

Tibeto-Burman vs. Sino-Tibetan

George van Driem
Leiden University

The Tibeto-Burman theory of language relationship dates back to the 18th century, but the precise contours of the language family were first defined by Julius Heinrich von Klaproth in 1823. His Tibeto-Burman family was part of a polyphyletic vision of Asian language stocks. The Indo-Chinese or Sino-Tibetan theory of language relationship was conceived by John Casper Leyden in 1807, and this hypothetical language family has undergone frequent and dramatic changes in shape throughout its chequered history. What is the defining trait that distinguishes the Tibeto-Burman theory from the Sino-Tibetan theory of genetic relationship, and which of the two today represents the more well-informed view?