The Shan of northern Myanmar speak a language of the Tai-Kadai family found from southern China, across Mainland Southeast Asia, through northern Myanmar and into Northeast India. Names connected with the Shan give us some insight into the historical range and connections between speakers of Shan and its relatives. ‘Shan’ itself is a Burmese name related to the old name for Thailand, ‘Tai’, and the second syllable in the name Assam of Northeast India and the ‘Ahom’, a Tai-speaking people after whom Assam is ultimately named. The Shans call themselves ‘Tai’, as do speakers of many related languages.

AS A LINGUISTIC AND HISTORICAL TERM, ‘Tai’ refers to a branch of the Tai-Kadai family, while ‘Thai’ refers specifically to the language of Thailand. Widespread as the Tai-Kadai family is, only two languages have official status as national languages: Thai in Thailand and Lao in Laos. Depending on the definition, many peoples, languages and scripts may fall under the term ‘Shan’, but here I just consider the largest language and script of Burma. Today Shan is a medium of instruction in formal and monastic education, although there is pressure on the central government to change its decades-old policy of only allowing Burmese to be used in government schools. Shan has been a literary medium for a few centuries, for both religious and secular texts. There are a few different writing systems that have been used for Shan, but the most widespread has been in use for centuries, although it was modified to represent all the sounds of the language only in the late 1960s. Today a substantial number of books and journals are published regularly in Shan, together with online magazines and newspapers.

Before being firmly attached to the Burmese state through British colonial policies, Shan speakers in the language’s many varieties tended to live in the valleys of the uplands throughout northern Myanmar (what is now Shan State, parts of Kachin State, and parts of Sagaing and Magwe Regions), where they tended to be at the top of the local sociolinguistic hierarchy. The traces of Shan on other languages, and their traces of influence on Shan, tell us about the history of relations between these groups, and something about their relative positions in terms of prestige and hierarchy. Relatedly, we find that even today, in the age of ethnicity and nationalist logic, not just speakers of Tai languages, but sometimes even speakers of Austroasiatic languages consider themselves ‘Tai’ or ‘Shan’. The Tai Loi, for example, consider themselves Shan but still speak their Austroasiatic language at home. Situations like these give us insights into the process of language-spread and historical identity formation not only in Myanmar, but places like Laos and Vietnam where similar conditions exist.

Forging an ethnicity through language and history

Today many Shans understand themselves, and their position in relation to their neighbors, through ideas that developed during the nineteenth century. At that time, Siamese intellectuals created a narrative of the origins of the Thai people in response to expanding European colonialism in Southeast Asia. They based this account mainly on western ideas and sources, including the travelogues of European missionaries and traders. Some traced the history of the Thai and Tai peoples back to Central Asia, from where the Tai migrated into Sichuan and Yunnan, where they established the Nanzhao (Yan Chao) kingdom in the eighth and ninth centuries AD. When Mongol troops invaded in the twelfth century, the Tai were pushed further into the Southeast Asian mainland, where they split and became the Shan, the Lao, and Thai, some with their own kingdoms.

This narrative lacks historical and linguistic evidence to support it, and in fact there is much evidence contradicting it. Recent scholarship has revised the dates of the Nanzhao kingdom and has shown that the main body of people spoke a Tibeto-Burman language. Nevertheless, this narrative remains the standard historiography in Thailand, and has proven successful in building national pride both among the Thais and among speakers of related languages. Thailand’s Tai-speaking neighbors have a complex relationship with Thailand, but nevertheless see Thai ideas as model.

Until the final Anglo-Burmese war in 1855, the Shans had lived in small principalities under the influence of the Siamese court, China, and sometimes other powerful neighbors. The British allowed these principalities to retain their traditional leaders (the Sao pha, lords of the day) (sawbae in Burmese), a privilege they kept during the first decade after independence in 1948 (Supposedly fearing the disintegration of the country, the Ne Win government finally abolished sawbae rule in the 1960s). With increasing Burmese domination, many Shan resisted and resented first the close association with Burma and thereafter direct Burmese rule. Shan elites sought to write a Shan history independent of Burma, Burmese institutions, or if possible Burmese connections. Ready-made narratives from the neighboring Thai were useful in this process. No doubt they saw being part of a larger Tai nation as preferable to being part of a Burman-led Burmese nation.

Shan in relation to other languages: Shan as a donor

Palaung is a donor language in the Shan dialects, including everyday vocabulary. As other authors in this Focus have noted, the Shan vocabulary also shows up in languages outside of the Shan-speaking areas, such as Palaung and Pa-O, show the historical dominance of Shan. Shan, speaking generally, have a direct influence on the outcomes of language contact. Languages in a lower position in the language hierarchy generally replicate the words (and patterns (grammar and syntax) of languages in a higher position. In the Palaung and Pa-O languages, even numerous words for everyday objects and activities come from Shan.

The exact phonetic shape of Shan loanwords in these languages tells us something of the history and timing of words that entered the language. We know that a wave of sound changes swept through many of the languages of Southeast Asia, perhaps beginning as early as the thirteenth century. One aspect was that such voiced initials sounds as /g b d z j/ became voiceless (k t c s f). Shan has undergone this change, but Hain Long (Shwe) Palaung has not. The fact that some Shan loanwords in Hain Long preserve the old sounds suggests that they entered the language quite early on. The Hain Long word jam [follow] apparently reflects an earlier Shan pronunciation *gum, now cin in modern Shan. Other loans, however, are more similar to modern Shan, suggesting more recent borrowings. For example, Palung po [be able], is nearly identical to modern Shan pe [win, able], which comes from a Tai root, ‘be’! Another interesting example is the Palaung word ruk, meaning ‘arrive’, which in modern Shan is ruk. We know that the sound /h/ has changed to /j/ in languages like Shan and Lao (although the sound is preserved in Thai), and so this loan must date from before that sound shift happened.

Shan loanwords also show up in languages outside of the present-day Shan-speaking areas, suggesting the power of the language to reach beyond where its speakers are, or perhaps a wider sphere of influence in the past. In Jinghpaw, for example, Shan loans are found throughout the language, including everyday vocabulary. As other authors in this Focus have noted, the Jinghpaw language itself is a dominant Tibeto-Burman language in Kachin State and functions as lingua franca. The large number of Shan loans, together with the absence of Jinghpaw loans in Shan, show that Shan was dominant, over Jinghpaw at least at some point in the past, even in areas where Shan has long been in contact. In Palaung, Shan loans into Palaung form layers of borrowing, each involving combinations of the two. In the word for ‘coconut’, ready-made narratives from the neighboring Thai were useful in this process. No doubt they saw being part of a larger Tai nation as preferable to being part of a Burman-led Burmese nation.

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In another twist, some Burmese words have entered Jinghpaw through Shan. Many of these words are older Burmese pronunciations, still preserved in Burmese spelling. One example is jinghpaw panglo [pang], ultimately from an early pronunciation of Burmese parit [pan], written (MAN/AI) (in his Focus article McCormick discusses the role of written Burmese in reconstructing the history of sound changes in Burmese). Another is aungmu [aung], the fact that the word has the same meaning as in Shan, which in turn slightly shifted from the Burmese source, shows that it came through Shan. The Burmese word hāun hmi [hmi] (written KONH MHK/ [merit, good deed] - refers to donations, including pagoda building.

Shan in relation to other languages: Shan as a subordinate language

Throughout its history, Shan has been in greater and lesser contact with Burmese, the language of the powerful lowland courts and the more recent central government in Myanmar. However, politics has never been the sole reason for contact between Shan and Burmese. The Burmese language also helps to clarify court and cultural Buddhism, and so has long been a prestigious language in the region. Taking part in a larger Burmese linguistic and cultural sphere does not necessarily mean that other peoples, like the Shan, who participate in Burmese networks of prestige, agree to current political arrangements.

The linguistic influence of Burmese can be seen on all levels of Shan vocabulary, and can incidentally be found far afield, even in places that today are not, or no longer, connected to the Burmese sphere, such as Meoang Jing in Laos. When comparing Shan to other closely related languages such as Thai Rhein (the language of Keng Tung, closely related to Lanna Thai), some of the sound differences are striking. While all those languages have an ‘imploded’ /dʃ/ and /bʃ/ sound (as McCormick also discusses in this Focus), and the ‘fricative’ /ʃ/, Shan lacks these sounds, just as Burmese does. Shan does have the sound /ʃ/ (written /ʃ/), an ‘aspirated fricative’, which is quite rare throughout the world, but which is also found in Burmese.

Structurally, it seems likely that Shan speakers have replicated certain Burmese patterns. For example, to say ‘in the house’, Shan speakers say b jhin (literally ‘at + in + house’), which is exactly the same (if in a different order) as the Burmese word džhun (literally ‘house + in + at’). The same phrase in Lao (which may be closer than Thai) would simply be b jhin. Today, Burmese influence is clearest in borrowings. Burmese terms abound in all domains of the Shan lexicon. While this was already the case in older classical texts, the number of Burmanisms has increased in modern prose, especially in formal and academic texts. Burmese is the sole language of state education and administration in the country, and the main language of media and commerce, and historically also through religion. A number of Shan political and cultural organizations, including online news magazines, are based in Chiangmai. Many Thai words for scientific and political concepts, which are often already present in Shan, can be easily turned into Shan-like words. Some of these loans may be difficult to detect, especially if they consist of indigenous Tai elements, like Shan kān mœj (political) from Thai kān (power), or tā-kā (light) from Thai tā-kā. Some of these are loans because of the parts exists in Thai but not Shan. More obvious are Thai loans from Khmer, which are otherwise absent in Shan. Structurally, Thai influence on Shan would be much harder to detect because the languages are very closely grammatically.

In Shan areas close to Thai, especially where there are substantial numbers of returned migrant workers, there may be some phonological convergence at work, one case is the reversal of the historical shift of Proto-Tai *ŋ ↔ Shan *ŋ. We find this shift in the Shan word pān [pān] (fire), which many young people now pronounce pān, following the pronunciation of the Thai cognate. As one young Shan migrant worker explained, “it sounds old fashioned to pronounce such words as pān with p. Maybe some old people in the villages still speak like that”.

Positioning Shan

Shan, while an important language of administration and education in the past, has itself long been situated between two powerful languages, Burmese and Thai. Both languages have at different times exercised influence on Shan on different levels and in different domains. The pull towards Burmese has been increasing, with the greater integration and acceptance of the Shan into Myanmar, while Thai remains an attractive alternative that, at least superficially, strengthens a sense of pan-Tai identity. Shan cultural and political elites may be more interested in Thai connections, although common people may take a much more pragmatic approach, adopting whatever languages they see as being useful in their daily lives.

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Above: Map of Tai land (in Shan).
Below: Shan School children. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of the European Commission on Risk.

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