

UNCLES AND AUNTS: BURMESE KINSHIP AND GENDER¹

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Introduction: The position of Burmese in Sino-Tibetan

Burmese is the Sino-Tibetan (ST) language with the second largest number of speakers after Chinese. It was the fourth to develop an orthography -- preceded by Chinese, Tibetan, and extinct Xixia (Tangut); surviving Burmese inscriptions date from 1112 AD onwards.

Its historical linguistic position within Sino-Tibetan is represented in the following language tree:

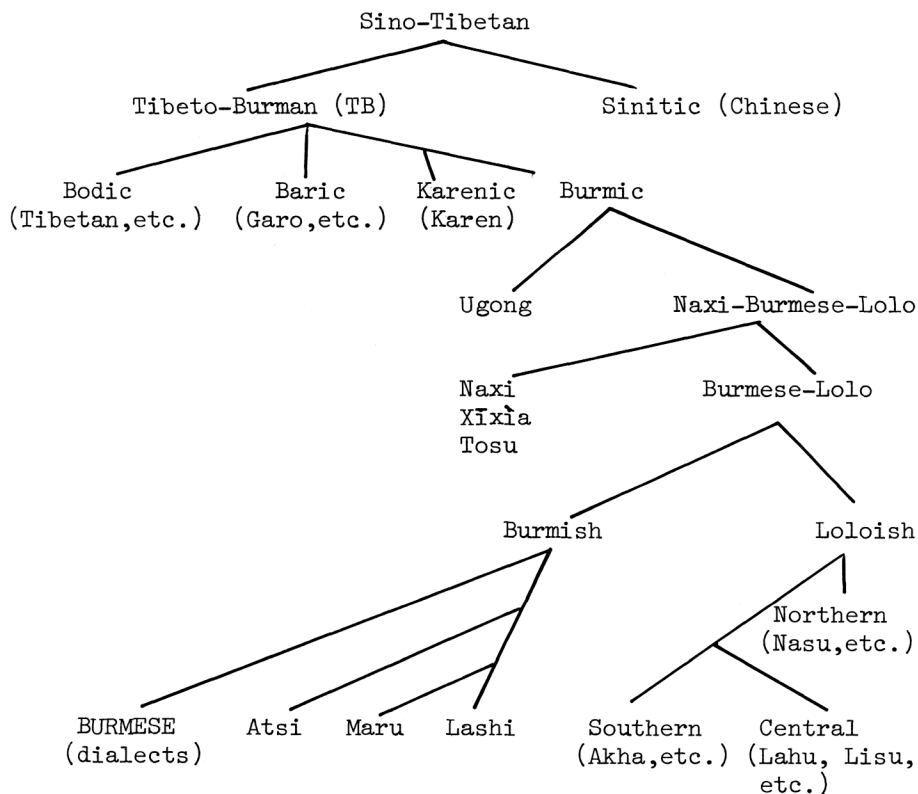


Fig.1: *Sino-Tibetan language tree*

This classification is based on patterns of sound correspondence found in non-borrowed vocabulary, and on proportions of shared basic vocabulary.²

Burmese has a number of regional dialects. The 'standard' language, or central dialect, has subdialects: that of Upper Burma centred on Mandalay, and that of Lower Burma centred on Rangoon. The Arakanese dialect, spoken along the north-western coast and into Bangladesh, has the second largest number of speakers, and is archaic in a number of ways; there are also several other dialects.

Quite closely related to Burmese are Atsi (Tsaiwa), Maru (Lawngwaw) and Lashi, spoken in north-eastern Burma by smaller groups which are part of the 'Kachin' culture complex. These languages show extensive influence from Jinghpaw ('Kachin'), a Baric Tibeto-Burman language according to Burling (1971), and of particular interest within these languages is the wide range of terms used for uncles and aunts.

Terms for Uncles and Aunts

A. Burmese

The system of kinship terms for parents' siblings is an area of substantial dialect difference in Burmese, and of extensive changes observable by comparing older and more recent sources on these dialects. Inscriptional data, mostly summarized in Luce (1981), with some data in Ba Shin (1962) and Than Tun (1958), provide early evidence for some forms though the exact referents of the terms are often hard to determine. Judson (1953) provides early nineteenth century data, and Tun Nyein (1906) gives normative early twentieth-century forms. Two anthropological studies have investigated modern Rangoon usage: Brant and Mi Mi Khaing (1951), and Burling (1965). Most recently, Spiro (1977) discussed the kinship system in depth, with 1960s usage for a village near Mandalay in Upper Burma, reporting 'old' Upper Burma forms, and current Rangoon forms. The three last sources disagree extensively and, indeed, my Burmese informants have always had trouble with these terms, which are in a state of flux: Tun Nyein (1906) actually contains a basic error, calling the father's sister terms 'maternal' and the mother's sister terms 'paternal'. Table 1 below summarizes the data:

Period:	Early	Late	c.1850	c.1900	'old' (Spiro)	c.1960 (Spiro)	
Source:	Inscriptions		Judson	Tun Nyein	Upper Burma	Upper Burma	Mandalay Rangoon
ùyi	X	X	MeB	MB			MeB ₁
ùyĩjì					MeB ₁		
wayĩjì					MeB ₂		
ùjì						MeB	MeB ₂ PeB ₂
ù			MB	MB			
ùlèjì							PeB ₃
ùmìn			MyB				
ùlè						MyB	MyB PyB
wayilè				MyB			
bájì	X		FeB	FeB	FeB	FeB	FeB ₁
bábá					FeB (address)		PeB ₄ (intimate)
bábájì							PeB ₅ (intimate)

Period:	Early	Late	c.1850	c.1900	'old' (Spiro)	c.1960 (Spiro)	
Source:	Inscriptions	Judson	Tun Nyein	Upper Burma	Upper Burma	Mandalay	Rangoon
bá thwè		X	FyB	FyB	FyB	FyB	
míyì	X						
əyì	X	X	FS	FS	FyS	FS	
əyìjì				FeS	FeS		
əyìlè				FeS			
míjì		X	MeS	FS	MeS ₁		
jìdɔ				FS	MeS ₂	MeS ₁	PeS ₁
jìjì				FS	FeS (address)		PeS (intimate)
əjì							PeS ₂
(ə)dojì				FS		MeS ₂	PeS ₃
míthwè	X		MyS	FS	MyS ₁		
thwèdɔ				FS			
(ə)dɔ	X			FS	MyS ₂	MyS ₁	PyS ₁

Period:	Early	Late	c.1850	c.1900	'old' (Spiro)	c.1960 (Spiro)
Source:	Inscriptions	Judson	Tun Nyein	Upper Burma	Upper Burma	Village
(ə)dolè			FS	MyS ₂	MyS	PyS ₂
dəda			FS			

Table 1: *Burmese uncle and aunt terms**

* Forms which occur in inscriptions are indicated by X. Abbreviations are: P = Parent; F = Father; M = Mother; B = Brother; S = Sister; Sb = Sibling; W = Wife; H = Husband; e = elder; y = younger.

Apart from the basic form /yì/, all the above are historically analysable compounds. /ù/ is 'head'; /jì/ is 'big' or 'elder'; /lè/ is 'little' or 'younger'; /mìn/ is 'king', /bǎ/ is a now archaic form for 'father', and /mí/ similarly for 'mother'; /thwè/ is another word for 'younger'; /dɔ/ is probably derived from the royal honorific suffix /tɔ/; and /ə/ is a formative prefix used with stative verbs and bound suffixes to form nouns.

In addition to their use as kin terms /ù/ and /dɔ/ are now used as honorific prefixes to male and to female names respectively. The radical restructuring of the Rangoon kinship system, with bilateral extensions of all surviving terms, results in extensive confusion among Burmans about the referents of these terms: some of this confusion is reflected in the data of Brant and Mi Mi Khaing (1951). An additional factor is the possibility of kin numeratives (with /jì/ for the first, /laʔ/ for the second last, and /lè/ for the last; or in inscriptions, /jì/ and /thwè/, /o/ 'old', and /thwè/, or /o/, /thwè/ and /ŋɛ/ 'little', in relative order of birth). These numeratives are no longer used in 'standard' Burmese, though Arakanese and other dialects still have them.

B. Arakanese

Forms from the Arakanese dialect are found in Bernot (1967), for the Marma dialect as spoken by a group who fled to what is now Bangladesh at the time of the Burmese conquest in the 1780s, and for 'Magh', the Bengali name for the Arakanese, in Lévi-Strauss (1952), who does not indicate tones. The least Burmanized Arakanese is probably Marma; the Arakanese spoken along the coast in Bangladesh and northern Arakan shows several innovative terms, while in southern Arakan, Burmanized forms are used, as seen in Table 2 below.

The Arakanese /rî/ is regularly cognate with Burmese /yì/, as are /grî/ and /jî/, /thwî/ and /thwè/. The innovative mother's brother term is used for address only in Marma, which also retains conservative forms for the other aunts and uncles. There is a Burmese couplet for husband and wife, /khin bun/, whose first syllable 'husband' may be related to the Arakanese term; this semantic shift may be connected with the Arakanese preference for mother's brother's daughter-father's sister's son marriage. Arakanese /bye/ could be derived from an alternative form of 'father'; /ywe/ is more problematic, though there is a Burmese bound couplet /ywe/ 'to associate familiarly and affectionately' (Judson 1953:864), but if this is the source, the Burmese spelling is etymologically wrong, although it is not unparalleled for the Burmese spelling, when representing a dialect which has merged /r/ into /y/, to 'respell' words incorrectly. Arakanese further has traces of suffixes for birth-order differences which provide for up to four ordered possibilities, as shown for Rangoon Burmese by Brant and Mi Mi Khaing (1951).

Dialect: Source	Marma <u>Bernot</u>	Northern Arakanese (Bangladesh)* (Akyab)*		Southern Arakanese (Sandoway)*
ûrî	MB			MB
əkhan	MB (address)	MB	PeB/MB	
bágrî	FeB	FeB		FeB
báthwî	FyB			FyB
əbye		FyB	FyB	
ərî(shan)	FS	FS	FS	FS
məgrîmá	MeS			
məgrî				MeS
əgrî(shan)		MeS	MeS	
məthwîmá	MyS			
məthwî				MyS
əywe		MyS	MyS	

Table 2: *Arakanese uncle and aunt terms**

C. Burmish

In other Burmish languages, many of the uncle and aunt terms are loanwords from Jinghpaw ('Kachin'). Burling (1971) demonstrates that the kinship structure of Maru has been rearranged into the Jinghpaw pattern,³ and that Maru has borrowed a number of Jinghpaw terms.⁴ Table 3 shows the overall pattern:

* Sites. (Ed.)

Language:	Maru		Atsi	Lashi	Jinghpaw
Source:	Okell	Burling		Benedict	Burling
MeB	yəŋyĩ	nyĩ	tsʔà	yuk-pho	tsʔà
MyB	yəmʒ	nyĩ	tsʔà	yuk-pho	tsʔà
FeB	phəmʒ	phómó	màn/phəmo	pha-mo	wà(=F)
FyB	yəgān	phəkān	màn/phəthan	pha-thang	wà(=F)
MeS	yəŋyĩ	mó	mʔi mo	mye-mo	nù(=M)
MyS	yəthʒ	mʔíkan	mʔi than	mye-thang	nù(=M)
FeS	nā mʒ	nà	moi	ning-mo	moi
FyS	nā thʒ	nà	moi	ning-thang	moi

Table 3: *Burmish and Jinghpaw uncle and aunt terms*

Atsi shows two Jinghpaw loanwords, for the cross-uncles and cross-aunts; and Maru dialect reported by Burling has shifted the meanings of some terms and, like Atsi and Jinghpaw, does not distinguish relative age for cross-uncles and aunts. Under the 'Kachin' system of marriage, there is a strong preference for mother's brother's daughter—father's sister's son marriage, so it is not too surprising that the Lashi term for mother's brother is, in fact, cognate with the usual Burmish term for wife's father. In the 'Kachin' system, each lineage is in a wife-receiving relationship with one other patriline and is in a wife-giving relationship with another patriline. The Atsi are the Burmish group most tightly integrated into this system.

As in Burmese, the terms for parallel uncles (father's brothers) and aunts (mother's sisters) are mostly compounds containing the term for father or mother respectively. The Maru mother's brother/parent's elder sibling term /ŋ-yĩ/ or /n-yĩ/ may be almost regularly cognate with Burmese /yì/; Maru occasionally shows additional prefixes in other etyma too. Maru /nā/ or /nà/ and Lashi 'ning' (father's sister) suggest *ni², which has cognate forms in Loloish, Naxi, Ugong and elsewhere in Tibeto-Burman, but not in Burmese.

For Atsi, for which I have more data, it seems that the order of birth suffixes is quite regular and productive: /mo/ 'first', /lʔat/ 'second', /nu/ 'third' and /than/ 'fourth'.

D. Burmic

For the Loloish languages, quite closely related to Burmese and Burmish, the mother's brother and father's sister etyma found in Burmish are also represented, as well as several other terms:⁵

	Akha	Common Lahu	Lisu	Naxi Lijiang Yangning	Ugong	
MeB	a _v g'oe	g'ui(pa ₋)*	v'vy	àgy	e ɣ	kudân
MyB	a _v g'oe					kuje?
FeB	a _v ui _v	u ^v (pa ₋)	wú(pha)	àbù	á bo	kudân
FyB	a _v zaw ^v					pûnjɛ?
MeS	a _v ui _v	(=M)	wú(ma)		(=M)	mɛ?dân
MyS	a _v mui	meh				?ajɛ?
FeS	a _v k'o _v	ku ^v (ma)	ányá	àni		nedân
FyS	a _v k'o _v	nyi a ⁻	nyínya nyánya			enɿ

Table 4: *Other Burmic uncle and aunt terms*

* Where appropriate, Central Loloish terms often have male or female suffixes, too. These are shown in parentheses.

Various shifts of meaning can be seen, such as the generalization of father's sister to parent's sister in Lijiang Naxi; the generalization of Lisu /wú/ to parallel uncle or aunt, unlike Lahu and Akha; or the Akha generalization of /a_vui_v/ to parent's elder sibling (same sex) =father's elder brother/mother's elder sister; also, the extension of Ugong /ku/ to refer to father's elder brother, in addition to mother's brother. Analysable forms in Ugong contain /dân/ 'big' (elder); the mother's elder sister term is composed of /mɛ?/ 'mother' and /dân/ 'big' (in the Sangkhla dialect it is /bák/ 'mother' plus /dân/). /je?/ patterns like a 'small' (younger) suffix for some of these terms, though not generally in Ugong; its core meaning seems to be mother's younger sister.

2. Proto-Sino-Tibetan and Burmic terms

Of the various etyma for uncles and aunts reconstructed for Proto-Tibeto-Burman in Benedict (1972) and for Chinese in

Karlgren (1957), only two have Burmic cognates. Karlgren (1957) GSR 1067b *g'iŋg/g'ieu:/ 'maternal uncle; wife's father'; Benedict (1972: #255) *kəw 'mother's brother/wife's father' is found in Ugong /ku/ and Naxi /gɣ/ and has shifted its meaning in Burmese to form part of the 'elder brother' term /əko/. Karlgren (1957) GSR 359d *nīer/nīei; 'mother'/; Benedict (1972: #316) *nīy 'father's sister/mother's brother's wife/wife's mother' shows a strange semantic shift in Chinese, and has been replaced by another term there (cf. Karlgren 1957: GSR 49g *ko/kuo/ 'father's sister; mother-in-law'). This etymon has no Burmese cognates, but Maru /nā/, /nā/, Lashi 'ning', Lisu /nyí/, Lahu nyi ā, Naxi /ni/ or /ni/, and Ugong /ne/ all provide support for it in its reconstructed meaning, within Burmic.

Benedict (1942) speculates that the Burmese-Lolo term for mother's brother is derived from the etymon for 'big' (elder), *k-ri² (L=Loloish] Bradley 1979b:756, without the *k prefix). Unfortunately for this hypothesis, the Loloish forms suggest *Tone 3, while the Burmish forms imply *Tone 2. There are a few other cognates which show this pattern of tonal difference between Burmish and Loloish. Thus, Burmish *ri² and Loloish *ri³ must be reconstructed, with Burmese, Arakanese, Maru, Akha, Common Lahu and Lisu cognates implying a Proto-Burmese-Lolo origin for this mother's brother etymon (L 196/7), not found in Ugong or Naxi which retain cognates of the Proto-Sino-Tibetan form.

To trace the apparent process of development through the various stages, it seems that Proto-Burmic may have had *go¹ 'mother's brother' (L 202-2) and *ni¹ 'father's sister'; that the former shifted its meaning and was replaced by *ri² (L 196/7) at the Burmese-Lolo stage, with a subsequent development to *ri³ in Proto-Loloish; then came various subsequent independent developments, involving analysable forms, for example, 'head' L 88A *u² being used for 'mother's brother', and subsequently 'uncle' in Burmese; and conversely being used for 'father's brother' in Loloish (L 192/3 *u²). Comparison of the Loloish forms further suggests some possible Central/Southern Loloish innovations, such as L 199 *me^{1/3} 'mother's (younger) sister', and so on; and the loss of the sex-specific use of terms in Central Loloish, leading to the addition of productive male or female suffixes, generalizing 'mother's brother' and 'father's brother' terms to 'mother's sibling' and 'father's sibling' in some dialects of Lahu (e.g. Shehleh, Bradley 1979a), and generalizing 'father's brother' to parallel 'aunt' ('mother's sister') in Lisu.

Prior to the inception of inscriptions, the further Burmese developments involved replacing the 'father's sister' cognate by generalizing the 'mother's brother' cognate to 'cross-aunt' ('father's sister'), then eventually eliminating the use of this form as a 'mother's brother', replacing it with

the 'head' form as noted above. The 'mother's brother' term also survives in the term for 'elder brother's wife' or 'wife's elder sister' in Burmese, /məyì/; this is less paradoxical given the survival of the Proto-Sino-Tibetan term for 'mother's brother' in the Burmese term for 'elder brother', /əko/. In Rangoon, /əyì/ is not an 'aunt' term, having been eliminated when the aunt and uncle terms 'went bilateral'; but /məyì/ survives -- two steps removed from the original meaning of /yì/.

The various compound forms also show an interesting pattern of development. The suffix /jì/ 'big' (elder) has survived, but the earlier /thwè/ 'younger' has mostly been replaced by /lè/. Interestingly, the former form for 'father' /bá/ has been replaced by a fused form /phe/, from /phá ʔe/ in its core meaning, but it survives in some 'father's brother' or, in Rangoon, 'parent's brother' terms. And just as /ù/ 'head' has replaced /yì/ in the meaning 'mother's brother', /jì/ 'big' seems to be acquiring the additional meaning of 'mother's elder sister' (or, in Rangoon, 'parents' elder sister'). Also, the 'royal' suffix /tɔ/ in a voiced form /dɔ/, seems to have acquired the meaning of 'mother's younger sister', and in Rangoon 'parents' younger sister'.

The radical restructuring of kinship terms in Rangoon has resulted in the total elimination of /yì/ as an 'uncle/aunt' term; in the final elimination of the /thwè/ 'younger' suffix, due to the loss of the 'father's younger brother' term which survives in Mandalay; in the generalization of /ùjì/ 'mother's elder brother' and /bá(bá)jì/ 'father's elder brother' so that both are used for 'parents' elder brother', while /ùlè/ 'mother's younger brother' takes over 'father's younger brother' as well. And, as noted, /jì/ compounds become 'parents' elder sister', while /dɔ/ compounds become 'parents' younger sister' -- both generalized from 'mother's sister' terms, eliminating the 'father's sister' terms found elsewhere.

Arakanese developments are more conservative in some ways, but more innovative in three new terms: /əbye/ 'father's younger brother', /əywe/ 'mother's younger sister', and /əkhan/ 'mother's brother', in most dialects.

3. History of Burmese marriage and kinship

Based on comparative evidence summarised in Benedict (1942), it seems likely that Proto-Sino-Tibetan society was patrilineal, with a preference for matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. Bradley (1979b) has discussed the Loloish groups, and concludes that Proto-Loloish society was also patrilineal, preferring mother's brother's daughter -- father's sister's son marriage. It also appears likely that there was a bride price (payment by the groom and his family to the bride's family) and, in addition, or instead, a requirement for several years of bride

service (the groom living with, and working for, his parents-in-law). The location of residence after marriage was, thus, at first uxori-local, but subsequently viri-local, that is, with or near the groom's family.

Some modern Loloish societies have changed certain aspects of these patterns; for example, most Lahu groups are bilateral, and regard cross-cousin marriage as incestuous, while most Lisu groups prefer bride price and viri-local residence. However, some Lahu groups, such as the Shehleh (a Black Lahu subgroup) and the Banlan (a Yellow Lahu subgroup), still allow, or even prefer, matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, and many Lisu grooms do bride service, as do nearly all Lahu ones. The Lisu are patrilineal, and do allow cross-cousin marriage, while the Akha, for example, prefer it.

Not surprisingly, the 'Kachin'-influenced Maru, Atsi and Lashi show Jinghpaw-like patterns for the non-reciprocal exchange of spouses; one lineage always, and only, provides the grooms to another which provides brides to the first. Hence, a hierarchy of lineages is created, with obligations created by the receipt of wives. This pattern is not characteristic of Burmese society, despite the close historical linguistic connection within Burmish, including Burmese, Maru, Atsi and Lashi.

In Arakanese society, as in most Loloish societies, Naxi society and Ugong society, there is a stated preference -- frequently carried out -- for marriage between mother's brother's daughter and father's sister's son. Moreover, the evidence of the Burmese kinship terms suggests the same at an earlier stage for the rest of Burmese society: it is only with this marital pattern (mother's brother's daughter and father's sister's son) that the mother's brother's wife will normatively be the father's sister (and, of course, father's sister's husband = mother's brother), and so the mother's brother term can generalize to mother's brother/father's sister, as /yì/ does in Burmese. In this marriage pattern, there would be a direct exchange of women for women between two linked patrilineages.

Spiro (1977) postulated exchange of siblings as the earlier Burmese pattern, based on kin term equivalences which equally support reciprocal cross-cousin marriage. It is, of course, possible that the earlier pattern of exchange between two specific lineages, which comparative evidence supports, could have developed into a general possibility of exchange between *any* two lineages, particularly with the vast expansion of Burmese society entailed by the politico-military success of the Burmans. After this proposed intermediate stage of sibling exchange, the Burmese marriage and inheritance system has again changed to a bilateral one, in which cross-cousin marriage is at least regarded unfavourably, with many, especially in Rangoon, regarding it as incest. However, there is still some feeling that

patrilineal ties are closer, and incest taboos are stronger patrilaterally.

It was traditional until fairly recently for Burmans to do about three years of bride service *and* to pay a substantial bride price. These are exactly the postulated Proto-Burmese-Lolo customs, which are appropriate in a patrilineal system. Other aspects of the system of kin terms also support this conclusion.

A final property of the Burmese system, found also in other Burmish and some Loloish societies, is a differentiation of terms based on relative age: elder or younger. There are separate, unrelated terms for younger sister, younger brother, and elder brother in Burmese; and a Proto-Burmese-Lolo term for elder sister which is not represented in Burmese. There is also widespread use of verb-adjectives (i.e. stative verbs) such as 'big' and 'small', as suffixes to indicate relative age of the parent and the aunt or uncle. Perhaps this age-grading, which reaches its extreme among the 'Kachin'-influenced Atsi, is a relatively recent characteristic of Burmese-Lolo societies. The suffixes used differ in different languages and are generally productive; so it would be risky to postulate very early age-grading.

In conclusion, Burmese kin terms for uncles and aunts show extensive differences *between* dialects and considerable variations *within* some dialects and the comparison of these kin terms with one another, with the corresponding terms from closely related Burmic languages, and from reconstructed Sino-Tibetan, has permitted the formulation of a hypothesis that pre-Burmese society was patrilineal, with cross-cousin marriage. Similarly, one may also postulate the presence of certain other characteristics in pre-Burmese society, such as bride service and bride price, from an analysis of comparative cultural evidence within the linguistic groups under study.

NOTES

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2. Some useful sources on Sino-Tibetan genetic classification include Benedict (1972) on Sino-Tibetan; Bradley (1975) on Naxi-Burmese-Lolo; and Bradley (1979b) on Burmese-Lolo, which which is known as Lolo-Burmese in Burling (1971), qv.
3. Indispensable information on, and discussion of, Jinghpaw kinship terminology is to be found in Leach (1954) and Leach (1977). (Ed.)
4. Further Maru data were provided by John Okell. Benedict (1942) has collected older data on Maru, Atsi, and Lashi, and Bradley (n.d.) has more recent data on Atsi.
5. Data are drawn from Southern Loloish Akha (in manuscript); Central Loloish Lahu (reconstructed Common Loloish Lahu from Bradley (1979a), in manuscript), and Central Loloish Lisu (Bradley and Hope, 1986). Naxi, which is less closely related, is represented by two dialects, those of Lijiang (Bradley 1975) and Yangning (Fu 1979). The data on the language most divergent from Burmese within Burmic, Ugong (Kok Chiang dialect), was collected in Thailand by the author in 1980-81.

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