

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.

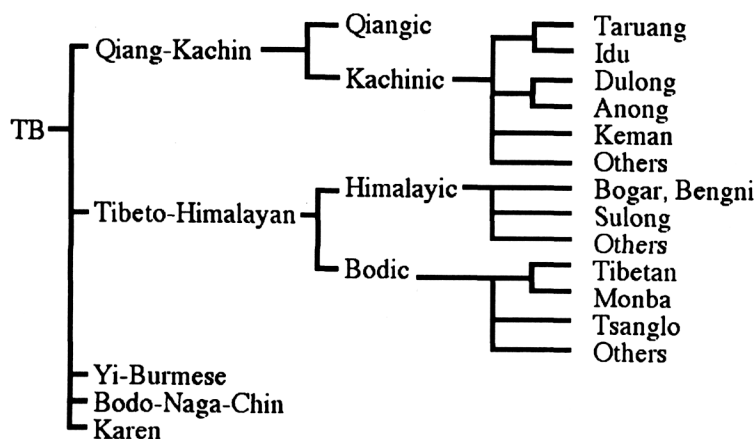


Figure 1. Internal Tibeto-Burman Relationships

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.