# The Status of Ngawn in South Central (Kuki-Chin)

Tyler D. Davis

Yin-J Co.,  LTD., Yangon, Burma/Myanmar

<https://tylerdavis.xyz/>

Ngawn (ISO 639-3: cnw) is an underdescribed South Central Tibeto-Burman language. Its speakers are native to Falam Township, Chin State, Myanmar (Burma) and there are 18,600 estimated speakers (LeClerc 2017d in Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2020). To date, the only documented classification of Ngawn is that of Fr. André Bareigts, as discussed in VanBik (2009:18–19). While some of Bareigts' classifications have stood the test of time, such as his classification of Lushai (Mizo) as Central and Khumi (cnk) as Southern, his classification of "Northern" conflates languages such  as Sizang (csy) with Hmar (hmr) (a member of the "Old Kuki" subgroup).

I made a rudimentary analysis of Ngawn's phonology using preliminary dataset of over 300 etyma collected from one male Ngawn speaker. I compared the etyma to analyses of Falam (cfm) (Khar Thuan 2008), Sizang (my own, unpublished) and Tedim (ctd) (Khoi Lam Thang 2001) to determine which languages had more innovations in common with Ngawn.

Most centrally, Ngawn should be classified as Northern South Central, rather than Central South Central, as PKC *r- has innovated to /ŋ/ in Ngawn. This innovation is clear evidence of "Shafer's Law," as coined by Hill (2014:24). Peterson (2017:196) also agrees that Shafer's Law is "the essential piece of evidence for a Center/Periphery subgrouping," with central languages retaining /r-/ and peripheral (Southern/Northern) languages innovating usually to a /g/. In Ngawn, like in Sizang –a language strongly attested in Tibeto-Burman literature as Northern South Central– the *r- innovates to /ŋ/ rather than to /g/. Some examples are listed in Table 1 below.

*Table 1: Correspondences of *r- in Ngawn*

| Ngawn | Gloss | Proto Lexeme | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| ŋuaʔ²¹ | 'rain' | *ruaʔ | VB 964 |
| tʰiŋ³⁴.ŋaʔ²¹(.mu³⁴) | 'fruit (tree)' | *raʔ | VB [941] |
| ŋua³³ | 'bamboo plant (large)' | *rua | VB [919] |
| ŋam³³.sa³⁴ | '(wild) animal' | *ram | VB [953] |
| ŋul³³ | 'snake' | *ruul | VB [975] |

Ngawn also exhibits innovations not seen in either North or Central South Central TB languages, such as *khl- > h-, as shown in Table 2.

*Table 2: Correspondences of \*khl- in Ngawn*

| Ngawn | Gloss | Proto Lexeme | Source |
|---|---|---|---|
| **h**a$^{21}$.dɛ$^{33}$ | 'moon' | *khlaa | VB [1295] |
| (a$^{34}$.)**h**a$^{21}$ | 'wing' | *khlaa | VB [1309] |
| **h**uak$^{33}$ | 'brain' | *khluak | VB [1279] |

Other sound changes are typical of Northern languages, such as PKC *khr- > PNC *kh- (see VanBik 2009:310), the simplification of PKC *pl- > PNC *tl- > t- (see VanBik 2009:29), and the loss of devoiced nasals (see VanBik 2009:197). Therefore, the retention of these common innovations with other Northern languages along with the realization of Shafer's Law demonstrates that Ngawn should be classified as a Nothern South Central Tibeto-Burman language.

EBERHARD, DAVID M., GARY F. SIMONS, and CHARLES D. FENNIG (eds.) 2020. Chin, Ngawn. *Ethnologue*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. https://www.ethnologue.com/language/cnw.

HILL, NATHAN W. 2014. Proto-Kuki-Chin initials according to Toru Ohno and Kenneth VanBik. *Journal of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society* 7.11–30.

KHAR THUAN 2008. A Phonological Description of Falam. http://ic.payap.ac.th/wp-content/uploads/linguistics_students/A_Phonological_Description_Of_Falam.pdf.

KHOI LAM THANG 2001. A phonological reconstruction of Proto-Chin. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Payap University ma in linguistics.

PETERSON, DAVID A. 2017. On Kuki-Chin subgrouping. *Sociohistorical linguistics in Southeast Asia: New horizons for Tibeto-Burman studies in honor of David Bradley*, ed. by Picus Sizhi Ding and Jamin Pelkey, 189–209. Leiden: Brill.

VANBIK, KENNETH. 2009. *Proto-Kuki-Chin: A reconstructed ancestor of the Kuki-Chin languages*. Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus Project, Department of Linguistics research unit in University of California, Berkeley. Berkeley, CA: STEDT. http://stedt.berkeley.edu/pubs_and_prods/STEDT_Monograph8_Proto-Kuki-Chin.pdf.