THE TIBETO-BURMAN GROUP OF LANGUAGES, AND
ITS PIONEERS

—R. K. SPRAGG

In an age in which scientific work is increasing, the
language of the Tibetans and related languages
that constitute the majority of the first use of the
term Tibetan (and Burman-
Tibetan), for the sizable and important group of related languages now
known by this name, were entirely unacknowledged. The two
terms Tibetan and Burman-Tibetan seem to have had their origin
in a hundred and seventeen years ago, in a series of articles by J.R. Logan in
Journal of the Indian Archipelago for the year 1851, one of which is entitled
"General characteristics of the Burman-Tibetan, and Dravidian
languages" (chapter IV, p. 186).

In an earlier chapter of the same volume Logan considered
the Tibetan-Burman group of languages in relation to the Dravidian,
and first came to the conclusion that 'the non-Aryan languages of
of India, from their Hindo and Tibetan make no difference to the
Tamil in the extreme south, have many features in common',
but qualified the 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 Tibetan-
Burman languages has hardly waxed into life and motion'.

Whatever the relative merits of the Dravidian and the Tibetan-
Burman groups of languages may be as regards plasticity and energy,
there is no denying that, in associating Tibetan with Burmanese, or even,
for that matter, distinguishing them as a group from Tamil and other
Dravidian languages, Logan's observations show remarkable insight,
especially when one remembers how restricted, in 1851, his opportunities
were for studying Tibetan-Burman languages, whether through published
material or observation at first hand. He was writing at the
time of the Second Burmese War (1852-53), his source material for
Burmanese was limited to 'the grammars of Jebson and Lassen' (p. 55),
and there was still less contact with Tibetan-speaking peoples. Darien
had, it is true, been ceded to the East India Company eighteen years
earlier, but foreigners did not lightly travel in Sikkim, as Sir Joseph
Hooker, the botanist, had discovered four years earlier, 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 Sikkim
and Ladakh. Logan tells us (p. 106) that he had to rely, for pub-
lished material on Tibetan, on Coorna de Koros’s Tibetan grammar,
of 1854, and Abel Rennet’s Recherches sur les langues tibétaines.

It is another twenty-five years before I again find the term
Tibeta-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 Burmese 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 Young’s husband’s troops entered Thassas,
and, last but not least, three years and twenty-four years, respectively,
before the publication of Jaschke’s and Das’s Tibetan dictionary.

E.L. Brandeth 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.” Later in the
same issue of the Journal Captain C.J.F.S. Forbes, of the Burmese Civil
Commission, writes, somewhat disparaging: “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.”

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: “Burmese, in many
respects, takes a place between the Burman and the more advanced
postpositional languages.”

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 scholar-
ship 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 Waddel with a contribution
to the chapter on central Tibetan.
1. Even in the jet age, however, students of Tibeto-Burman languages are in some respects no better off than Loges: 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 spolling) 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?


