

## Discussion note: more on “Kamarupan”

Burling, Robbins

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**DISCUSSION NOTE:  
MORE ON “KAMARUPAN”\***

Robbins Burling  
University of Michigan

“Kamarupan” is the name that Jim Matisoff bestowed on a somewhat scattered and certainly disparate group of Tibeto-Burman languages. It includes the Tibeto-Burman languages that are spoken in northeast India and others from adjacent regions. I have long felt that the name is inappropriate for northeast Indian languages and I would like all Tibeto-Burmanists to understand why the name is so problematic.

The term is derived, ultimately, from “Kamarupa”, the name of an ancient Hindu Kingdom that flourished about a thousand years ago and had its capital in the lower Assam Valley. Today, “Kamrup” is the name of a “district” (a political subdivision of a state, similar to an American “county”) of the lowland state of Assam. Both ancient Kamarupa and the name of the modern Kamrup district are indelibly associated in the minds of all who live or work in northeastern India with the non-tribal, Indo-Aryan speaking, segment of the population. Historically, “Kamrup” and “Kamarupa” have had nothing at all to do with Tibeto-Burman speakers. Kamrup District probably has a higher proportion of Indo-Aryan speakers and a correspondingly lower proportion of Tibeto-Burman speakers than any other district in Northeast India except, perhaps, for the Khasi Hills, where Mon-Khmer languages predominate.

As a linguistic term, “Kamarupan” has two problems. The first, and less serious, one is that it is not a genetic term at all, but simply a catch-all geographical label under which to include otherwise uncategorized languages. In his “In Defense of Kamarupan” (1999), Matisoff wrote: “My use of Kamarupan ... is meant to cover not only the TB languages of NE India ... but also those spoken over wide swaths of territory in adjacent areas of Burma and Bangladesh, and even in corners of Tibet” (1999: 175). “Kamarupan” then, is not meant to be a genetic subgroup, but it is, rather, a geographical catch-all into which languages of uncertain subgrouping are swept. “Kamarupan” joins “Himalayish” as a term that Matisoff has used to embrace languages that are clearly Tibeto-Burman but whose classification within Tibeto-Burman is not yet well understood. These are geographical terms and neither is intended to imply a phylogenetic division of Tibeto-Burman, although Matisoff has not always made this fully clear. I had understood that Matisoff used the term Kamarupan to cover a geographical area but I had not known, until reading his Defense, how far it extended or that it

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\* This paper is a response to Matisoff (1999) ‘In defense of *Kamarupan*’, which in turn was a reply to Burling (1999) ‘On “Kamarupan”’ (ed.).

embraced “wide swaths” of anything outside of northeast India. It may be that he has, somewhere, spelled out the exact extent of Kamarupan, but I have never found the place. In any case, to mix phylogenetic and geographical terms, as Matisoff does, invites misunderstanding.

Why, though, do we need a term for the languages that Matisoff likes to call “Kamarupan”? Other than being Tibeto-Burman, they have nothing in common except for their geographical contiguity and their phylogenetic uncertainty. Obviously, an infinite number of ways can be found to inscribe polygons on the map so as to enclose geographically contiguous areas. Why, then, this particular enclosure? Why not, for example, group the languages of Arunachal with Himalayish instead of with Kararupan? Arunachal, after all, lies squarely in the Himalayas. Why not, for that matter, group all unclassified language into a single batch called “Unclassified”? That would not invite misinterpretation in the way that “Kamarupan” does.

But it is the second problem with the term “Kamarupan” that is the much more serious one. In northeast Indian local usage, the word is firmly associated with the civilization of the Indo-Aryan speaking Assamese lowlanders, and it is in no way connected with the Tibeto-Burman speakers, either of the lowland or of the surrounding mountains. All the connotations of “Kamarupan” are with the non-tribal lowlanders. Matisoff argued that his “use of Kamarupan is abstract and neutral ...” (1999: 175). I am certain that he meant it to be abstract and neutral but, unfortunately, it is not. To the people who live in northeast India, it unambiguously connotes the lowland Assamese. Sadly, relations between the lowland Indo-Aryan speakers and the Tibeto-Burman speaking tribals of both hills and plains has often been fraught with misunderstanding and mutual mistrust. I have had lowlanders tell me condescendingly that the hill people are “simple” and “backward” and that they “need to be brought into the light of civilization”. I have had hill people tell me that lowlanders are a mob of thieves and scoundrels. To use a term like “Kamarupan” that is closely associated with the lowlanders as if it has something to do with highlanders does nothing to promote mutual understanding, and it is distinctly unkind. It is like using “Russ” to designate the languages of the Caucasus simply because “Russ” is an ancient name associated with the forebears of people who have, at times, dominated the Caucasus. Who wants to be named for the people who have conquered them? Not the Georgians or Azerbaijanis, I’m sure, and certainly not the Tibeto-Burman speaking minorities of northeast India.

Matisoff defended the continued use of “Kamarupan” on the grounds that “it is “already enshrined in the labyrinthine relational databases of STEDT, and it would be pointless and laborious to try to change it now...” (1999: 180). I hope he was joking. It might be laborious, but it would certainly not be pointless. Any database of languages and their relationships ought to be flexible enough to undergo revision. Only one thing is certain about a language classification: It is tentative and temporary. New data will always force revisions, and any database had better be designed with the expectation of such revision.

A few years ago, at a meeting of the Northeast Indian Linguistic Society, we were treated to a fine paper that dealt with the Indo-Aryan dialects of western Assam. Somewhat apologetically the speaker referred to these dialects as “Kamarupan”. In the discussion period that followed, I offered my warm approval of his use of the term for lowland Indo-Aryan dialects, and I mentioned my dislike of its use for Tibeto-Burman languages. I was gratified by the thunder of applause that greeted my comment. The applause was especially welcome because the audience included a large number of native speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages.

Jim Matisoff and I are equally stubborn, and neither of us suffers under any illusion that one of us will change the other’s mind. I hope, however, that I can have some influence on other linguists, and not only those who are Tibeto-Burmanists. I would like to make all linguists aware of just how inappropriate, indeed insulting, it is to use “Kamarupan” as Matisoff has used it. Nevertheless, neither he nor I will decide what terms gain consensus. That is up to the entire linguistic community.

## REFERENCES

- Burling, Robbins. 1999. On Kamarupan. *LTBA* 22.2: 169–171.  
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Author’s address:

Robbins Burling  
Department of Linguistics  
440 Lorch Hall, 611 Tappan St.  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109 USA

Email: [rburling@umich.edu](mailto:rburling@umich.edu)

