

The SOAS Wa Dictionary Project: Lexicography for a Divided Language

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Wa is the major language of the Palaungic branch of Northern Mon-Khmer, spoken by about one million people in an area on the border between China's Yunnan Province and the Shan State in Burma. The Wa language has been the subject of several linguistic studies, most of them in Chinese. The only Wa dictionaries which have been compiled hitherto are Wa-Chinese dictionaries which are either limited and out-dated.

The SOAS Wa Dictionary Project is a three-year effort (2003-2006), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to produce a high-quality dictionary, translating Wa into Chinese, Burmese/Myanmar and English. The project uses advanced techniques in corpus-based lexicography, centred on a database and Internet resource, which can be adapted for other languages spoken in Burma/Myanmar besides Wa after the life of the project.

The academic objectives of this project are:

- * to compile an electronic Wa language corpus from printed and recorded materials suitable for linguistic and textual analysis
- * to produce two dictionaries of the Wa language from the corpus: one scholarly and one for Wa-speaking end-users
- * to record, document, preserve and disseminate the corpus using the Internet
- * to establish, by the end of the project, an expandable template for corpus-driven lexicography and linguistic research on other minority languages of Burma.

The project benefits Wa speakers by:

- * providing a dictionary targeting Wa-speaker end-users
- * supporting literacy in Wa, Burmese, Chinese and English
- * bridging the divide between the two main Wa orthographies (Chinese and Revised Bible orthographies)