

Pa-O between Shan and Burmese

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Abstract

Pa-O is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by over 500,000 people in Eastern Myanmar. Pa-O speakers are to be found scattered in an area stretching from Southern Shan State to Mon State. Traditionally, Pa-O has been divided into two main dialects, Northern and Southern Pa-O (or high and lowland Pa-O), the Northern dialect being spoken in Shan and Kayah States and the Southern dialect south of these areas. Pa-O is classified as a member of the Karenic branch of Tibeto-Burman. Pa-O, and other Karenic languages, it has been assumed, have been in contact with Tai-Kadai languages and Austroasiatic languages previously which may account for the unusual (for Tibeto-Burman languages) verb-final word order, but the exact nature of this contact is unclear. In the case of Pa-O, in recent history speakers have certainly had contact with Shan, one of the aforementioned Tai-Kadai languages. Still today many Pa-O live alongside Shan people in Shan State. The contact between speakers of Pa-O and Shan is reflected in many Shan loanwords present in Pa-O today. However, the overall influence of Shan on Pa-O has decreased significantly in recent decades in favour of Burmese, the national language. Most Pa-O speakers do not have good knowledge of Shan, but they do of Burmese due to schooling in Burmese. This paper aims to examine how this contact situation is reflected in loanwords in the Pa-O language based on material collected by the author and a pre-existing wordlist. Shan and Burmese have both acted as donor languages for loanwords in Pa-O and this paper will examine the potential different ages of loans along with different loan word domains, for example vocabulary regarding trade/commerce or religion. The northern variety will be focussed on here, but differenced with Southern Pa-O will be mentioned where relevant.