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A Tale of Two Khamtis: Language Classification in Southwestern Tai

Khamti [kht], a language of the Southwestern Tai (SWTai) branch of the Tai-Kadai family, has two primary speaker bases: in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India, with an estimated 5,000 speakers, and across the Myanmar (Burma) border to the southeast, in Sagaing Region and Kachin State, with an estimated 8,000 speakers (Lewis 2014). Previous scholarship has largely treated these as variants of the same language, despite little comparative work between the two and virtually no data from Burmese Khamti in the literature at all.

Linguists have long noted that “in the field of comparative Tai one of the problems that linguists have not fully come to grips with is the problem of classification” (Chamberlain 1975). Several theories of the internal structure of SWTai have been advanced, but scholars have failed to come to any consensus. Khamti, while uncontroversially classified as a member of SWTai, has been a frequent point of disagreement: Chamberlain (1975) and Diller (2008) group it together with varieties of Shan, while Robinson (1994) and Edmondson and Solnit (1997) argue for Shan and Khamti in separate sub-branches of SWTai.

The lack of consensus on the alignment of Khamti is understandable. Language data from Myanmar has long been difficult to come by; until the relaxing of EU and US economic sanctions in 2012-13, the country was unavailable to western investment and largely inaccessible to foreigners outside of limited tourist destinations. The area where Khamti is spoken, at the northern edge of the country, has extremely limited infrastructure for access, and what exists is very recent, including a single-room airport featuring weekly flights that opened in 2011. As Myanmar continues to open up, increasing interest in language documentation in Myanmar will begin to fill this gap in our empirical knowledge of Southeast Asian linguistics.

This paper will present preliminary findings from language documentation fieldwork conducted in Khamti District, Myanmar, during the summer of 2014, as well as some of the implications for a more confident classification of Khamti within SWTai.

Among the important findings are a significantly different tonal system, with just four lexical tonemes instead of the five previously described for Khamti. Historical analysis using the Gedney tone box system (1972) indicates a strikingly different system of historical tonal splits, as seen in Tables 1 and 2.

Proto phonology	Proto tone				
	A	B	C	DS	DL
voiceless w/ frication	1	6	2	6	
voiceless unaspirated	4				
glottalized		2	2		
voiced					

Table 1. Tone splits, Burmese Khamti (author, 2014) – Khamti Township, Myanmar

Proto phonology	Proto tone				
	A	B	C	DS	DL
voiceless w/ frication	4				
voiceless unaspirated	1	4	5	4	
glottalized					
voiced	3	1	2	1	

Table 2. Tone splits, Indian Khamti (Weidert 1977) – Arunachal Pradesh, India

Systematic tonal splits have always been a core element of Tai historical language classification and reconstruction (e.g. Brown 1965, Li 1977), and while basic historical analysis clearly indicates that Khamti of India and Myanmar share a recent common ancestor, they are clearly not as close as previously assumed. Intriguingly, an analysis made by Morey (2005) of an 1849 sketch grammar of Khamti, written by a British scholar in India, indicates a tonal system that is more similar to Khamti of modern Myanmar than of modern India.

While additional documentation is needed in Myanmar to draw firm conclusions, these results help us move closer to a better understanding of both the present language situation in Myanmar, and of historical language classification within Southwestern Tai.

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