

ON “KAMARUPAN”

Robbins Burling
University of Michigan

The remarkably diverse Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeastern India have never been satisfactorily classified and, in a laudable admission of ignorance, Jim Matisoff has used the term “Kamarupan,” a geographical rather than a genetic category, as a way of coping with them (e.g., Matisoff 1991). While I understand Matisoff’s frustration at the unsatisfactory state of Northeastern Indian language classification,¹ I find the term “Kamarupan” misleading. I welcome the opportunity to explain why.

Kāmarūpa, Matisoff points out, was the ancient Sanskrit name for “Assam”. For most of its history, Assam was limited to the valley of the Brahmaputra river, but when in the late nineteenth century British colonial power pushed out of the valley and into the surrounding hills, the political borders of Assam were temporarily extended. Today, however, the hills have been organized into separate “hill states”, and Assam has shrunk back to its older borders. Once again Assam consists primarily of the Brahmaputra valley, and it has become just one among the seven states of what everyone now refers to as “Northeastern India”. It is no longer accurate or appropriate to refer to the entire area as “Assam”.

Ancient “Kamarupa”, like modern Assam, was probably limited to the valley, never embracing the hills where most Tibeto-Burman languages are found. Today “Kamrup” is the name of just one district within the state of Assam.² Kamrup District contains the city of Guwahati, and this makes it one of the two most urbanized districts in the entire Northeast. To anyone with experience in Northeastern India, “Kamrup” means this single district, not the whole of Assam, let alone the whole of Northeastern India. Hardly a district in the entire Northeast can have such a low percentage of Tibeto-Burman speakers. Geographically and historically, “Kamarupan” is a badly inappropriate term for the Tibeto-Burman languages, almost all of which are spoken outside of Kamrup.

¹ I am making an attempt to ameliorate the situation (Burling *in prep.*).

² A district is an administrative subdivision of a state, similar to an American county.

Simply to classify all these languages under a single term, moreover, invites misunderstanding. Matisoff contributed to the misunderstanding by picturing the Sino-Tibetan languages with a branching diagram in which “Kamarupan” is shown as coordinate with “Karenic”, “Lolo-Burmese”, and other branches of Tibeto-Burman (Matisoff 1991:481). The Kamarupan branch is further divided into “Kuki-Chin-Naga”, “Abor-Miri-Dafla”, and “Bodo-Garo”. None of the other language groups shown on the chart is geographically defined, and anyone looking at the diagram without reading the article’s fine print would infer that Matisoff regards the “Kamarupan” languages to be one of the genetic subdivisions of Tibeto-Burman.

Scott DeLancey, who wrote the articles on Tibeto-Burman for the *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (DeLancey 1991), grouped all the Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeastern India together, but instead of calling them “Kamarupan” he used the term “Baric”. This is a particularly unfortunate choice, since “Baric” has a long-established use for just one particular subgroup of closely related Tibeto-Burman languages. Never before has “Baric” been used to embrace all of the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Northeastern India. The only reason that I can imagine for grouping all these languages together is that DeLancey was misled by Matisoff’s term into believing that they all belong to a single genetic subgroup. I suspect he took the idea, though not the word, to be authoritative.

Finally, it seems just a bit presumptuous for outsiders to give names to other people’s languages and language groups. Wherever possible, we should try to follow local usage. I urge Matisoff and all other Tibeto-Burmanists to abandon the term “Kamarupan”. It is historically and geographically inappropriate and it invites misinterpretation and an incorrect classification. The present political boundaries that divide the nations are utterly irrelevant for language classification. We do not use geographically defined terms for the Tibeto-Burman languages of Burma, China, or Nepal, and I see no need for such a term for Northeastern India. If, for some odd reason, it is necessary to distinguish these languages from the languages that lie across invented political borders, I suggest the accurate, though admittedly awkward, expression “the Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeastern India”.

REFERENCES

- BURLING, Robbins. In preparation. "The languages of Northeastern India." In *The Sino-Tibetan Languages*, ed. by Graham Thurgood and Randy LaPolla. London: Curzon Press.
- DeLANCEY, Scott C. 1991. "Sino-Tibetan languages." In *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, ed. by William Bright, 4:445-9. New York: Oxford University Press.
- MATISOFF, James A. 1991. "Sino-Tibetan linguistics: present state and future prospects." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 20:469-504.