

## Absract

### The Lingua Franca Cycle and the Map of Tibeto-Burman Languages Robbins Burling ICSTLL/Seattle —September, 2006

Where the terrain is difficult and the politics fragmented, languages often become fragmented as well. Thus many Tibeto-Burman areas are notable for the sheer number of their languages. Even when divided by their languages, people still want to talk to each other, however, and lingua francas offer a splendid way to escape from the burdens of Babel. Pidgin languages are especially useful as lingua francas not only because they are (relatively) easy to learn, but also because, being nobody's first language, no one has a special claim over them (e.g. Nagamese). Once well accepted, however, lingua francas have a tendency to spread, both to more people and to more situations. If used widely enough, children start to base their own first language on the pidginized lingua franca, and then creolize it into a "full" language. If it is still used as a lingua franca, a creole may continue to spread (e.g. Jinghpaw). As it spreads, substantial language shift can occur without much population displacement, and this suggests that the present distribution of Tibeto-Burman languages may owe more to the spread of lingua francas and less to migration than we sometimes presume. The invention of pidgins and the replacement of older languages by lingua francas suggest that discontinuities may have been more important in Tibeto-Burman history than we have generally recognized. The likelihood of abrupt discontinuities has serious implications for the way we classify Tibeto-Burman languages.