The history of Buddhism in Central Asia—a term that I will use here to refer to the network of oasis towns comprising the ancient "Silk Road" stretching from Eastern Iran to Tun-huang—is a major missing piece in our knowledge of the evolution of the Buddhist tradition. Yet the scholar who attempts to compile a connected history of Central Asian Buddhism finds again and again that there is simply not enough data to reconstruct the total picture of events in this region. At times it is tempting to abandon the project altogether, appealing to the words of the great Indologist John Brough, who declared that a narrative history of the expansion of Buddhism across Central Asia simply cannot be written. As he wrote in 1965, "the surviving information is fragmentary, interpretation is often uncertain, the problems numerous and intractable." Certainly Brough was right in pointing out that we will probably never have all the pieces of the puzzle: Too much of the data has been lost—or perhaps never existed at all in written or iconographic form—for us to be able to put together a complete account of the diffusion and evolution of Buddhism in Central Asia.

But if we are willing to abandon the analogy of the puzzle, and think instead of our task as one of organizing the existing data into something resembling an open-weave net, the project becomes at once less daunting. Put another way, if we admit at the outset that the area occupied by the gaps in our knowledge may always be far greater than that occupied by what we do know, then we can forge ahead—with, of course, all due caution—in the task of organizing those small bits of data that are available into a preliminary framework. Once this has been accomplished, new perspectives may emerge even from materials that have already been examined by modern scholars, and we may also find clues for where to look for more information in the sources from adjacent regions. As the connecting link between India and China during those vital first
centuries of the expansion of Buddhism across the Asian continent, Central Asia holds a place of unparalleled importance in the history of the Buddhist religion. The value of what we may be able to learn from the admittedly fragmentary data from this region is sufficient to justify, I believe, a preliminary attempt to put the pieces into order. Specially, I would like to focus here on one of the overarching issues in the history of Buddhism in this region: the use of a special "church language," on the one hand, and vernacular languages on the other.

Church Language and Vernacular Language: Methodological Considerations

We must begin with the problem of definition. First, what is meant by "church language" (or "religious language") in general? Second, can we identify anything that corresponds to this category in the Buddhist context? And third, does such a thing exist in the more narrowly defined context of Buddhism in Central Asia?

Beginning with the first of these issues, we may adopt the useful system of analysis suggested recently by Richard N. Frye, who on the basis of his research in the Iranian cultural sphere has pointed out the existence of four distinct language categories:

1. "religious" or "church" language: a language distinct from the spoken vernacular and restricted to liturgical, scriptural, or other religious use.
2. written administrative language: the language used for written record-keeping in business and government. This may be simply a more formalized version of the everyday spoken language, or it may be a different language altogether (as in the case of the administrative use of Aramaic in the Achaemenid empire of Persia).
3. spoken administrative language: the language used for oral communication in government and business dealings. Again this may simply be a somewhat elevated version of the ordinary spoken vernacular, or it may be a separate language. In a multilingual empire the spoken administrative language (like its written counterpart) is often a lingua franca stretching across a number of linguistic boundaries.
4. vernacular language: the local dialect, spoken at home and in informal work and social situations.

In some cases, of course, these categories may overlap; in the extreme case (as in the United States, where English is generally