CHAPTER NINE

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KAREN BRANCH
OF TIBETO-BURMAN*

Ken Manson

9.1 Introduction

The Karen languages form a clearly defined cluster of languages with no members of uncertain status (Benedict 1972, Shafer 1974, Matisoff 1991, Bradley 1997, van Driem 2001, LaPolla 2001, Thurgood 2003, Manson 2010). The English term Karen is probably an adaption of the Burmese name for these people, but it has been reacquired by the Sgaw to refer to themselves. Other Karen groups rarely use this term to refer to themselves, and refer to themselves instead with an endogenous name, often based on the reconstructed Proto-Karen form *k-ɲaŋ (Solnit 2001), e.g. Kayah, Kayaw, Kayan, Sgaw.

The Karen branch has been considered part of Sino-Tibetan for over a century, but only in the last 35 years has a consensus developed that these languages form a distinct branch within Tibeto-Burman rather than a sister to Tibeto-Burman. Benedict (1972: 129) notes that 'morphologically, Karen diverges from Tibeto-Burman almost as widely as does Chinese, especially as regards syntax'. These features lead Benedict to claim that Karen is a sister of Tibeto-Burman proper. However, Shafer (1974) considered Karen to be a sister to the following Tibeto-Burman branches: Burmic, Baric and Bodic. Our current understand is more in line with Shafer than Benedict (Bradley 1997, van Driem 2001, Matisoff 2003).

Speakers of Karen languages are located primarily along the eastern border of Burma from southern Shan State southward to the southernmost tip of Burma. Over the last two centuries there has been migration into Thailand along the western border with Burma and then

*I dedicate this paper to David Bradley. When I started my MA under David, David shared his knowledge about Ngwi-Burmese languages in our regular meetings. These discussions helped me understand the broad features of Ngwi-Burmese. When I started researching the Karen branch, there was little help in the literature to situate my research. So this is my attempt to rectify the situation, following David’s (2012) paper on the characteristics of the Ngwi-Burmese branch.
further into northern Thailand. Bradley (1997: 46) suggests a total population of 3.9 million but notes that this is ‘substantially under enumerated’. The total population of ethnic Karen is somewhere between 6 and 12 million, however, not all ethnic Karen still speak Karen languages. Many now speak only Burmese, especially those living on the plains.

The total number of Karen languages is unknown, but it would appear from the literature that there are between 20-30 distinct Karen languages. Sixteen of these languages have been reasonably documented, but the Karen languages found in the mountains of eastern Burma usually have numerous dialects, some often difficult to understand to other speakers of the same ethnicity (see, for example, Bennett (1991) for Kayah and Manson & Chou (2008) for Kayan).

Internal comparison and reconstruction have been limited to either a few well known groups (normally the three largest groups: Sgaw, Pwo, and Pa’O) or data collected from outside of Myanmar with displaced groups. Reconstructions of Karen include Haudricourt (1946, 1953), Jones (1961), Burling (1969), Solnit (2001, 2013, in prep), Manson (2010, 2011) and Theraphan (2014). Based on the orthographies of two languages (Sgaw and Pwo) and his experience in other Asia languages, Haudricourt proposed a reconstruction that is still valid today. Jones’ immense work of collecting nearly 1,000 words from six Karen varieties was limited by his conservative approach to reconstructing only protoforms that had reflexes in all six varieties. Burling re-reconstructed Proto-Karen based on Jones’ data, but this reconstruction seems to be just a cerebral exercise without understanding the issue of tonal development in Southeast Asian languages; and thus, his reconstruction is phonologically unmotivated with respect to tonal development. In fact, both Jones and Burling ‘neglected the fundamental work by A. Haudricourt’ (Benedict 1972: 128).

Solnit’s and Manson’s reconstructions have been developed independently and are based on Haudricourt’s pioneering work and fieldwork in a wider range of Karen speech varieties. Not surprisingly, the reconstructions are very similar. Theraphan’s reconstruction, the most recent, is based on a large wordlist, but only Proto-Karen fauna reconstructions have been published.1 This reconstruction is similar to Solnit’s and Manson’s with the greatest variation being in the proto-tones.

From our current state of knowledge, we can see reasonably distinct clusters of Karen languages, but how they relate at higher levels depends on which feature of the languages a researcher is focusing on. Bradley (1997) notes that there is considerable disagreement on the subgrouping

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1 A larger set of reconstructions is available in the STEDT database.