

himalayan linguistics

A free refereed web journal and archive devoted to the study of the
languages of the Himalayas

Himalayan Linguistics

Introduction to Issues in South Central (Kuki-Chin) Linguistics

David A. Peterson

Dartmouth College

ABSTRACT

This piece briefly introduces this special issue devoted to the investigation of languages of the South Central (Kuki-Chin) subgroup of Tibeto-Burman. The motivations for the special issue and the contents of the papers are reviewed. Terminological, transcription, and interlinear gloss conventions followed in the papers are discussed. The subgrouping schema assumed in a number of the papers is presented in detail.

KEYWORDS

Kuki-Chin, South Central, Tibeto-Burman, Trans-Himalayan, comparative grammar

This is a contribution from *Himalayan Linguistics*, Vol. 22(1): 1-4

ISSN 1544-7502

© 2023. All rights reserved.

This Portable Document Format (PDF) file may not be altered in any way.

Tables of contents, abstracts, and submission guidelines are available at
escholarship.org/uc/himalayanlinguistics

Introduction to Issues in South Central (Kuki-Chin) Linguistics

David A. Peterson
Dartmouth College

1 Introduction

A well-established and important subgroup of Tibeto-Burman, the South Central (Kuki-Chin) languages are spoken at the crossroads of India, Burma, and Bangladesh.

Most of the papers included in this issue were prepared in their original forms for the *Workshop on Issues in Kuki-Chin Linguistics* held in conjunction with the *46th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics*, which met at Dartmouth College in August of 2013. The workshop consisted of invited papers on specific topics in Kuki-Chin linguistics. Authors were asked to prepare papers which would contribute to a kind of manual for doing research with Kuki-Chin languages. In addition to the papers included here, there were also talks on verbal concatenation, presented by Lalnunthangi Chhangte, and on incorporation, broadly understood, by K. V. Subbarao. James Matisoff was also kind enough to open the workshop with an assessment of the state of Kuki-Chin scholarship at the time.

A number of years have passed since the workshop; the papers included here have been thoroughly rethought and revised in order to include more recent data. With the possible exception of a number of Indian dissertations which have first become available just in the last few years, the papers strive to be exhaustive in terms of their coverage of the existing literature on South Central.

2 Intended audience

We hope that this collection will be especially useful for linguists beginning their research with South Central languages. The papers are written to be reasonably user-friendly and to direct readers to worthwhile data and literature on specific issues that these languages present. Besides beginners in the field, we believe the papers will also be useful to specialists in other branches of Tibeto-Burman to gain familiarity with the structures and theoretical issues which South Central languages typically pose.

3 Organization of the issue

The issue begins with two papers on phonology, and one devoted to orthography development. The first is a thorough treatment of segmental phonological issues in the subgroup by Mortensen. Most if not all South Central languages make lexical and grammatical use of tone, as well, so Mortensen's paper is followed by a similarly extensive survey of tonal phenomena by Lotven. The first section of the issue is rounded out by more practical considerations of phonological and related phenomena in a case study of orthography development for Lamkang by Chelliah, Garton, Khular, and Khullar.

The second section focusses on morphosyntax. It begins with a survey of issues concerning lexicon by Van Bik, which among other things, clarifies the typical array of word classes in South Central languages. Peterson and Baclawski's contributions focus on issues of nominal case marking and deictic elements, respectively. The remaining papers primarily treat aspects of verbal morphosyntax, which in South Central languages is quite complex. Bedell, Mang, Siang Nawl, and Suantak examine the critical phenomenon of verbal stem alternation in detail. DeLancey provides an authoritative survey of the equally important phenomenon of participant marking (agreement) in the subgroup. Finally, So-Hartmann and Peterson examine what are usually relatively unproductive prefixal valence-affecting markers widely attested in the different South Central branches.

4 Terminological issues

At the end of the 2013 workshop, some time was devoted to discussion of terminological issues in Kuki-Chin linguistics. This conversation was dominated by the name that we use for the subgroup itself. Both pieces of the traditional name *Kuki-Chin* are in fact exonyms (although arguably the word Chin derives from a Southeastern—see below—word for 'person'). The *Kuki* part is particularly problematic for groups who ethno-culturally prefer to identify as *Naga*. While *Zo* or some form of it would seem like a natural choice to use for the family, not all languages have evidence of this root. Thus, arguments were provided, especially by Scott DeLancey, for using a purely geographic term to designate the subgroup.

While we failed to reach consensus at the workshop, since that time, many specialists in Kuki-Chin have decided to adopt the term suggested by DeLancey, *South Central*, to refer to the subgroup. Our use of this term does not necessarily imply acceptance of current proposals for a higher-level Central subgroup of Tibeto-Burman, although for at least some of us it suggests we view it as likely that South Central languages will form a part of something that eventually may be demonstrated as a Central Tibeto-Burman group.

5 Subgrouping

Working out the subgrouping of South Central is challenging given the still limited data available for many of the languages. A number of the papers in this issue assume the approximate subgrouping suggested by Peterson (2017) for convenience, so it is worth presenting it briefly here. Figure 1 gives the hypothetical subgrouping.

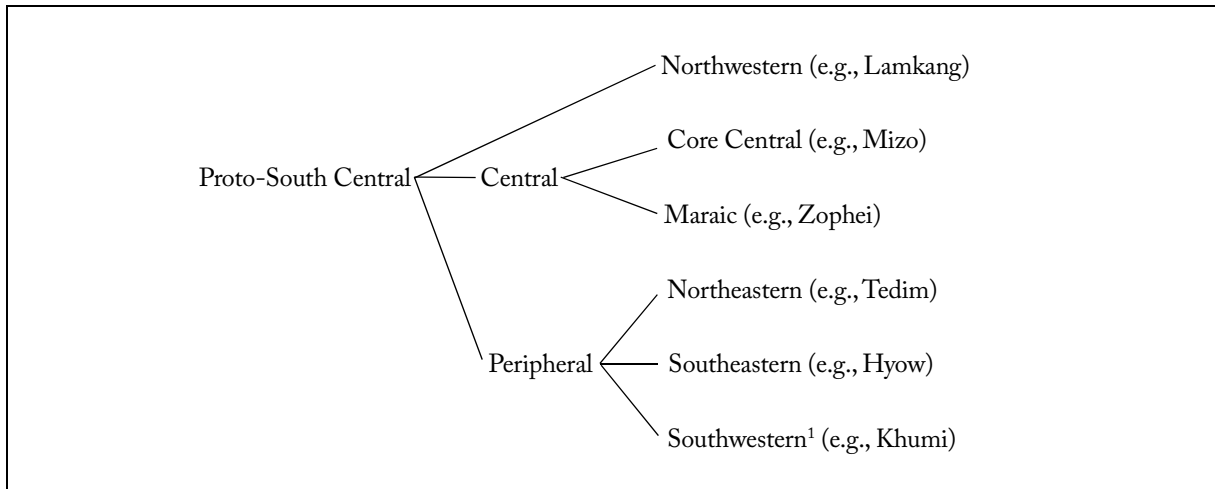


Figure 1. Hypothetical subgrouping for South Central (Peterson 2017)

While this subgrouping speculates that there may be reason to distinguish between Peripheral and Central subgroups, much of the evidence for this division is either non-probative or problematic, so in general, we can only be confident in most of the lower levels of the subgroup: Northeastern, Southeastern, Southwestern, Core Central, and Maraic. The Maraic languages appear likely to be most closely affiliated with the Central languages, although similarity due to language contact cannot be definitively ruled out at present. *Northwestern* is a term which characterizes languages which earlier literature referred to with the highly problematic term *Old Kuki*. While there are clear relationships between some of the Northwestern languages, forming identifiable clusters within Northwestern, it is possible that some of the languages may be more closely allied with the Central languages. It is also unclear at this point that the remaining languages even form a unified subgroup in the first place.

6 Orthographies/transcriptions, interlinear glossing conventions

In contrast to usual *Himalayan Linguistics* practice, there have been no attempts to standardize the transcription used in examples to IPA, or in terms of their interlinear glossing conventions. Especially for older sources, it may be difficult to determine the exact phonetic value of particular graphemes, and older sources generally are not glossed in a careful manner. For this reason, the glossing of examples from older sources should be taken as educated guesses, but not as definitive.

7 Acknowledgments

The guest editor would like to thank the contributors for their assistance in putting the issue together, and for their patience, as it took much longer to complete than was initially anticipated. Thank you also to several external reviewers who provided extremely useful feedback to the

¹ Note that Peterson (2017) originally called the Southwestern subgroup *Khomic*, but *Southwestern* is a more apt characterization of it since it avoids the appearance that the name is based on a single representative language.

contributors. The National Science Foundation provided generous funds for the initial workshop (#BCS-1322400 to Dartmouth College). I would also like to express my thanks to the previous chief editor of *Himalayan Linguistics*, Kristine Hildebrandt, for her tireless advice and support. To co-editor You-Jing Lin and her editorial support staff (especially Jingyao Zheng) we express our sincere gratitude for seeing the volume through to its completion. Thank you also to Lucas James for some early assistance on the formatting of the manuscripts, and to Kenneth Van Bik and Muhammad Zakaria for extensive consultation on specific data questions.

8 Dedication

Tragically, two of our contributors passed away before the volume could reach its conclusion, Helga So-Hartmann and George Bedell. The substantial and lasting contributions of these two scholars to the investigation of South Central can never be overlooked by anyone who works with these languages. Helga and George have been, and will continue to be, outstanding role-models for us all as researchers and collaborators. With our deepest respect and affection we dedicate this issue to their enduring memory.

REFERENCES

Peterson, David A. 2017. "On Kuki-Chin subgrouping". In: Ding, Picus S.; and Pelkey, Jamin (eds.), *Sociohistorical linguistics in Southeast Asia: New horizons for Tibeto-Burman studies in honor of David Bradley*, 189-209. Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004350519_012

David A. Peterson
David.A.Peterson@dartmouth.edu