

Competing influences of Tibetan and Chinese on the languages of the Sino-Tibetan borderland

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This paper focuses on language contact in the Sino-Tibetan borderland of South-West China, a buffer zone between two typologically distant groups of languages (Tibetan, Sinitic). This area hosts a number of little-studied indigenous languages, currently classified as members of the putative Qiangic subgroup of Sino-Tibetan. I take one Qiangic language, Lizu (a.k.a. Ersu), as a case study to examine the influence of Tibetan and Chinese on local languages. The impact of Tibetan on Lizu is most salient, including prosody (template word-tone), lexicon (religious and cultural vocabulary) and morphosyntax (e.g. conjunct-disjunct marking). Conversely, the influence of Chinese appears mostly restricted to lexicon. The attested patterns are consistent with the oral history of the group and the cultural dominance of Tibetan in the area. The paper concludes with a preliminary discussion of possible generalizations that can be drawn from this case study on other Qiangic languages as well as language contact in the Sino-Tibetan borderland at large.