Wolfenden (1929), but relatively simple tonal systems. This group and others have been linked geographically by Matisoff, in his Kamarupan group.

The Western group corresponds mainly to Shafer's Bodic group and Benedict's Tibetan/Kanauri plus Himalayan, with a few additions. In this classification the Western group is divided into Bodic (including Tibetan), and Himalayan. Bodic has four subgroups: Tibetan proper; Western Bodish (Gurung or Tamang) subgroup, Eastern Bodish or Monpa, and eastern Bodic or Tshangla subgroup, and the Kanauri subgroup, also known as West Himalayish. Himalayan falls into the relatively homogeneous Kiranti or Rai subgroup and the more disparate western subgroup, which includes various languages not classified as Bodic by Shafer, including Newari and Chepang. Most of these languages have extensive secondary morphology, especially on verbs; many have word rather than syllable tone systems, often involving phonation as well, while some are non-tonal.

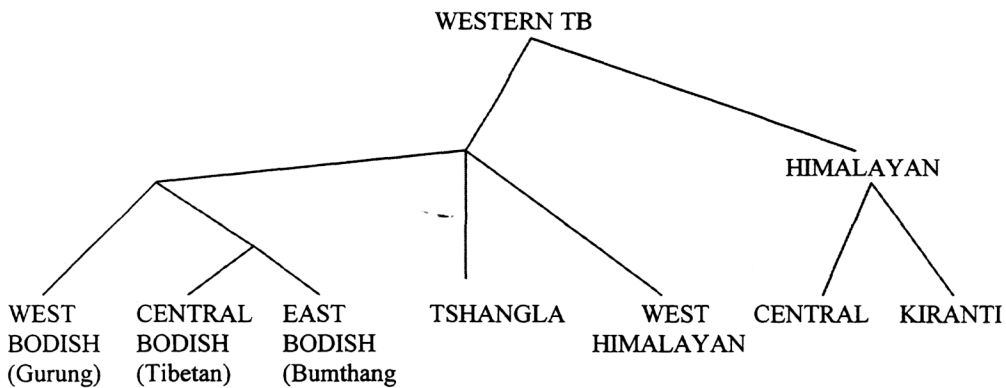
The North-eastern India group includes the Central subgroup (languages of the border between north-eastern India and Tibet, also northern Burma and adjacent areas of China); some scholars such as Thurgood have linked this with the core North-eastern or Qiang subgroup. The latter languages have substantial shared verb morphology; most are tonal. Some of the southern North-eastern group languages are lexically transitional to South-eastern, but are phonologically and morphologically more typical of North-eastern. These include the Nungish and Naxi languages.

The South-eastern group includes Shafer's Kukish/Benedict's Kuki-Chin-(Southern) Naga; the Burmese-Lolo subgroup; and the Karen subgroup. Apart from Kuki-Chin, which

is typologically similar to the adjacent North-eastern India languages in having some preserved and some innovative morphology and relatively simple tonal systems, these languages tend to have very little morphology and complex tonal systems typical of the *northern South-east and southern East Asian linguistic area*. Of all the TB languages, the Karen subgroup is the only one to have SVO syntax; but even Karen retains various verb-final syntactic characteristics. Bai also shows SVO as an alternative possibility; it has been heavily influenced for millennia by SVO Chinese. All other TB languages are SOV.

2. WESTERN TB OR BODIC

This group comprises two main branches: Tibetan and other closely related languages on the one hand, and the TB languages south of the main Himalayan range, from north-western India across Nepal and Sikkim. The relationship between these languages can be shown as follows.



2.1 BODISH

This subgroup includes Tibetan proper. Apart from literary Tibetan with its long history and continuing use as the liturgical language of a variety of Buddhism, there are many regional and local varieties which serve as the spoken Low corresponding to the literary High in a diglossic pattern. Some of these regional Lows have more widespread use; this includes the Low of Lhasa, the traditional capital of Tibet, which is used as a spoken lingua franca among Tibetans in South Asia and elsewhere. In much of central and eastern Tibet a variety of Kham spoken Tibetan is used as a lingua franca by herdsmen, and is thus known as Brokpa, literally 'herdsman'.

Many TB groups on the margins of Tibet have adopted Tibetan Buddhism, and some of these speak languages which are also Bodish, while others speak North-eastern TB languages. Those in more intimate contact with Tibetans may tend to become Tibetanised, with their languages showing this process. One such example is Baima, the northernmost North-eastern Tibetan language, which some scholars prefer to regard as a variety of Tibetan; see for example Nishida and Sun (1990) who support this view.

There are two non-Tibetan subgroups of Bodish. One is West Bodish, also sometimes known as the Gurung group or the Tamang group from the two languages with the largest number of speakers. This includes Gurung, Tamang, Thakali, Manang, Kaike and Ghale; the last two are close to Tibetan linguistically, and thus perhaps transitional between West Bodish and Tibetan. The other is East Bodish, which includes the large Tshangla group.

2.1.1 CENTRAL BODISH (TIBETAN)

Some sources suggest as many as 6.5 million speakers of Tibetan, but this is an overestimate; the actual total is probably less than five million. Also very close to Tibetan but linguistically distinct are the Monpa group of eastern Bhutan and adjacent areas of India and Tibet to the east. Within 'Tibetan' itself there is a vast range of varieties, nearly all of which are linked by sharing Tibetan Buddhism and thus literary Tibetan as a koine. Scholars tend to divide this range into Western, Central, Southern, Amdo (mostly north-eastern) and Kham (mostly eastern) subgroups. In India and Nepal most Tibetans are pejoratively called Bhotia, and in China they are called Zang [tsaŋ⁵¹]. Apart from its role as the language of Tibet, varieties of Tibetan are or were the official language of various kingdoms, from Ladakh in the west to Mustang in north central Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and so on.

The Tibetan-speaking area has been divided among various provinces in China, including the 'Tibetan Autonomous Region', north-western Yunnan, western Sichuan, much of Qinghai and parts of Gansu. Tibetan Buddhist influence formerly spread even further, into the Mongol areas to the north-east. The events of 1959 added substantial numbers of 'standard' Lhasa speakers to India and Nepal as refugees. Closure of the Indian-Tibetan border in 1965 further disrupted traditional trading relationships and left small 'Bhotia' populations speaking divergent Central and Southern Tibetan varieties cut off. In Nepal, the northern quarter of the country is inhabited mainly by Central and Southern Tibetan speakers, with large post-1959 refugee groups around Kathmandu and elsewhere. Apart from the speakers of Nepali, nearly all the population of Bhutan and Sikkim speak some variety of Tibetan or Monpa. Tibetan is also spoken by a few in northernmost Burma. A conservative total is nearly 4.9 million speakers. This total does not include the West Bodish (Gurung, Tamang) Group with nearly 800,000 and the East Bodish, Bumthang or Monpa Group with nearly 150,000 speakers. More distant are the Tshangla Group, three languages with nearly 150,000 speakers in Bhutan. Not included are the rGyarung and several other groups of western Sichuan who are within the cultural orbit of Tibetan Buddhism but speak distinct languages of the North-eastern TB Group. These latter groups, however, are included within the Tibetan nationality in China; hence the total population of the Tibetan nationality in China, 4.6 million in 1990, is higher than the number of Tibetan speakers there, approximately 4.3 million.

I am grateful to George van Driem and Warren W. Glover for some of the information in this section. It should be noted that the names of many Tibetan varieties include the suffix *-pa/-po* 'people' or the suffix *-skad/-kad/-kat* or *-ka/-kha* 'speech'. The following indicates the names and relationships within Central Bodish.