The Sal Languages'

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Background

The sub-classification of the Tibeto-Burman languages has been a subject fraught with considerable mystery. Among all the central and eastern Tibeto-Burman languages, there appear to be only four clear sub-groupings: 1. The Bodo languages of Assam, 2. Manipuri-Mizo-Kuki-Chin, 3. Lolo-Burmese, and 4. Karen.' Other subgroup names have been used from time to time, such as "Naga," "Naga-Bodo," "North Assam," and even "Kachin" but these seem to label little more than geographically contiguous groups for which no genuine linguistic reality has been demonstrated. Jinghpaw, Nung, Mikir, and all of the vast numbers of languages found in the arc to the north and east of the Brahmaputra river, from the north of Assam around to the Naga Hills, fall into an uncertain limbo—surely Tibeto-Burman, but not clearly or closely affiliated with any other particular Tibeto-Burman languages.

We have, of course, heard a good many suggestions, from time to time, about the linguistic sub-grouping of these languages, including an old suggestion that the Bodo languages of Assam show a special relationship both with Jinghpaw and with certain languages of the northeastern Naga Hills region. So far as I am aware, this was first suggested by Robert Shafer (1953:162) but Paul Benedict also pointed to the similarities among these languages in the Sino-Tibetan Conspectus (1972:6-7, hereafter referred as "STC"), and a number of others have followed suit. A number of years ago I was sufficiently impressed with the similarities between Jinghpaw and Garo (the representative of the Bodo group with which I have worked most closely), to undertake a fairly elaborate comparison between certain

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'This is a revised version of a paper that I first prepared for the XVth International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics held in Beijing, People's Republic of China, August, 1982. I am specifically indebted to Paul K. Benedict and to David B. Solnit, both of whom offered helpful suggestions about a number of my entries, and I am more generally indebted to the hosts of the Beijing conference for their warm hospitality.

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aspects of the two languages. I tried to show that, in spite of what appeared to me to be massive mutual borrowing between Jinghpaw and such "Kachin" languages as Maru and Atsi, evidence can still be found for an underlying special relationship between Garo and Jinghpaw (Burling, 1971). In particular, I argued that even though the phonological system and the kinship system of Jinghpaw and Maru could be regarded as almost identical, their lexicons show striking differences. In some ways, indeed, Jinghpaw appears to be lexically more like Garo than it is like Maru.

In my earlier paper I used no data from any of the "Naga" languages, and comparisons with these languages have always been difficult because of the paucity of evidence from the Naga Hills and adjacent regions. Information has been limited to rather fragmentary vocabulary lists, such as those in Grierson (1903), and while these have offered tantalizing hints, their evidence could never be definitive. In recent years, however, a number of dictionaries of Naga languages have become available, and while these are still far from the sophisticated linguistic treatments that we would like to have, they do provide enough new data to make a reassessment of the relationship among these languages worth while. There is also one bulky attempt at a comparative treatment of the "Naga" languages, G.E. Marrison's SOAS dissertation (Marrison, 1967), which can be used to supply some otherwise missing pieces. In this paper, I survey some of the available data on the Bodo, northeastern Naga, and Jinghpaw languages, and I try to reach a judgement on the likelihood of a special relationship among them.

The final judgement about sub-grouping should rest upon a close understanding of all types of shared innovations of the sub-group and upon a detailed understanding of the phonological correspondences among the languages. In our present state of knowledge about Tibeto-Burman languages, however, we must usually be content with an examination of simpler lexical similarities. We are reduced to the following fairly obvious and simple presumptions: if a group of languages 1) share lexical items that other languages fail to share, 2) show no sign that these shared terms are due either to mutual borrowing or to the residue of a still earlier stage of the language, and 3) have similarities that go beyond those expectable by simple chance, then it is plausible to conclude that these languages shared a period of common innovation and thus form a sub-group within the larger family.

The languages that I consider in this paper, for instance, have words such as sal, san, jan, all meaning 'sun,' and the phonological correspondences that relate the sounds of these words are paralleled in other sets of words. Similarities of this sort can hardly be dismissed as mere chance. Whether they might be due to borrowing or to a com-
mon historical residue that happens to have been lost from other languages is more difficult to decide, but if enough lexical items pattern in the same way as the words for 'sun' it becomes increasingly difficult to attribute the similarity to anything except common innovation at an earlier common stage of the language. It is upon the basis of a few lexical similarities of this sort, similar words that are found in Bodo, eastern Naga and Jinghpaw, but not, apparently, in other Tibeto-Burman languages, that earlier suggestions about their special relationship rested. Since the distinctive word for 'sun' has been cited particularly widely as offering evidence for the special relationships among these languages, and since the word can be plausibly reconstructed as sal, I will refer to the group as the sal languages. This paper is a survey of the lexical similarities among the languages of this group.

Sources and Affiliation

There can be little doubt that the Bodo languages form a relatively unified sub-group of Tibeto-Burman, considerably more closely related to one another than to other Tibeto-Burman languages. These Bodo languages include Boro, spoken in the lower Assam valley and recently described both by Bhat (1968) and by Bhattacharya (1977). The language that, in an earlier paper (1959), I called "Kachari" is, apparently, essentially the same as Boro, and I will supplement my own data with examples drawn from Bhat (indicated with "DNSB" in the tables) and from Bhattacharya ("PCB"). I will assume that these all come from the same language, but I have not tried to reconcile the somewhat divergent transcriptions used in the various sources. I also cite a few words from the closely related Dimasa language that I have taken from Harrision (1967). Dimasa is a dialect reasonably closely related to Boro, but it is difficult to be confident of just how similar or different they are.

Garo, spoken in the Garo Hills in the bend of the Brahmaputra river, resembles Bodo in many ways, but the two languages are by no means mutually intelligible. Boro and Garo are the best described of the Bodo languages. On Garo, I rely upon Mason, 1954, Negminza, 1972, Holbrook, n.d., as well as upon my own knowledge of the language. The transcription that I use for Garo is explained in Burling (1981). It is close, but not identical, to the transcriptions used in Garo dictionaries.

I also use materials that I collected from Atong and Wanang, two languages that are fairly closely related to

'I did ethnographic and linguistic field work in the Garo Hills from 1954 to 1956 with the help of a generous
each other within the "Koch" group that is, in turn, coordinate with Boro-Garo. I included these data from Atong and Wanang in my comparative study of Bodo phonology (1959).

I also cite a few examples from Chutia (taken from Brown, 1895) another Bodo language spoken further to the east in the Assam valley. Examples from Chutia are listed in the tables, in the "Wanang" column, but identified as coming from Chutia. The approximate location of these languages can be seen on the map (last page). The Bodo group also includes Rabha, spoken to the north of the Garo Hills, Lalung, spoken in the middle Assam valley, and the language of Tripura which lies just north of the Chittagong Hill tracts, but I include no data from any of these languages.

The relevant eastern "Naga" languages are less well known than the Bodo languages and they have been referred to under a bewildering variety of names. Present terminology seems to have settled on six language names. Ranging from southwest to northeast these are: Chang, Phom, Konyak, Wancho, Nocte, and Tangsa (see map). Earlier names, used in Grierson or in other early sources, and copied in more recent comparative literature, include (with equivalent modern terms in parentheses): Mojung (Chang); Tamlu, Chingmengnu, and Assiringia (Pom); Tableng and Angwanku (Konyak); Banpara and Mutonia (Wancho); Namsangia and Mohongia (Nocte); Moshang and Shange (Tangsa). The best known (or at least most often cited) of these languages has been Konyak, and the term "Konyak Languages" has sometimes been used as a general term for this group.

It seems fairly clear that these six languages show more similarities to one another than to the other "Naga" languages or to the languages of bordering regions, though even this modest claim should not be taken as fully proven. In spite of having been used as a general name for the group, for instance, Konyak appears to diverge in a number of respects from its neighbors (see conclusions, below). I know of no evidence at all, however, that would suggest that these languages are more closely related to other "Naga" languages than to Tibeto-Burman generally. The term "Naga" appears to be a purely geographical term that lacks linguistic significance. This "eastern Naga" group, in fact, straddles the modern border between Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh (formerly North East Frontier Agency, or "NEFA"), with Chang, Phom, and Konyak lying primarily in Nagaland, and Wancho, Nocte, and Tangsa primarily in Arunachal Pradesh. For want of a better term, however, I will continue to refer to these languages as the "eastern Naga" group.

I offer data in this paper from three of these eastern Naga languages, each described in a recent publication: Konyak, (Kumar, 1973), Nocte (Das Gupta, 1971), and Tangsa