

THE TIBETO-BURMAN LANGUAGES OF NEPAL A GENERAL SURVEY

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Scope of the Survey

'Tibeto-Burman' is now generally accepted as a designation for a group of genetically related languages within the Sino-Tibetan family. The Sino-Tibetan and in particular the Tibeto-Burman languages, however, still pose many classificatory problems due largely to insufficient linguistic evidence. The complexity of the problems involved can be seen in the works of Shafer (1955; 1966-70), Voegelin and Voegelin (1964-66; 1977) and Benedict (1972), all of whom attempted to cover the Sino-Tibetan as a whole, while the treatment given by Grierson and Konow (1903-1928) represents an areal survey of Tibeto-Burman languages. There is obviously a good deal of linguistic diversity and geographical area over which these languages are spoken, but the scope of the present survey is restricted strictly to the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Nepal and the neighbouring areas of North India, Bhutan and Tibet.

Language Classification

Apart from many overviews and in-depth studies available on the T-B family, Grierson and Konow (1903-1928) is a basic source for an overall classification of the T-B languages. The parts on T-B provide not only discussions of the characteristic features of the family and its subgroups but also useful word lists and free translations of various texts. Shafer's *Introduction to Sino-Tibetan* (1966-1973) is an attempt to establish genetic classification on the basis of phonological comparison and reconstruction. Benedict's *Sino-Tibetan, a Conspectus* (1972) is in many ways a controversial work on methodological grounds, but remains an important source of information on Proto-T-B phonology and morphology. Voegelin and Voegelin's *Languages of the World Series* (1964-66; 1977) are by far the most comprehensive in terms of discussions on language classification and distribution of speakers, but contain scanty linguistic data. Gerd Hanson

(1991) has given a classification of the T-B- languages and dialects of Eastern Nepal based on field research of the Linguistic Survey of Nepal. His focus was on the grouping of Kiranti languages, while Weidert and Subba (1985) covered the same field with concentration on Limbu grammar and lexicon. For our purpose, however, Soren Egerod's article "Sino-Tibetan languages" published in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1974) seems a good starting point. His classification follows the broad groupings of Shafer (1955) (Bodic, Burmic and Baric), and in some respects the sub-groupings of Benedict (1972) who organized the T-B family into seven nuclei or divisions:

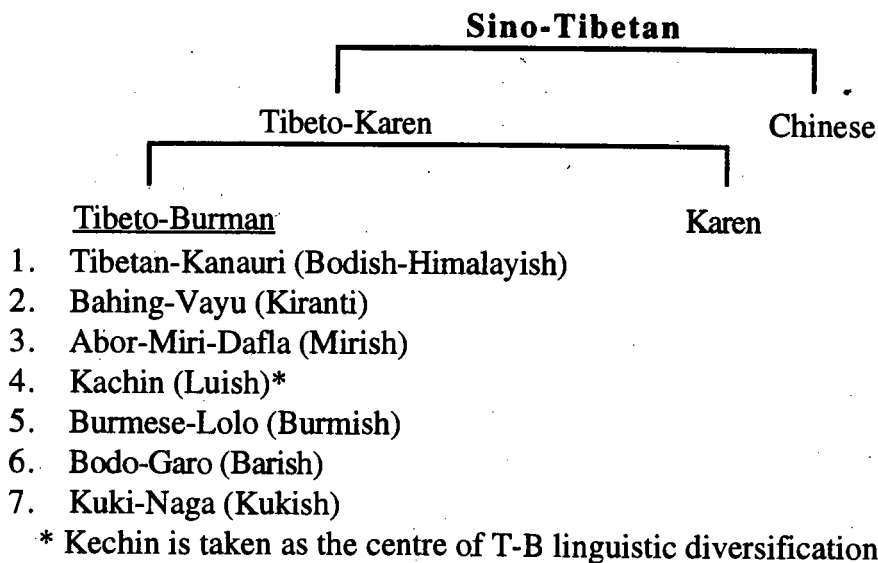


Figure 1. Affiliation of T-B, after Benedict (1972)

Tibetic (Bodic) languages: The Tibetic or Bodic division is the most relevant to the present survey, and Table 1 represents a partial classification of the Bodish-Himalayish and Kirantish languages, the majority of which are spoken within Nepal with some marginal spread over the adjacent areas of Assam and Sikkim in northern India. It is convenient to divide these languages into six groups: Tibetan, Gurung, Kham, Magar, Limbu, and Rai groups, with references to their locations in Shafer's classification (1955). The divisional classification of languages like Newari and Dhimal, however, has been left uncertain although Newari was identified by Benedict (1972) as belonging to the Bahing-Vayu (Kiranti) group.

Table 1: Bodish-Himalayish and Kirantish languages of the Bodic division

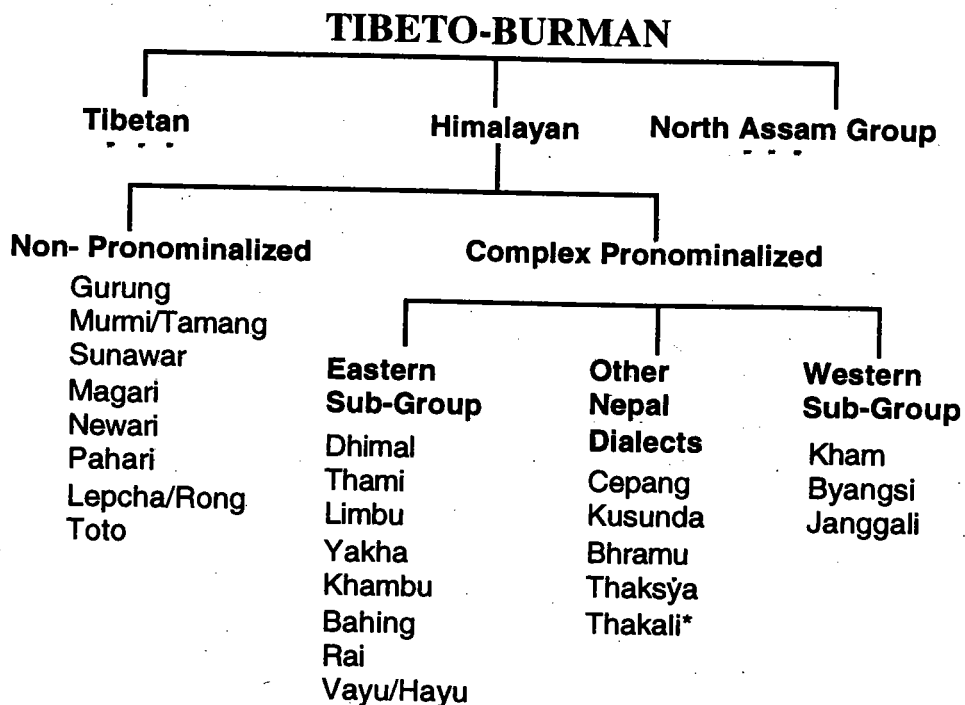
Bodish-Himalayish languages	Areas spoken
<u>Tibetan Group:</u>	
Tibetan (Lhasa, Tichurong, Dolpo/Dolpali) Sherpa, Lhomi, Jirel, Surel, Kagate	Tibet, North-East Nepal and Western India.
<u>Gurung Group</u>	
Eastern and Western Tamang/Murmi, Gurung, Thakali/Thaksya, Manang/Manangba, Nishangba, Kaike, Chantel	Central hills of Nepal.
<u>Kham Group:</u>	
Kham (Maikot, Babang, Takashera)	Western Nepal
<u>Magar Group:</u>	
Raji, Bramu/Bhramu, Thami	West and South-West Nepal
Byangsi, Janggali, Kusunda; Magar, Cepang, Dura, Bhujel/Bhuji, Vayu/Hahu, Raute/Banrawat	Central and East Nepal
<u>Kirantish Languages:</u>	
<u>Limbu Group:</u>	
Limbu (Phidim, Changi, Taplejung, Maiwa Khola, Terhathum) Yakha / Yakhomba, Lepca / Rong	Eastern Nepal, Sikkim, and W.Bhutan
<u>Rai Group:</u>	
Sunavar, Khambu, Bantawa Rai, Thulung, Kulung, Chamling, Khaling, Sangpang	Eastern Nepal
<u>Other Bodic languages:</u>	
Newari, Pahari, Dhimal, Toto, Meche	Central Nepal, Southern Nepal and Northern India.

The grouping of languages and the distribution of speakers as shown in Table 1 are, however, subject to certain overlaps, and it is beyond the scope of this survey to indicate precisely what linking relationships exist between different groups. It is also not our purpose here to review the entire family tree nor the classificatory problems represented in the works of various T-B scholars and linguists. For a recent overview of synchronic and diachronic comparative research on T-B languages, see Hale (1982).

Comparative Perspectives on Language Structures

Particular Language Systems: The Himalayan region is commonly recognized as a rich linguistic area but the comparative methods developed so far to account for genetic relationship or typological classification of languages have remained unstable and lacking in common consensus. The reason for this may be that all areas of linguistic structure-phonology, lexicon, morphology, syntax, and semantics – of T-B languages are not yet amenable to intensive research, and comparative linguists are often forced to work almost entirely with vocabulary. Matisoff (1978) is a pioneer attempt to include specific semantic fields as a crucial tool for comparative research on T-B languages. The theory of semantic correspondence, if it can be rigorously applied, would undoubtedly lend support to the study of similarities in sound and form of related words.

One broad feature of the Himalayan languages is the pronominalized and non-pronominalized distinction. The phenomenon of 'pronominalization' has to do with the affixation of pronoun-like formatives to the root verb to indicate agreement to the subject and the object (direct and/or indirect). Grierson and Konow (1909) recognized the Austric (or Munda) substratum as the explanation for pronominalization in Himalayan languages, and provided the following broad classification:



* Thaksya/Thakali has now been confirmed as non-pronominalized.

Figure 2. Pronominalized and non-pronominalized Himalayan languages of Nepal, after Grierson and Konow (1909)

Another basis for language grouping is through lexicostatistics. Glover (1971, 1974) computed cognate groupings for thirty languages of the Bodic division spoken in Nepal and arrived at percentages of semantic and phonetic features shared by two or more diverging languages. This study also provided clues as to when and to what extent languages have converged or diverged.

Structural Similarities: Many structural features in T-B languages are typologically similar, and it is possible to make certain generalizations on the basis of comparative data. Hale (1970), for example, makes a phonological survey of seven Bodic languages of Nepal at levels of segmental phonemes, distinctive features and tone systems. One of his summaries on the vowel features may be quoted to show what the languages share in common:

Table 2. Distinctive vowel features in seven Bodic languages of Nepal, after Hale (1970)

	Sherpa	Gurung	Tamang	Thakali	Chepeng	Newari	Sunwar
Nasal	1	1	2	3	3	1	1
Breath	3	1	1	1	3	3	3
Length	3	3	1	3	3	1	1

1. Contrastive for all vowels
2. Rare, contrastive only for /e/ and /a/
3. Non-contrastive

Phonetic/Phonological Correspondences: The argument for phonetic or phonological correspondences in shared vocabulary can be seen quite convincingly in limited data:

English	Tibetan	Sherpa	Thakali	Limbu	Newari	Tamang
one	tsi?	tsikh	'Tih	thih	chi	kiih
two	ngi	ni	'ngih	netsti	nyi	nyih

A comparison of basic vocabulary to show sound resemblances has been made for several languages, and a few examples of similar words in Tibetan and Newari, respectively, follow: “outside”, phi and pi; “eye”, mig and mikha “die”, shi and sh; “kill”, sat and syat; “sun”, nyi and nyibha; “fire”, mi and mi. Such similarities are neither coincidental nor cultural loans.

Sound Systems: The core phonological segments of T-B include three voiceless stops (p,t,k) with aspirated and non-aspirated distinction, clear and breathy voiced stops (b,d,g) and three nasals (m,n,n̄). There are five continuant sounds (s,z,r,l, and h) and two semi-vowels (w,y). Three degrees of vowel opening have two members in each: i, u (high), e, o (mid) and a, a: (low). Length and nasal vowels also occur in varying phonemic or sub-phonemic functions.

Historically, two interesting claims have been made: one, the contrast in aspiration of initial stops is most likely the result of lost initial CC- cluster of Proto-T-B; and two, the loss of voicing contrast in initial and final consonants and consonant clusters led to the development of tones.

Tonality: Tibetan and several languages of the Himalayan group (Tamang, Thakali) have a lexical tone although tones are often related to breathiness, voicing and stress features. Lexical pitch is entirely non-contrastive for Newari and some Tibetan dialects.

Syllabicity: A vast majority of words in T-B languages are monosyllabic, a situation which resulted in the loss of initial consonant clusters and a system of affixes. This is true of contemporary Newari, but interestingly, Dolkhali Newari dialect spoken in Eastern Nepal shows several retentions in morphology (syllable-final consonants and older forms of verbal suffixes) and appears to be rather important for comparative studies.

Affixation: Most T-B languages have or had at one time a system of prefixes and suffixes attached to stem words. Benedict (1972: 96) characterized complex affixation as 'morphology of antiquity', and several Proto-T-B prefixes have been reconstructed: *s- (causative), *m- (intransitive), *b-, *d-, *g-, *r- and others in certain language divisions. In Newari, the alternation of voiced and voiceless initial consonant in 'suppletive causatives' (dane/thane; gyaye/khyaye) provide evidence of the loss of Proto-T-B prefix *s-. The same is true of suffixes where Proto- *s- (used with several types of nouns and verbs), *-t and *-n have been posited for several T-B languages.

Vowel Alternations: The dominant pattern of verb morphology in T-B center on the vowel alternations around the stem. This is true of Lhasa Tibetan where verbs are differentiated in part by vowel alternations (tan ki jo

'send', tan ki_ji 'shall send'), and in Newari the vowel changes involved in inflectional morphemes are predictable for all classes of verbs (won-a 'I went', won-a 'He went', won-e 'I will go', won-i 'He will go'). Other factors like accent or *sandhi* (influence of surrounding sound) have also been suggested as possible reasons for the T-B ablaut systems.

Word Classes: Some T-B languages appear not to make a clear distinction between verbs and nouns, or adjectives used as verbs. The main verb, always placed after all nouns, is marked for aspect and tense, while nominals can be pre-modified or post-modified depending on their relationship to verbs. In some languages (Newari, Gurung) nominals are marked for their function (ergative construction) but not marked as such in the verb. The notion of 'subject' and transitivity of verbs in ergative languages can best be seen as 'agent-goal' rather than a 'subject-object' system.

Noun Classifiers: In a number of modern T-B languages, nouns can be counted or modified by the use of classifiers in constructions such as 'one person man', 'one object book', 'one structure house', and so on. This phenomenon has received some attention in Newari, and is apparently absent in Tibetan but classifiers are not exclusively Sino-Tibetan; they exist also in Miao-Yao, Tai, Austric, and Japanese.

Word Order: The most common T-B word order is subject-object-verb, and modified-modifier, but this is not uniform within the family. In Newari, modifiers can take various forms (demonstrative, quantifier, possessive, phrase or single-word adjective) and usually precede the head noun. Verbal modifiers follow the main verb in both Tibetan and Newari. Newari verbs can also occur in a series (concatenation) with irreversible order (won-a: ka-ya hati 'go, take, come' to mean 'bring').

Writing Systems: The use of writing systems in T-B seems to be very restricted. Newari is one of four T-B languages with an old written tradition (the other three being Tibetan, Burmese and Manipuri) and the only member of the Himalayan group with such a tradition. The Tibetan and Newari scripts (Ranjana, Pracalit, Bhujimol) are variations of the Brahmi (Devanagari) alphabet of northern India which has its origin in the *Kutila* writing system invented in the 7th century A.D.

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