

# Linguistic convergence within the ‘Kachin’ languages

Speakers of the various Kachin languages often use the expression ‘Kachin’ or ‘Kachin language’ when speaking in English or Burmese to refer to the Jinghpaw language. There is, however, no single ‘Kachin’ language. The languages included in the super-ethnic category ‘Kachin’ include Jinghpaw itself, also spoken in China and Northeast India, where it is called ‘Singpho’; Zaiwa (Atsi), Lhaovo (Maru or Langsu), Lashi (Lachik or Lacid), Lisu, Rawang (Krangku), Ngochang (Maingtha or Achang, Ngachang), Pola (Bela), and Hpun. Pola has around 400 speakers and Hpun may no longer be spoken. As the recent work of Sadan,<sup>1</sup> Robinne, and others has shown,<sup>2</sup> the Burmese-language term ‘Kachin’ to refer to these peoples arose fairly recently in the context of colonial Burma. As a category, ‘Kachin’ may make sense most fully in English or Burmese, given that the term was created and given more meaning by successive governments to denote a category of people useful in the British colonial army. The question of how the people who now fall under this category may have understood themselves and their interconnections in the past and how their views have changed, may ultimately be unanswerable.

André Müller

THE RISE of the term ‘Kachin’ throws into relief a perspective on ethnicity as a ‘process’. The ideas and practices of pre-colonial Burmese courts, pre- and post-colonial local elites, soldiers and nationalists, common people, British officials, and local and international scholars have all contributed to the imagining, creation, and maintenance of the Kachin category. Over time, the meaning of Kachin – who is Kachin and who is not – has changed. Jinghpaws may not recognize their non-Christian ancestors as Jinghpaw or Kachin, and not all the people or groups who today fall under the Kachin umbrella necessarily accept their position there. For example, some Lisu speakers, but certainly not all, have associated themselves with the Kachin since the late nineteenth century, when the former moved into the Kachin region. We can think of a ‘core Kachin’ group, or linguistic and socio-cultural complex, which includes Jinghpaw, Zaiwa, Lashi, and Lhaovo, while the others, such as Lisu and Rawang, are ‘peripheral Kachin’.

What, if anything, is the linguistic evidence for any kind of close association between speakers of the language falling under the category ‘Kachin’? All of them are part of the Sino-Tibetan family, but come from several branches of the family.<sup>3</sup> Jinghpaw itself, the largest of the Kachin language and the lingua franca among most of the languages, is often put in the ‘Sal’ group, together with languages never considered Kachin, such as Kadu of Burma and Bodo of Northeast India. On the other hand, Zaiwa, Lashi, Lhaovo, and especially Ngochang are closely related to Burmese.

‘Genetic’ or ‘arboreal’ models of language relatedness helps us understand only so much about the linguistic situation. The classic model is the Indo-European family, the first language family to be established and which serves as a model for other projects of establishing language relatedness. English and Dutch are on the same Germanic ‘branch’ of the tree; we think of them as ‘sister’ languages. But when speakers of various languages are in close, long-term contact and many people speak each other’s languages, aspects of their languages come to resemble each other, even if the

languages are not ‘genetically’ related. We often think about loanwords or ‘matter’ – what most think of when they hear of ‘language contact’ – but also of ‘patterns’, or how words are put together. Following this idea, we can then understand how even though English and Dutch are close ‘sisters’, in some ways the Dutch verb system works more like it does in German and French than in English. Surprisingly, aspects of the English sound system and even its grammar may come from early contact with the Old Brythonic or British language, which survives today as Welsh.

## Connections – linguistic and otherwise

My research is part of a larger project on the ‘areal linguistics’ of what we have called the Greater Burma Zone, which includes modern Myanmar but also parts of Northeast India, Yunnan, northern Thailand, and Bangladesh. A lot of discussion and research has gone into defining ‘linguistic areas’, such as Western Europe, Meso-America, the Balkans, South Asia and even Mainland Southeast Asia. The idea is that when there is widespread multilingualism, no matter what language family the languages come from, or how closely or distantly they are related to each other ‘genetically’, they come to take on each other’s features. In other words, they say things the same way and replicate similar grammatical structures, without necessarily borrowing a lot of ‘words’ or ‘matter’ from each other. Some of these features are shared with other languages spoken in the Greater Burma Zone, for example Burmese or Shan, while others are restricted to the languages spoken by those who identify themselves as Kachin.

Focussing on the Kachin languages, we have found evidence of intense contact between at least some of the languages. My findings are based on our work both with native speakers of various Kachin languages in Burma and an analysis of texts and grammatical descriptions. The linguistic evidence suggests that these languages form a socio-cultural complex within the Greater Burma Zone – a close relationship such as contact between the languages over an extended amount of time. Our findings fit well into the idea of shared social structures, an overarching clan system that determines, for example, who can and cannot marry whom. The clans connect the Kachin groups so that many people identify more with their clan and their connections with other clans than with their native language. The various subgroups share a common Kachin practice: they do not necessarily think of themselves either by the name of their language, nor as ‘Kachin’, but as members of their clan, related to other clans by marriage.

Patterns of exogamy and mutual obligations between the clans play a large role in maintaining contact between the various languages. The various groups share rituals and traditions, most importantly the *mayu-dama* system, exogamous marriage patterns that specify which clan is ‘husband-givers’ and which ‘wife-givers’. This system often fosters cross-linguistic marriage. It is common to find multilingual families with the children speaking two or three Kachin languages. The evidence for a local Kachin linguistic complex comes from a comparison of the structures and words of the languages. Unsurprisingly, the influence of the Jinghpaw on the other languages is pronounced: the other languages have ‘converged’ towards Jinghpaw by replicating Jinghpaw patterns. In the phonology or sound systems of the languages, we find that Zaiwa, whose speakers are in closest contact with Jinghpaw, has a sound system that is more similar to Jinghpaw and less so to its closest relatives, Lhaovo and Lashi. Both Jinghpaw and Zaiwa have approximately the same set of ‘rhymes’, a term used to describe the combinations of vowel

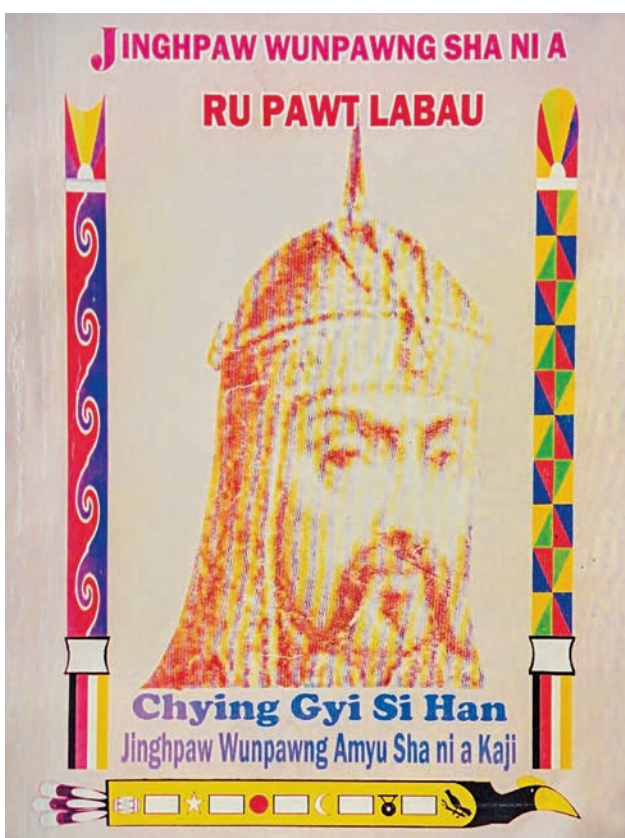
and final consonant that a language allows. Lhaovo and Lashi have a set that is more similar to Burmese, especially written Burmese, which preserves an older stage of the sound system of the language. For example, Lhaovo, Lashi, and Burmese allow diphthongs before final consonants whereas Zaiwa, like Jinghpaw, does not.

In terms of vocabulary or words, there appears to be widespread borrowing from Jinghpaw into the other languages. There is a large number of loanwords ranging from special to everyday vocabulary, even grammatical words. Examples include the word for ‘very’: Jinghpaw *grài*, borrowed into Zaiwa, Lhaovo, and Pola as *kyài*, and into Rawang as *grvy/gây*; another being ‘because’: Jinghpaw *matə̀*, borrowed into Zaiwa as *mətə̀*, and into Lhaovo as *ətə̀*. Anyone who is familiar with the Burmese language will note that the same change of *[r]* to *[y]* appears to have happened in some of these languages, also. Of all the languages in the Kachin complex, Zaiwa appears to have the largest number of Jinghpaw loanwords.

British anthropologist Edmund Leach was the first to point to the close relationship that exists between Shans and various Kachins.<sup>4</sup> The phonetic shape of words can tell us that certain Shan words (which themselves may be Burmese in origin) came to the other Kachin languages through Jinghpaw. One example is the Jinghpaw word for ‘garden’, *sún*, borrowed from Shan *sʰón*. Speakers of Jinghpaw regularly perceive the *o* of Shan (and Burmese) words as more similar to their own Jinghpaw *u* than to their own *o* sound, which is more open, similar to the ‘aw’ in English ‘jaw’. Even though these two vowel sounds in Zaiwa are actually closer to the Shan, Zaiwa nevertheless also has *sún* for the word ‘garden’, suggesting the word came from Jinghpaw and not directly from Shan. According to native speakers and interviews with faculty of the Anthropology Department of Mandalay University conducted in January 2016, Jinghpaw kinship terms also appear in Lhaovo and Rawang.

## This, that and yon – versus that up there and that over there

Research into language contact and convergence is in its infancy, and so it is not surprising that little has been done about the languages of the Greater Burma Zone. I have found some intriguing evidence from the languages under the ‘Kachin’ name which suggests that their demonstratives (words for ‘this’, ‘that’, and ‘yon’). The core Kachin languages (Jinghpaw, Zaiwa, Lhaovo, Lashi and Pola) all share two common traits, which they do not with their closest relatives: ‘relative height distinctions’ in their demonstratives and variation in where in the sentence they place these. In all the core Kachin languages, speakers make the same distinctions in how high an object is from the perspective of the speaker. There are single words meaning ‘that up there’, ‘that over there’, and ‘that down there’. There are one or two words that also mean ‘this here’. Making such distinctions in height is a common feature of many languages spoken in mountainous areas, such as in the Caucasus and the Himalayas. Lhaovo, for example, has only one pronoun referring to something or someone close to the speaker – *tə̀é* – regardless of the height. For objects or people further away, the language distinguishes between *xú* [that up there], *tʰò* [that over there], and *mò* [that down there]. The forms in Lashi, Zaiwa, and Pola (all closely related languages) are very similar and make basically the same distinctions. The system in Jinghpaw, a language from a different part of the Tibeto-Burman family, also makes basically the same distinctions, with the addition of forms distinguishing ‘this near me’ and ‘that near you’.



Left: Kachin Book cover.



Top: Young Lacid Women, Myitkyina, 2016.

Middle: Interview with Rawang Man, 2016.

Below: Lisu Students Taungyi, 2016.

All photographs by author.



Another related grammatical feature that ties the core Kachin languages together is *where* these demonstratives are placed in the sentence. The equivalent of ‘this cat’ and ‘cat this’ are both possible. We find this variability in two short Zaiwa sentences:

*nò hī gè ʔàkóŋ mā.*  
 cow this (topic) colorfulness be.in  
 “This cow is colorful”

*mô póngtín bə-gu? kân-aʔ!*  
 that pen help-pick.up put.in-(imperative)  
 “Pick up that pen down there!”

The peripheral Kachin languages, such as Lisu and Rawang, do not show this kind of variability. Rather, the demonstrative always follows the noun: literally, ‘cat this’. In some of the close relatives of these languages, such as Burmese and Kadu, the demonstrative always comes before the noun (‘this cat’). It is not common in the languages of the world to have variation like this, so finding it here among the core Kachin languages is significant.

**Variable participation in being Kachin**

These two small – yet tantalizing – examples suggest that through close contact, as fostered through the clan and marriage systems, the core Kachin languages have converged in certain aspects of their grammar. In areas of Papua New Guinea and the Amazon, where cross-linguistic marriages have been institutionalized in similar ways as among the Kachin, we find similar patterns of convergence across languages. The evidence of the shared words and systems among the core languages suggest that the contact has been more long-term and closer than the contact with the peripheral languages like Lisu and Rawang. Indeed, the Lisu themselves know that they started moving into the area as late as the nineteenth century. Only a small part of the overall Lisu population participates in the Kachin clan system, and its exogamous marriage tradition. Only some speak Jinghpaw.<sup>6</sup> Among the Rawang, only those in close contact with other Kachins share the kinship and clan system, even though they are linguistically strongly influenced by Jinghpaw, as manifested in a large amount of loanwords in nearly all domains, including grammatical words.

Not only peripheral Kachin groups contest being affiliated with the Jinghpaw, or being part of the Kachin system. In the past decades, each Kachin subgroup has founded its own ‘literature and culture’ committees (the term ‘literature’ in these names follows a Burmese English usage, which we would call ‘literacy’), promoted its own orthography, published primers and Bible translations. The Kachin Baptist Church, with its focus on Jinghpaw, was initially antagonistic to these efforts to create individual literary languages. These subgroup committees usually attempt to ‘purify’ their languages by replacing commonly used Jinghpaw words with newly coined words in a process similar to those in French, Icelandic, or Turkish. In places like northern Shan State where ‘pure’ Jinghpaw speakers are the minority, some subgroup Kachins prefer to speak their mother tongue (be it Lhaovo, Zaiwa, or Lashi) instead of using Jinghpaw as a lingua franca when talking to speakers of other Kachin languages. The closeness of many of these non-Jinghpaw languages facilitates this process, since the level of shared vocabulary among them is high enough to allow people to quickly gain passive fluency in the other languages through exposure. We thus see some evidence among some speakers of separating linguistically from the larger, otherwise more prestigious, language and emphasize their identity as Lhaovo, Lashi, or Zaiwa.

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The actual words for these demonstratives in Lhaovo, Lashi, Pola and Zaiwa are all similar in form, which is not surprising given that the languages are closely related. The forms in Jinghpaw, Anong, and Lisu, all of which make similar height distinctions, are of different shapes, which shows that the words were not merely borrowed.

The evidence from some of the other languages is less clear. Rawang could be called a peripheral Kachin language and is from yet another part of the Tibeto-Burman family. Here we find no distinctions in altitude. But its close relative, Anong, spoken in Yunnan and adjacent Burma, does make height distinctions. Lisu, which some native speakers see as falling under Kachin while others do not, does make altitude distinctions. According to *Ethnologue*, speakers of Anong are shifting to Lisu.<sup>5</sup>

When we consider the systems in closely related languages, we find a rather different picture. Burmese is closely related to Lhaovo, Lashi, Zaiwa, and Pola, yet does not make any height distinctions. Instead, the system focusses only on relative distance: *dí* [this], *ʔèdì* [that], and *hó* [yon] or ‘indeterminate distance’. Kadu is a relative of Jinghpaw, but has a system basically the same as Burmese. As Leach first described, speakers of the Kachin languages have long been in contact with Shan, which as Jenny describes elsewhere in this *Focus*, is a wholly unrelated Tai-Kadai language. The Shan forms closely parallel those of Burmese and Kadu. Even though Shan speakers live at a relatively higher altitude than the Burmese, they are still valley dwellers.



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