

**So Near and Yet So Far:
Dialect Variation and Contact among the Tangshang Naga in Myanmar**
Nathan Statezni and Ahkhi
SIL International

Language Information:

The Tangshang Naga varieties are referred to as Tase Naga in the Ethnologue (ISO code: nst). These speech varieties belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family, in the branch classified by Bradley (1997) as Bodo-Garo-Northern Naga.

Location:

The Tangshang Naga people live in and around remote Nanyun Township in Sagaing Division, Myanmar, and across the border in Arunachal Pradesh, India. The Tangshang Naga area is shown in the map below with blue diagonal lines.

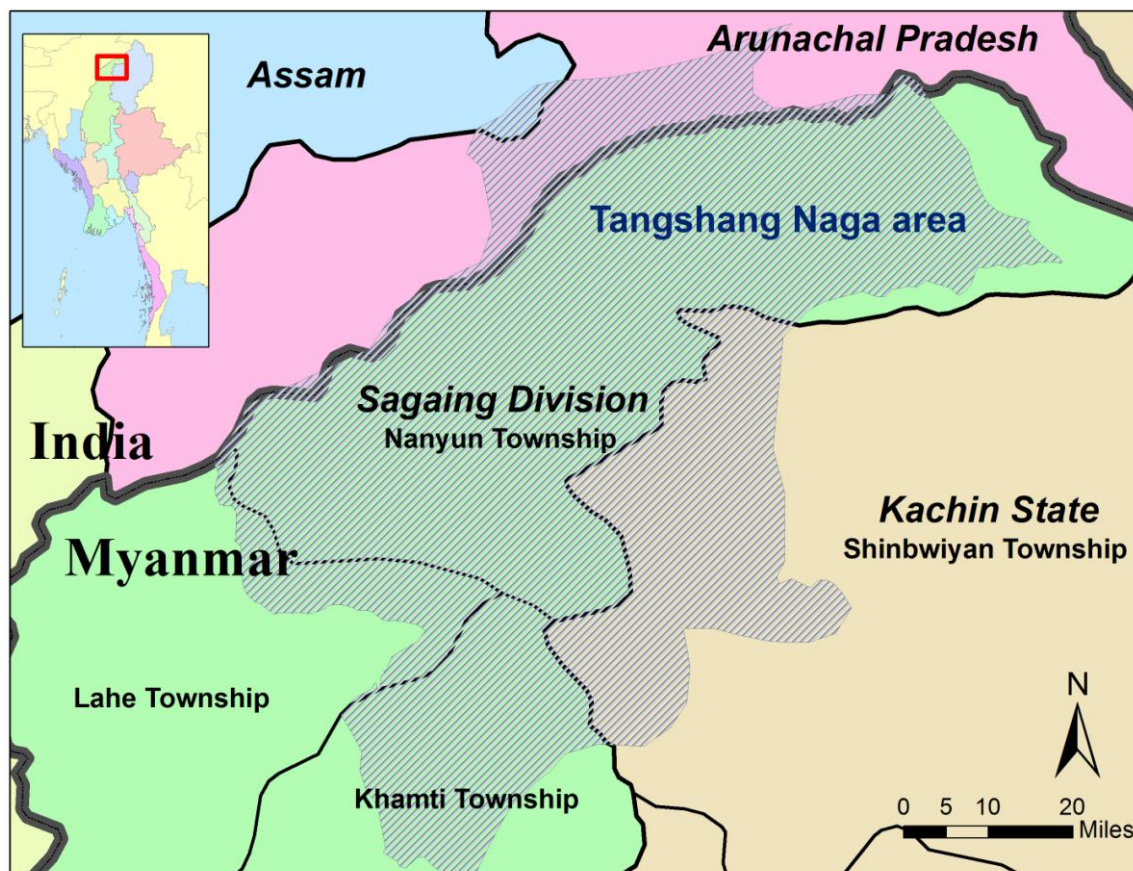


Figure 1: Map of Tangshang Naga area

Abstract:

The Tangshang Naga (also known as Tangsa, Heimi, and Rangpan) are a group speaking perhaps 70 Tibeto-Burman speech varieties, living in remote Nanyun Township in Sagaing Division, Myanmar, and spilling over the border into Arunachal Pradesh, India. Despite small distance between villages, intertribal fighting and mountainous terrain have kept contact between villages to a minimum, such that nearly every village represents a different speech variety. Today, many of the Tangshang Naga speech varieties are so divergent from each other that communication in their own varieties is not possible. Nanyun Township remains isolated to this day, with few schools or medical facilities, and in search of a better life, many Tangshang Naga people, often as entire villages, have begun migrating to the flatter lands along their borders. There, they have come into contact with other Tangshang Naga subgroups and have begun living together in mixed villages.

This paper will present our findings about dialect variation, contact, attitudes, and intelligibility among the Tangshang Naga in Myanmar, as well as discussing the implications of these findings for language development efforts among the Tangshang Naga.

In assessing dialect variation among the Tangshang Naga, we have collected and compiled lexical data from more than 40 of these speech varieties. We have compared these varieties to assess lexical similarity using a lexicostatistical approach based on Blair's (1989) *Survey on a Shoestring*. In addition, we have recorded personal narratives in the Longkhai and Shanke varieties, which are considered by many Tangshang to be prestigious and widely understood, and developed comprehension questions about them. Using these narratives, we have then tested comprehension of the Longkhai and Shanke varieties among other Tangshang Naga speech varieties. Finally, we have administered questionnaires among villagers and leaders from more than 30 of these speech varieties to assess language vitality, dialect perceptions, attitudes, and contact patterns.

Based on our research, we have found a wide range of lexical similarity among the Tangshang Naga speech varieties, from as low as 35% lexical similarity between the Gakat variety in Myanmar and the Hawi variety in India, to as high as 99% between the Chamchang and Shanke varieties. Due to increased contact between diverse speech varieties, people have been learning to speak, or at least understand, multiple Tangshang varieties, in order to communicate with those around them. Although the Longkhai and Shanke varieties were reported to be prestigious by subjects from many different Tangshang speech varieties, we found a wide range of ability to understand these varieties. Our findings show that, if language development efforts were to be made among the Tangshang Naga in Myanmar, several different projects would be needed, since development in the Longkhai and Shanke varieties alone would not be sufficient to cover all the Tangshang speech varieties.