

THE TIBETO-BURMAN GROUP OF LANGUAGES, AND ITS PIONEERS

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In an age in which centenaries are increasingly celebrated, it must be a source of sorrow to the student of Tibetan and allied languages that the centenary of the first use of the term *Tibeto-Burman* (and *Burma-Tibetan*), for the sizable and important group of related languages now known by this name, went entirely uncommemorated. The two terms *Tibeto-Burman* and *Burma-Tibetan* seem to have had their origin a hundred and seventeen years ago, in a series of articles by J.R. Logan in *Journal of the Indian Archipelago* for the year 1853, one of which is entitled 'General characteristics of the Burma-Tibetan, Gangetic, and Dravidian languages' (chapter IV, p. 186).

In an earlier chapter of the same volume Logan considered the Tibeto-Burman group of languages in relation to the Dravidian, and at first came to the conclusion that 'the non-Arian languages of India, from their Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman members on the North East to the Tamil in the extreme south, have many features in common', but qualified this statement, a little further down the page, with the remark (with which not all of us will agree): 'the phonology of the south is advanced, plastic and energetic, while that of the Tibeto-Burman languages has hardly wakened into life and motion'.

Whatever the relative merits of the Dravidian and the Tibeto-Burman groups of languages may be as regards plasticity and energy, there is no denying that, in associating Tibetan with Burmese, or even, for that matter, in distinguishing them as a group from Tamil and other Dravidian languages, Logan's observations show remarkable insight, especially when one remembers how restricted, in 1853, his opportunities were for studying Tibeto-Burman languages, whether through published material or from observation at first hand.¹ He was writing at the time of the Second Burma War (1852-3); his source material for Burmese was limited to 'the grammars of Judson and Latter' (p. 53);² there was still less contact with Tibet and Tibetan-speakers: Darjeeling had, it is true, been 'ceded' to the East India Company eighteen years earlier,³ but foreigners did not lightly travel in Sikkim, as Sir Joseph Hooker, the botanist, had discovered four years earlier;⁴ and another twelve years were to pass before Sir Ashley Eden's escape from Bhutan was to precipitate the Bhutan War. Only through Kashmir, occupied,

with British support, by the Dogra, Rajah Gulab Singh, in 1846, was there access, of a sort, to the Tibetan-speaking populations of Baltistan and Ladakh. Logan tells us (p. 106) that he had to rely, for published material on Tibetan, on Csoma de Koros's Tibetan grammar, of 1834, and Abel Remusat's *Recherches sur les langues tartares*.⁵

It is another twenty-five years before I again find the term *Tibeto-Burman* in a publication. This next occurrence is in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* for the year 1878: and here it is important to remember, in establishing the climate of opinion of the time, that another seven years were to elapse before the Third Burma War resulted in the overthrow of the kingdom of Ava, and completed the British conquest of the territory now known as the Union of Burma, another twenty-six years before Younghusband's troops entered Lhasa, and, last but not least, three years and twenty-four years, respectively, before the publication of Jaschke's and Das's Tibetan dictionaries.⁶ E.L. Brandreth writes (p. 8): 'the chief group we then come to is what has been called the Tibeto-Burman from the two principal languages included in it - an immense group - the boundaries of which in the present state of our knowledge are very doubtful'.⁷ Later in the same issue of the *Journal* Captain C.J.F.S. Forbes, of the Burmese Civil Commission, writes, somewhat disparagingly: 'the term "Tibeto-Burman" has latterly crept into use as a convenient designation of a very large family of languages which appear more or less to approximate to each other'.⁸

As a student of linguistics I too am obliged to recognize that there are linguistic grounds for dissatisfaction with the term *Tibeto-Burman*. This is because the reasons for adopting it were not so linguistic as politico-cultural: Burmese and Tibetan were the two national languages of the group, with great literary prestige. From a linguistic point of view it would have been better to name the group from the languages at its extremes, from its two most diverse members, if, of course, it had been possible to establish which those languages were. This was not, however, even attempted; for Logan himself writes: 'Tibetan, in many respects, takes a place between the Burman and the more advanced postpositional languages'.⁹

Despite Forbes's strictures the term *Tibeto-Burman* was sufficiently well established by 1909 to give its name to Part III of the *Linguistic Survey of India*; and it is a matter of pride to me that I should, even though indirectly, be associated with that volume, through the scholarship of David Macdonald, my wife's grandfather, who contributed to the chapter on Lepcha as well as himself contributing to the chapter on Sikkimese Tibetan, and helping Colonel Waddell with a contribution to the chapter on central Tibetan.¹⁰

1. Even in the jet age, however, students of Tibeto-Burman languages are in some respects no better off than Logan: Burma is all but closed to scholars from America and the non-Communist countries of Europe; the present writer was refused permission by the Government of Pakistan to study the Balti dialect of Tibetan (of great interest, as being in many respects the nearest in pronunciation to Tibetan spelling) in their province of Baltistan; and who would waste time and energy in applying to the Chinese Government for permission to study Tibetan in Tibet?

2. A Judson, *A dictionary, Burmese and English*, Maulmain, 1852, in which the *Gram mar* is contained as an appendix; Thomas Latter, *A grammar of the language of Burmah*, Calcutta, London, 1845.

3. *Bergai District Gazetteers, Darjeeling* (Alipore, 1947), pp. 37-8; but for a different view, see Hope Namgyal, Gyalmo of Sikkim, 'The Sikkimese theory of land-holding and the Darjeeling grant', *Bulletin of Tibetology*, III, 2 (Gangtok, July, 1966) pp. 47-59.

4. Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, *Himalayan Journals*, 1854, chapters XXV-XXVI.

5. A. Csoma-de Koros, *Grammar of the Tibetan language*, Calcutta, 1834; Abel Remusat. *Rec. erches sur les langues tartares*, Paris, 1820.

6. H.A. Jaschke, *A Tibetan-English dictionary*, London, 1881; Sarat Chandra Das, Rai Bahadur, C.I.E., *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, Calcutta, 1902.

7. *JRAS*, X (1878), p. 8.

8. 'On Tibeto-Burman languages', *JRAS*, X (1878), p. 210.

9. *Op. cit.*, p. 106.

10. *Linguistic Survey of India*, part III, Calcutta, 1909.