The linguistic position of Tani (Mirish) in Tibeto-Burman: A lexical assessment*

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INTRODUCTION

The obscure Tani (Mirish, Mishingish) languages of southern Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh have only recently begun to receive the attention they deserve (Chhangte 1990, 1992; Sun 1993, 1994). The aim of this paper, which is part of an ongoing project to study the phonological and lexical diachrony of these languages, is to contribute toward clarifying the linguistic position of Tani languages in the Tibeto-Burman family from the vantage-point of reconstructed Proto-Tani (hereafter PT).[1]

Section 1 surveys and contrasts exisiting views on the affiliations of Tani in Tibeto-Burman. Section 2 inspects in detail a number of Tibeto-Burman languages which have been nominated in the literature as possible close relatives of Tani. After screening out a few unlikely contestants, a pilot lexical study is conducted in section 3 to weigh the degrees of lexical affinity between Tani and the remaining candidates as compared with three control languages, Written Tibetan, Written Burmese, and Garo. The implications of the output of this study on the phylogenetic position of Tani are then discussed. In the concluding section, we consider the nature of the relationship between Tani and Digarish (consisting of two known languages: Taraon and Idu), the language group which turns out to be most akin to Tani in basic vocabulary.

1. EXISTING VIEWS ON THE PLACE OF TANI IN TIBETO-BURMAN

The genetic affiliations of Tani with Tibeto-Burman have seldom been called into question,[2] and should now be considered *proven beyond reasonable*

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[1] A preliminary phonological reconstruction of Proto-Tani is proposed in Chapter II of Sun 1993, from which the reconstructed PT roots cited herein are taken. The Proto-Tibeto-Burman (hereafter PTB) reconstructions are based mainly on Benedict 1972 (hereafter STC).

[2] The great lexical differences between Tani and other Tibeto-Burman languages (only 12.5% agreement of basic vocabulary with Tibetan and Burmese according to his calculation) has led Marrison to doubt not only the genetic affiliations of Tani with Tibeto-Burman, but also "the

doubt in view of the accountability of much of the PT phonological developments in terms of PTB (Sun 1993, chapter IV).[3] However, there is no consensus yet as to how Tani interrelates with other Tibeto-Burman languages. In fact, as shown in the following survey of the subgrouping literature, opinions diverge sharply from each other with regard to both lower-level and higher-level affiliations of Tani in Tibeto-Burman.

1.1. Konow: 'North Assam'

In the colossal Linguistic Survey of India, Tani languages, along with other little-known Tibeto-Burman languages of Arunachal Pradesh, were brought together in the so-called 'North Assam' group. This was clearly meant to be an expedient, geographical grouping, as shown in the following quote from Sten Konow, the linguist originating this term (Konow 1909:568, 569, emphasis ours):

> The North Assam group is *not a well-defined philological group* with salient grammatical features distinguishing it from other Tibeto-Burman forms of speech...In many important points, however, Mishmi[4] differs from Abor-Miri, and *the points of correspondence just referred to are not of an importance sufficient to prove a close connexion between the two forms of speech.*

As for higher-level connections, Konow made only a vague suggestion (Konow op. cit.:572):

> The North Assam forms of speech can be described as links which connect the Tibetan and Himalaya dialects with the languages of the Bodo, Naga, Kuki-Chin and Kachin groups.

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reality of the Tibeto-Burman language family as generally accepted...The Tibeto-Burman family is an unsatisfactory construct, and this whole field of investigation should be reopened" (Marrison 1988:216). My own lexical study, however, has turned up much higher cognate figures between Tani and both Tibetan and Burmese (see 5.3. below). Even if Marrison was right about the cognacy rates, his radical view on the status of Tibeto-Burman, we believe, would be hard to accept for most Sino-Tibetanists.
[3] For instance, the regular sound correspondence between PTB *-əy and PT *-i is backed up by as many as eleven cognate sets, all belonging to basic vocabulary (Sun 1993: 4.3.1.2.).
[4] As shown by ensuing research, the Mishmi languages do not form a coherent linguistic unit either. Rather, there is a fundamental cleavage between Digaro-Chulikata-Midu (Taraon-Idu) and Miju (Kaman). Thurgood 1985:81 claims that the Mishmi languages belong with Nungish under a supergroup 'Kaman-Nung' with 'fully substantiated lower-level genetic relationships'. We believe that this claim, which remains totally unproven, underestimates the great differences between the two Mishmi groups (for a more conservative view, cf. Sun et al. 1980:299-315).

1.2. Shafer: Mishingish (Bodic/Burmic)
The distinctness of the 'North Assam' languages is further underscored in Shafer 1955:102, where no less than four separate groups are recognized: Mishingish (= Tani), Digarish (= Taraon-Idu), Midźuish (= Kaman-Meyöl), and Hrusish (= Hruso = Aka). Shafer did not attempt a further classification but suggested that all of them are 'possibly sections of Bodic, possibly of Burmic, *certainly not of Baric*' (Shafer op. cit.:102).

1.3. Benedict: Mirish (Major Tibeto-Burman Nucleus)
While positing Abor-Miri-Dafla (i.e. Mirish in the narrow sense = Tani) as one of the major nuclei of the Tibeto-Burman family, Benedict (1972:5) suggests that to this division perhaps also belong not only the three Arunachal neighbors of Tani: Taraon, Kaman, and Hruso, but also the geographically more distant Dhimal group of Sikkim and Nepal. This claim, in effect, upgrades for the first time Konow's 'North Assam' from an *areal* to a *genetic* grouping. He further speculates that this group (Mirish in the extended sense) could ultimately be linked with Kachin (Jingpo), Baric (Bodo-Garo and Konyak), Nungish, and Lolo-Burmese under the supergroup 'Burmic' (op. cit.:11). This view was soon given up. In Benedict 1976:178; fn. 14, he proposes instead that, as far as core vocabulary is concerned, Tibetan, Chepang, Tamang (i.e. Bodic), Burmese-Lolo-Nungish, Lushai (Kuki-Chin-Naga), and Miri (Tani) form one supergroup as against Kachin, Garo, Konyak languages, and Chairel (or Chakpa, a Luish language according to Bradley 1993:7).[5]

Benedict's revised view on the linguistic position of Abor-Miri-Dafla (AMD = Tani) can thus be interpreted as follows: At a lower-level, AMD is most closely related to Hruso, Taraon, Kaman, and Dhimal; these languages are allied further with Lolo-Burmese, Bodic, and Kuki-Chin-Naga, as against Kachin and Baric. It is important to note that while Benedict ventures explicit claims about possible lower-level close relatives of Tani, he agrees with Shafer that *Tani is not akin to Baric*.

1.4. Other Ideas
Egerod 1974 also contains a classification of Tibeto-Burman, founded largely on Shafer and Benedict's frameworks. According to Egerod, Mirish (=

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5 Incidentally, Benedict's revised view on the special relationship between Jingpo, Bodo-Garo, and Northern Naga seems to be receiving growing endorsement (Burling 1971, 1983; French 1983). The most drastic move in this direction is taken by Weidert 1987: fn.22, where Jingpo is put directly under one of the three branches of Barish: Western Barish (= Bodo-Garo, or Burling's Garo branch); Eastern Barish-I or Arunachal Barish (= Tangsa, Nocte, Wancho); and East Barish-II (= Konyak, Phom, Chang, Khiamngan, and *Jingpo*). An alternative view groups Jingpo rather with Lolo-Burmese, forming a *'Jiburish'* subgroup on the strength of hundreds of cognates between Jingpo and Lolo-Burmese and some parallel phonological developments (Matisoff 1974). In Matisoff 1991:481, however, Jingpo (Kachinic) and Lolo-Burmese are treated as separate major Tibeto-Burman subgroups.

Tani) is one of the major branches of Tibetic (= Shafer's Bodic); further, all of the other sections (Dhimalish, Digarish, Midźuish, Hrusish, Newarish, and Dzorgaish) left unclassified between Bodic and Burmic by Shafer are directly assigned to 'Other Tibetic'. Although further genetic subrelations among these Tibeto-Burman groups are not explored by Egerod, it is clear that, like Shafer and Benedict, he does not consider Mirish to be closely affiliated with Baric.

Matisoff 1991, DeLancey 1991 and Bradley 1993 are among the most recent statements on the genetic relationships among the Tibeto-Burman subgroups.[6] Incorporating information on the newly described Tibeto-Burman languages as well as some recent low-level subgrouping proposals, they all depart in significant ways from their predecessors. In DeLancey 1991, an expanded notion of Baric is suggested, subsuming not only Bodo-Garo and Konyak-Naga (= French's Northern Naga), but also Kuki-Naga, Kachinic (Jingpo), and Mirish. What is more, in this classification 'Mirish' includes the three Mishmi languages in addition to Tani proper, but not Dhimal (assigned to Bodic) or Hruso (not mentioned in his framework). This extended conception of Baric may be inspired by the geographically-based *Kamarupan* (i.e. Assamese Tibeto-Burman) group first proposed in Matisoff 1985b: fn. 8, where, however, the term is explicitly stated to be 'a neutral overall designation for the TB languages of NE India and adjacent areas'. Matisoff 1991:480-1 proposes a simplified heuristic subclassification model of Tibeto-Burman with seven major Tibeto-Burman subgroups including Kamarupan (again with the disclaimer that this is a 'purely geographic rubric'), under which we find Kuki-Chin-Naga, Mikir, Meithei, Mru, Bodo-Garo, as well as Abor-Miri-Dafla. Unlike DeLancey's Baric, however, Kamarupan does not include Jingpo, which is assigned to form a subgroup (Kachinic) by itself. Bradley 1993 contains a wealth of valuable new demographic and sociolinguistic information, especially concerning the Tibeto-Burman languages of India and Burma, but is unconventional in many ways. Adopting purely geographic labels, Bradley classifies Tibeto-Burman into four major groups: Western (Bodic), Northeastern India (= Burling's Sal group plus Kuki-Chin-Naga and Luish), Southeastern (Burmese-Lolo and Karenic), and Northeastern, a tentative medley group containing not only languages which Benedict 1972 puts under Mirish (i.e. Tani, Hrusish, Dhimalish, and the Mishmi languages), but also Nungish, Qiangic,[7] and some widely divergent minor languages such as Sulung and Bugun.

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[6] Dai 1989 and Sun 1988 are not considered here because they deal only with the Tibeto-Burman languages of China.
[7] Surprisingly, Bradley's Qiangic also includes such languages as Tujia, Baima, and even Bai. Chinese scholars now tend to regard Baima as a divergent dialect of Tibetan (Zhang Jichuan and Huang Bufan, p.c.)