The Sinicization and Tibeticization of Qiangic Languages in Western Sichuan: Modeling the Contact Settings in an Areal Perspective

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Abstract: Language contact, Qiangic languages, Sinitic and Tibeten languages, Western Sichuan, Areal perspective

This paper examines the basic premise of language contact in the Qiangic group from an areal perspective, providing evidence for contact-induced change between the Qiangic group and its adjacent Sinitic and Tibetan languages. Based on the collected data, this paper provides examples of phonology, lexicon, and morphosyntax borrowing/transfer between the languages in the area. The emergence of contact languages in this area indicates a point of convergence that occurred in the Qiangic group (cf. LaPolla 2001, Sun 2024). An illustration follows:

Ⅰ. *Phonological convergence*

Some Qiangic languages reflect a reduction in the total number of consonant segments due to the loss of marked segments, resulting in a consonant system more in line with Southwest Mandarin phonology. For example:

(1) Chirkova & Gong (2019) note that in Duoxu (southern Qiangic), the consonants /ɬ, ɹ, ɣ, ɢ, q, qʰ/ were lost and substituted by /l, w, g, k, kʰ/ due to contact-induced simplification between Duoxu and SWM.

(2) By "brightening," many Qiangic languages have developed high front vowels from Proto-TB *-a, a phenomenon that is extremely rare in the rest of the TB family (Matisoff 2022).

On the other hand, some Qiangic varieties develop monosyllabic tones under the influence of SWM (Stanford & Evans 2012) and word-based pitch patterns under the influence of Tibetan (cf. Sun 1997).

Ⅱ. *Borrowed lexicon/morphemes in the Qiangic group*

The borrowing of lexical items is a significant issue in the Qiangic group, particularly with

regards to Sinitic and Tibetan loanwords. Direct borrowing from the Sinitic language is more common as Qiangic people have more contact with Han people. On the other hand, Tibetan loanwords are mainly introduced to the Qiangic group through religious and traditional cultural activities. These words may be borrowed either directly or indirectly (Huang 2023, and Y. Huang 2023:67-71), or even through an accommodation process. This morphological strategy is rarely found in other Sichuan TB languages outside the Qiangic group.

Ⅲ. *Shared morphosyntactic features*

Qiangic languages have borrowed morphological and grammatical patterns from neighboring languages due to language contact. These shared features are not developed from internal factors of grammaticalization (Sun 2024, and Huang & Shao forthc.). Morphological borrowings from Tibetan to Minyag, Guiqiong, Shixing, Pumi and some other Qiangic varieties were also examined in the contact situation in this geographical corridor (cf. Shirai & Endo 2021).

The remainder of this paper also presents the assumption, tested in our study, that the levelling of differences among Qiangic varieties occurs because of their distinctive contact scenarios with both SWM and Tibetan. It is also argued that the characteristic changes associated with convergence in the Qiangic group make the Central Tibetan-Qiang-Yi corridor a provisional micro-linguistic area in which most Qiangic varieties display specific features (i.e., uvular phoneme simplification, velar phoneme allophones, verb stem directional prefixes, multiple categories and functions of existential verbs, etc.) that are rare in the neighboring TB languages in Western Sichuan, China.

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