

The Kachin Languages as Members of a Linguistic Area

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Abstract

The northern part of Myanmar is inhabited by several ethnic groups subsumed under the label “Kachin”. The Kachin share many cultural traits, such as a common history, mythology, religion (Christianity), traditions and rituals, as well as a cross-cutting clan system on which their exogamous marriage system is based. In addition to the lingua franca Jinghpaw, each of these groups speak their own language, e.g. Zaiwa, Lhaoovo, Lacid, Ngochang, Rawang, and Lisu, which belong to different branches of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Despite not all of them being closely related to each other, they have certain linguistic traits in common that do not derive from their common proto-language and cannot be explained by chance either. That is, these traits must have spread through the languages by long-lasting, intensive cultural and linguistic contact between them.

In this talk I will present phonological, lexical, semantic, and morphosyntactic evidence for this convergence between the languages of the Kachin, and show that these features are mostly absent from the closely related languages outside of the Kachin sphere, as well as from the unrelated non-Kachin languages Shan and Khamti, spoken in the same region. I furthermore propose a distinction between “Core Kachin” and “Peripheral Kachin” languages, the latter of which do not seem to participate as much in this convergence, pointing to a much shallower intensity and/or time-depth of contact on their side.

From this, I conclude that the languages of the Kachin are members of a linguistic area defined not by the geographic region, but mainly by the participation in the same sociocultural multi-ethnic group.