Languages of Arunachal Pradesh: more Amazonia than the British Isles?"

13th April, 2011

BERNER LINGUISTISCHE ZIRKEL

Roger Blench

Kay Williamson Educational Foundation
An early view of Arunachal Pradesh

- The preceding remarks will have shown there is considerable difference between the North Assam dialects... The home of the North Assam tribes may be considered a kind of backwater. The eddies of the various waves of Tibeto-Burman immigration have swept over it and left their stamp on its dialects.

- Konow in Grierson 1909:572
Evidence-based approaches

- Since Konow there has essentially been a repetition of this approach characterised by:
  - The assumption that these languages must be Tibeto-Burman, often because they are typologically similar
  - And that they somehow fit together
  - And that an absence of further data absolves Tibeto-Burman scholars from trying to resolve their classification

- This is highly unsatisfactory. The usual approach (which would certainly be taken in the Amazon) is that languages are considered isolates until proof of their genetic affiliation is offered
Evidence-based approaches

- In reality, there is data on almost all these languages. Not very well transcribed and sometimes hard to lay your hands on
- But no longer..
- New fieldwork in 2011 has resulted in modern data for a number of languages such as Bugun, Mey, Sartang and Milang
- And a complete collection of locally published descriptions is now in Europe and being scanned
EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES

- The basic tool is a comparative wordlist, in a spreadsheet-like format of all significant distinct speech forms in Arunachal Pradesh, summarising Tani languages with proto-Tani forms.
- These are compared with purported PTB forms. This is something of a problem in itself, since the only PTB forms available are those of Matisoff (2003) which are manifestly Lolo-Burmese, Tibetic and Sinitic.
- Using these as a proxy what we see is a complete absence of any regular relationship; scattered loanwords (of course) but surprisingly few of those for some languages like Bugun.
- And a remarkably weak relationship between these languages.
Evidence-based approaches

- All of this leads to only one conclusion; the so-called North Assam languages are extremely diverse and not necessarily Tibeto-Burman.
- And that typological and lexical similarities are just that; borrowing (probably in many directions).
- Given this, what can be said about language relationships?
- The following slides present a few examples of new hypotheses that are being developed.
Koro is a purportedly newly discovered language spoken by a small community among the Hruso (=Aka).

This was announced with great hoo-ha by National Geographic, despite it already being listed in the Ethnologue.

Indeed, the fact that the Koro have been making music videos, does rather suggest they don’t necessarily see themselves as ‘unknown’

Be that as it may, Koro does indeed bear virtually no resemblance to Hruso.

But it does share lexicon with another language, Milang, which is spoken quite some distance away, northeast of Pasighat, and which is usually classified as Tani.

Together with Mark Post and Yankee Modi (a native speaker) we have compiled a table of shared lexemes and grammatical morphemes which are not common Tani.
We therefore propose there was formerly a language phylum, tentatively christened ‘Siangic’ which was distributed across this region.

The expansion of the Tani would have split apart the two groups and Taniised Milang.

Even so, borrowings from Siangic into proto-Tani may well explain some of its deviant lexicon.

Further investigation of Milang has revealed many more features which do not resemble Tani, including a set of breathy vowels.

Now we need deeper data on Koro.
How to discover an unknown language
Museum presentation of Arunachal Pradesh ethnography
The Mey cluster

- One of the problematic languages of Arunachal Pradesh is known in the literature as Sherdukpen, spoken in the west along the road to Tawang.
- Sherdukpen is a composite name given by outsiders, which covers the language spoken in Rupa and Shergaon.
- The people and language are correctly known as Mey.
- There is, however, another language spoken not far away, known to its speakers as Sartang.
- This is clearly also a relative of Mey (although speakers professed to be ignorant of the relationship).
- Even more remarkable are the villages of Chug and Lish, off the Dirang-Tawang road.
- These are very much under the influence of Tawang and their language and people have been classified as Monpa.
- But they are also Mey…
Bugun

- Not far from the Mey live the Bugun, a single group living in about eight villages with about 1500 speakers
- Bugun is also quite distinctive; nonetheless it shares quite a number of lexemes with the May cluster
- However, the relationship is not very regular
- Interviews suggested that in former times, there was a patron-client relationship between Mey and Bugun and Bugun has to speak Mey to their masters
- So it is conceivable that the similarities are due to borrowing
- Or both, in other words they are related, but there has also been recent borrowing, which is my current hypothesis
Under both hypotheses, Mey and Bugun show very little in the way of a relationship with PTB. It is therefore proposed to establish a distinct language phylum with the name Kamengic, which would bring these languages together.
Another language which is problematic is Puroik, a language spoken by former hunter-gatherers/vegeculturalists, who live from xx to the Chinese borderlands.

Indeed the first (and only extensive) monograph on the language is in Chinese.

This monograph has a highly problematic account of the phonology (especially the tone) and lexicon (or else the language is quite different).

Puroik is also very hard to classify, Sun (1993: fn. 14) says; ‘Sulung is a newly discovered distinct Tibeto-Burman language showing remarkable similarities to Bugun, another obscure Tibeto-Burman language spoken to the west of the Sulung country.’
This is a gross exaggeration; but it does have some common lexicon with Kamengic as a whole, though again the relationship is not very regular.

If Puroik is genuinely related this would then be greater Kamengic; but further research is needed to establish such a genetic grouping.
Sartang shaman at Rahung village
What type of language is Meyor?

- The Meyor language, also known as Zakhring, is spoken in Anjaw District, Walong and Kibithoo circles, Arunachal Pradesh. In 2001 there were some 376 speakers scattered in fifteen villages.
- The only published source on the language is Landi (2005).
- The core data shows that it is related to the Tibetic type languages spoken in Arunachal Pradesh, such as Memba and Monpa. These languages have a relatively high proportion of Tibeto-Burman roots.
- However, Meyor appears to have a significant number of lexical similarities to Miju, an isolate spoken nearby.
Landi argues there are also similarities with Singpho, but these are either lookalikes or common Tibeto-Burman inheritance.

So Meyor appears to be Tibetic but has been influenced by Miju in the recent past.
Muddles over Monpa

- ‘Monpa’ is essentially a cultural classification which has been confused with a linguistic grouping.
- Chug and Lish Monpa have proven to be Mey.
- Lists of Dirang and Tawang Monpa turn out to be very different.
- The closest relative of Dirang appears to be Tshangla known as Sharchhopkha in Bhutan which also corresponds to Cangluo spoken SE Tibet.
- The Monpa of Kalaktang, spoken in West Kameng district isolated from the other Monpa appears to be similar to Dirang with some Mey substrate effects.
- Tawang is still not properly classified, although its nearest relatives appear to be the ‘Memba’ languages spoken in NE Arunachal Pradesh.
- But is certainly ‘greater Tibetic’
Old Dirang
What else?

- Languages which continue to be hard to classify include;
- Hruso may form a cluster with a language called Levai spoken on the Tibetan borderlands but is potentially an isolate
- Miju
- Miji
- Mishmic, a small cluster consisting of Idu and Digaru

However;
- Turung is part of the Jingpho group
- Tangsa, Wancho, Nocte are ‘Naga’ type languages
- Tani may include more unexpected substrate languages like Milang. The source of much deviant lexicon in Tani is unknown
Where next?

- The whole of Northeast India remains a problematic area and the other highly debatable grouping are the many languages that fall under the label ‘Naga’.

- Unlike Arunachal Pradesh, there is no one source for linguistic information.

- There are locally published dictionaries and a number of theses at NEHU, Shillong and elsewhere.

- But there seem to be languages noted on lists and maps for which no data is available at all.

- The first task is to try and track down what has been done; and then to try and fill in the blanks.

- Not all of these areas are accessible, but once you get in, research is possible.
Once you stop accepting received and repeated wisdom the languages of NE India simply do not resemble Tibeto-Burman or one another.

As a consequence, we have to regard this region not as some sort of backwater, but rather as a major region of diversity in global terms.

Which makes it more resemble the Amazon, or NE Asia or Arnhem Land rather than any region of relative uniformity.

And for this reason it deserves serious attention by descriptive and historical linguists.

But also suggests we should not keep recycling the same old statements without evidence.
Adi women singing and Kuki flute-playing
THANKS

To Kay Williamson Educational Foundation for supporting my fieldwork

To Mark Post and Yankee Modi for assistance in the field

To Nyima and Karma Dorje in Rupa for hospitality

To the Milang and Bugun communities