

TOPICAL REPORTS

Lesser-Known Languages in Nepal A brief state-of-the-art report

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1. As a major part of the Himalayan region, Nepal houses a large variety of ethnic groups with cultural traditions of their own. Besides the philology of the "great traditions" in Nepali, Sanskrit/Prakrit, Newari, Tibetan, or Maithili, research in the oral traditions of the very heterogeneous ethnic minorities is necessary for deeper studies in the anthropology and history of the country and of the Himalayan region in general (cf. also Gaenszle 1992, Höfer 1992; this paper is intended as a linguistic supplement to these contributions).

Therefore, systematic research in the unwritten languages and dialects of Nepal is useful not only for comparative and general linguistics, but also for social and cultural research in general. As a result of Nepal's political closure until 1950, many parts of the country were linguistic (and anthropological) *terra incognita* until the middle of this century. Intensive linguistic research started in the late 1960s with survey work and later in-depth studies of individual languages organized by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (coordinators: K. Pike and A. Hale), mostly in the central and mid-western parts of the country. In the 1980's, the "Linguistic Survey of Nepal" (Director: W. Winter, University of Kiel), supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, was conducted as a series of field campaigns in the eastern part of Nepal as the first comprehensive inspection of this very complicated linguistic area. Both research programs were carried out in close cooperation with scholars from Tribhuvan University. As the most important purely Nepalese contribution to linguistic research, the so-called *Paryayavāci Śabdakoś* ("Synonymous dictionary") of the Royal Academy should be mentioned here, published in 1973. This large synoptic glossary contains equivalents of Nepali words in several Indo-Aryan (Awadhi, (Bhojpuri), Tharu, (Done-) Danuwar, Bhojpuri, Maithili) and Tibeto-Burman idioms (Gurung, Chepang, Tamang, Newar, (Bantawa) "Rai", Magar, Limbu, Lepcha, Sunuwar) in Devanagari transcriptions. The first results of the SIL research were published in Hale/Hari/SchoettleIndreyer (1972), Hale (1973), portions also in Trail (1973) with regard to Chitwan Tharu and Dhangar Kurukh in the Terai. (For further literature cf. the bibliography in Hale 1982). For the first results of the "Linguistic Survey of Nepal" (LSN) cf. Winter (1984), Gvozdanović (1985), Winter (1987), and Hansson (1991), portions also in Weidert (1987); a "Linguistic Atlas" with lexical and phonological isoglosses in the Kiranti languages of East Nepal is considered for publication. Further sources for "small languages" are glossaries, primers, textbooks and journals in Nepali and in these languages, published by local societies and private persons in Nepal. These cannot be considered here in detail.

At present, Nepal as a linguistic area can be sketched out in its entirety, although some local languages lack any description. With regard to the number of distinct languages, the Tibeto-Burman vernaculars are the languages of the largest number of linguistic minorities, while most of the more important language groups with regard to the number of speakers are Indic. Varieties of rather well known Indic languages (Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi) are spoken by the majority of the population in the Terai; the label of "Tharu", however, denotes several tribal idioms, counted as one group on the grounds of ethnic classification; some of these appear to be only slightly different varieties of Indic regional languages (cf. self-denotations like "Maithili Tharu", "Bhojpuri Tharu"), others appear to represent distinct Indic idioms (e.g., Chitwan Tharu, Dang Tharu). No systematic linguistic research seems to have been carried out so far on the Tharu groups of the western Terai (including Dang Tharu), where they are the majority of the local population.

The Tibeto-Burman idioms of Nepal cannot be summed up under the label of "Tibetan dialects", as is used in popular descriptions. "Tibeto-Burman" denotes a genetic phylum like "Indo-European", and the grammatical and lexical diversity in the Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal can hardly be overrated. The problem of their genetic classification will not be addressed here; in my opinion, further synchronic research in grammatical, lexical and dialectal details of more individual languages is needed for a non-speculative diachronic analysis.

2. The largest "gaps" or "blanks" with regard to descriptive studies can be found in the western part of the country. Besides "Bhotia" groups and "Tibetans" (Bhote) in a narrower sense in the upper mountains, all Tibeto-Burman groups in the hills of West Nepal and in the western parts of Middle Nepal prefer the label of "Magar". As a linguistic group, the Magar in the districts of Palpa and Tanahun, the "Eastern Magar", who also live in the central and eastern hill regions of the country as larger minorities, are one of the major Tibeto-Burman groups of the hill regions. However, among other "Magar" groups of West Nepal, only rather small groups of "Western Magar" in the lower hills of the outer west appear to speak dialectal varieties of Eastern Magar, with a more conservative grammar. Other western "Magar" groups speak quite distinct languages:

1) The "Kham Magar" (an artificial term introduced by D. and N. Watters 1973, derived from the native word for "language"), who live north-west of the Eastern Magar are the most important newly-found language group in Nepal, not only with regard to the number of speakers, but also with regard to their remarkably rich oral traditions with a rather archaic version of Himalayan shamanism. In this language, rather good lexical, phonological, and grammatical studies have been carried out in the central dialect of Taka; but further research could also be useful on the widely different dialects.

2) The "Tarali Magar" in Tichurong valley (south of Dolpo) are a small group who speak Kaike, a Tibeto-Burman idiom in its own right. From this "small language", only a provisional vocabulary (about 600 words, without phonological analysis) compiled by J. Fisher during anthropological field

work has been published so far (in Hale 1973 IV). No detailed grammatical information is available.

3) The **Raji** are a small tribal group scattered in the lower hills and in the Inner Terai in the western part of Nepal. Their language is known only from an incomplete 100 word list in Hale/ Hari/ Schoettelndreyer 1972, which points to a remarkably independent Tibeto-Burman idiom.

4) The **Rauty** people, a marginalized group of hunters and gatherers in the outer west, also claim for themselves the status of "Magar". This ethnic group appears to be identical with the Ban Rauts, Ban Manush or Raji in India (Uttarakhand, previously Almora district). Their language is also known as "Janggali"; a first comprehensive description, based primarily on an unpublished thesis, has been published by D. D. Sharma (1990:169, 228, cf. p. 175 for further sources). This Rauty/"Raji"/Janggali language should not be confused with the Raji language in Nepal which is a distinct Tibeto-Burman idiom (but the Rauty language is also Tibeto-Burman, definitely not "Munda" as Sharma wrongly classified it); the word lists do not provide evidence for any closer genetic relationship. Beside a 100-word list recorded in Dailekh district (with good evidence for a linguistic identity with Sharma's "Raji"), no linguistic research seems to have been conducted so far among the Rauty of Nepal.

5) The status of "Magar" is also claimed by members of the **Ban Raja** group, a group of erstwhile hunters and gatherers, now scattered in the middle west and western parts of Nepal. These people, better known by the abusive name of **Kusunda** (old self denotation: *gilongdei mihag*, i.e. "forest people") have given up their own language, which was either the only representative of a distinct branch of Sino-Tibetan or an isolated language heavily influenced by Tibeto-Burman. The accessible data are too scanty for a complete description.

6) The "**Chantel Magar**" are a heterogeneous group of erstwhile copper miners. Besides Nepali speakers, this ethnic formation comprises a group with a language of its own (in Myagdi district). This so-called Chantel *kurā* is also said to be a dialect of Thakali (cf. also de Sales 1989). No deeper linguistic studies have been carried out so far in this idiom.

Although some speakers of Tibetan dialects claim to be "Magar", people in the upper mountains of West Nepal are usually called "**Bhotia**". These people are also a very heterogeneous group (this excludes the so-called "Bhote Sherpa" people who speak Tibetan and closely related "small languages").

1) The **Byangsi** (also: Bensi) people of Darchula district (scattered groups also in other parts of the country) belong to the "Shauka" group, a cluster of Tibeto-Burman tribes subdivided into four different "language groups", viz., Byangsi, Chaudangsi, Darmiya, and Johari (= "Rangkas", a joint label for Byangsi and Chaudangsi; the Johari have given up their language in favour of Kumaoni). These idioms are rather closely related, and the definition as distinct "languages" seems to be motivated by ethnic criteria above all. The majority of the Byangsi and other Shauka people lives in the mountainous regions immediately west of Nepal in the Indian territory of Uttarakhand (Uttar Pradesh state, previously Almora district). The latest descriptive sketches of the Shauka idioms have been published by D.D. Sharma

(1989). To the best of my knowledge, no linguistic studies have been carried out so far among the Byangsi of Nepal.

2) The **Bhotia** language(s ?) in Humla and Mugu districts lack(s) any published description. Occasionally the non-Tibetan natives in this region are also called "Tamang"; but the "Tamang" in Mugu at least are reported to speak a language that is definitely neither Tamang nor a Tibetan dialect.

3) No clear linguistic information is available about the language of the non-Tibetan natives in South Mustang ("Baragaon"), who may represent an older stratum of settlers. This small language, spoken within an area with a Bhote (Tibetan) majority, is known as "Shege" or "Sheke" (R. Bielmeier, p. c.) and may be identical with "Baragaonle" (according to Grimes 1988: 564 a member of the Gurung-Tamang group "close to Thakali", cf. below).

3. The **Gurung-Tamang** family, a rather compact group of comparatively closely related languages is the most important group of Tibeto-Burman languages in Nepal with regard to the number of speakers. It comprises the Gurung and the Tamang as two major language groups and several lesser-known "small languages".

At present, **Gurung** (main area in the western part of the central hills) has become one of the best-known Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal besides (Kathmandu) Newari. Also with grammatical, lexicological and phonological/tonological in-depth studies of the Western Gurung dialects, rather comprehensive research in dialectological varieties has been carried out. The dialects appear to differ widely; for practical and comparative purposes, further in-depth studies of the southern (Syangja and Tanahun districts) and eastern (Lamjung and Gorkha districts) dialect groups may be useful.

As the largest individual language among all non-Aryan languages of Nepal, **Tamang** (main area in the central hills round Kathmandu valley, larger minorities in the eastern hills) is "little known" compared with Gurung. Several in-depth studies have been carried out in both "Eastern" and "Western" Tamang, but no comprehensive reference grammars or larger dictionaries have been published so far. The difference between "Western" and "Eastern" Tamang may be more ethnic than linguistic; all accessible data appear to point to a contiguous cluster of mutually intelligible local dialects, and the dialectal diversity appears to go beyond that of Gurung. The other members of this family are "small languages" with less than 10,000 speakers:

1) The language of the **Thakali** south of Mustang, vanishing now in favour of Nepali, is the historically most important of these "small languages". Several in-depth studies have been carried out of the dialect of Thaka, i. e., "Thakali" in a narrower sense, but the present state of knowledge is far from a complete description. No clear information is available on linguistic variations among the three major subgroups of Thakali. It is also not known whether the people of "Panchgaon" in Mustang speak a dialect of Thakali or a distinct language.

2) **Chantel kurā** is either a distinct member of this family or a dialect of Thakali, cf. above.

3) The language of the **Nishang** (also: Manangi, Manangba) in Manang. No linguistic information is available besides a word list in Hale/ Hari/ Schoettelndreyer 1972).

4) The non-Tibetan language in South Mustang ("Baragaonle", Shege) is reported to be a member of this family, cf. above.

4. As ethnic labels and rough social classifications, denotations such as "Gurung" or "Tamang" should not point to speakers of a Gurung-Tamang language. Many "Bhote" groups who speak Tibetan idioms prefer a self-denotation as "Tamang" or "Gurung". The **Ghale Gurung** in Gorkha district are a Gurung subgroup on the grounds of ethnic classification but speak a distinct Tibeto-Burman language (native term: *lila*), which definitely does not belong to the Gurung-Tamang family (cf. Nishi 1982).

5. The other Tibeto-Burman languages in Middle Nepal (besides Tibetan idioms) appear to belong to two distinct genetic subgroups:

1) The **Newari** idioms in Kathmandu valley and in the hills east of it. Written Kathmandu Newari with its spoken varieties can hardly be called "lesser-known"; but there is little knowledge about other spoken varieties of Newari, which might be important with regard to a historical grammar of this language. Other than Newari in a narrower sense, some closely related "small languages" must be taken into consideration. The Pahari people, tribal groups outside the Newar caste systems, speak several idioms of their own; besides Newari dialects, at least one distinct language, being rather archaic in its sound patterns, can be obtained here (evidence from LSN tape records). The Dolkhali language, spoken by Newar people in Dolakha, can definitely be classified as a distinct language (cf. Genetti 1990); the LSN data do not point to any intermediate dialects between this idiom and the Kathmandu/Bhaktapur dialects of Newari.

2) The second language family may be called "**Chepeng-Thami**". The language of the Chepeng, previously hunters and gatherers in Makwanpur district and adjoining areas, is described in a rather comprehensive way in Caughley (1982). The Bujel language in Tanahun district may represent a dialect of Chepeng. The language of the Thami people - scattered groups in Dolakha, Sindhuli, and Kabhre Palanchok districts, mostly in Tamang villages, also a minority in Ilam district in the outer east - appears to be comparatively closely related to Chepeng, if Newar and Tamang loans are neglected. This language (about 20, 000 speakers, at least two widely different dialect groups) lacks any modern description, but unpublished materials exist within the LSN data. In the late 1980's field research was conducted by S. Toba from the Royal Nepal Academy; so at least descriptive sketches can be expected to be published in the near future. No recent information is available about the language of the Bhramu (= Baraamu, etc.) in the outer south of Gorkha district (less than 1,000 persons, scattered in Darai villages). The scanty data from Hodgson's materials (compiled ca. 1840) point to a rather close relative of Thami (with special regard to the Sindhuli dialect); it is not known whether and to what extent this language is still alive.

6. The autochthonous tribes in the eastern hills are **Kiranti** in a narrower sense; but the term "Kiranti" is often used for all pre-Tibetan and pre-Aryan groups of the Himalayan region. The Kiranti languages are the largest linguistic group in Nepal with regard to the number of distinct languages. The traditional labels for these groups are Sunuwar, Rai (or Kiranti Rai) and Limbu; the Wayu (Hwayo, Hayu, Vayu) in Sindhuli and Ramechhap districts may be classified as marginal members of Kiranti.

The classification of the Kiranti languages was a major problem for the LSN as the first research programme that comprised data from East Nepal in its entirety (cf. the scheme published in Gaenszle 1991: 40, which reflects the state of knowledge in 1984/85; "Wayu" is a misprint for "Wayu"). The labels "Sunuwar", "Limbu" and "Wayu" also denote language groups (with two distinct, but closely related languages for Limbu), while Rai is an ethnic term used for other Kiranti languages that differ widely from each other (cf. Hansson 1991). For practical purposes, the Kiranti languages, which may represent a heterogeneous cluster of several genetic subgroups, can be subdivided into three major groups, viz., Western, Central and Eastern Kiranti. (For the complicated geographic distribution of Rai groups cf. Hansson 1991).

1) **Western Kiranti** comprises the Wayu language as a marginal member (described in a comprehensive reference grammar by B. Michailovsky 1981, 1988), Sunuwar (= Kwoico) (Dolakha, Ramechhap, Okhaldhunga districts, many minorities in Ilam and Panchthar), Bahing Rai, Jerung (Zero) Rai, Umbule (= Chaurasye) Rai, Tilung Rai, Lingkhim Rai (nearly extinct), Thulung Rai (Subgroup: Deusali, Ilam), Khaling Rai, Dumi Rai (rapidly vanishing now, for a comprehensive description of one dialect cf. van Driem 1993) and Koi Rai (spoken in one village only). The LSN data are the only sources for Jerung, Lingkhim, Tilung, and Koi. There are no modern data from Umbule besides the LSN materials and an SIL 100 word list. Comprehensive reference grammars exist for Wayu, Thulung, Khaling, and Dumi, and several in-depth studies have been carried out of Sunuwar (cf. Genetti 1992) and Bahing (cf. van Driem 1991).

2) **Central Kiranti** comprises only "Rai languages". The languages can be divided up into a northern subgroup with Kulung (with Sotang) Nachhering, and Sangpang, and a southern subgroup with Bantawa, Chamling, and Puma. These two groups differ widely in grammar, but share many lexical and phonological features. As intermediate groups between Central Kiranti and East Kiranti, Dungmali (with Khesang and many small subtribes), Saam (nearly extinct) and Mewahang (with two different varieties, "Eastern" and "Western" M.) could be added here. The "Chukwa" (recte: *cukhuwa* (?)) a Mewahang clan cf. Gaenszle 1991: 141, 316) idiom recorded in the north of Bhojpur district appears to be a variety of Kulung mixed with Mewahang. Only Bantawa has been described so far in a complete reference grammar (cf. Rai 1981, 1985; for materials from other dialects cf. Gvozdanović 1985, Hansson 1991a). The LSN materials are the only sources for Puma, Saam (several subgroups, scanty data), and "Chukwa". There are no modern data for Dungmali besides the LSN data (some of these are published in Ebert

1991; the language is heavily influenced by Bantawa, but clearly distinct in grammar and phonology). Chamling materials were also collected by K. H. Ebert (now Zurich, some portions published in Ebert 1987, for lexicological materials from LSN cf. also Winter 1985). Besides earlier SIL research, two larger studies are in preparation for Kulung, viz. a field research project at the University of Leiden (according to G. van Driem, in a letter) and a larger Kulung-Nepali dictionary projected by a Rai nativist (according to W. Winter, p.c.). Planned studies in Bantawa are an "analytical dictionary" (W. Winter/N. K. Rai, a first version exists as ms. and in floppy disks) and a dissertation with a field project (J. Bisang-Foltan, Mainz/Zurich).

Further research is needed, above all, in Sangpang as a rapidly vanishing idiom with many historically important dialects (some of these appear to be based upon very archaic tribal substrata). Materials in the Mewahang dialects were collected by M. Gaenszle during his anthropological research (portions published in Gaenszle 1991).

3) **Eastern Kiranti** comprises the Rai languages Northern Lorung (=Lohorong) (rather close connections with Eastern Mewahang; there is a chain of nearly mutually intelligible idioms from Northern Lorung to Kulung in the upper Arun region), Southern Lorung (= Yakkhaba/Lorong = Yamphu/Lorong); definitely distinct from the language known as "Lohorong", also not to be confused with "Yamphu" or "Yakkha"; many dialects, most of them nearly extinct, "Yamphu"(1) (perhaps a marginal dialect of Southern Lorung), Yamphu (2) (= "Yakkhaba" = "Yamphe", also "Yakkha", large diversity in the local dialects), Yakkha (also "Yakkhaba"), Lumba "Yakkha" (clearly distinct from common Yakkha; the peculiar "Yakkha" numerals published in Gvozdanović 1985 are from this language), Mugali = Lambichong in earlier literature (nearly extinct now), Phangduwali (nearly extinct, very scanty data), Chhintang (nearly extinct), Chhulung, Belhare (also "Athpare" [Belhara]), Athpare, and the two Limbu languages Chhatthare Limbu and Limbu. Reference grammars have been published after 1980 for two major dialects of Limbu, viz., the Panchthare dialect (Weidert/ Subba 1985) and the Phedappe dialect (van Driem 1987). Portions of Yakkha (and Yamphu = "Yakkhaba") can be found in Gvozdanović (1985) and Gvozdanović (1989). A reference grammar of Lohorong (= N. Lorung) is in preparation now (G. van Driem, Leiden) a field project in Yamphu is planned (R. Rutgers, Leiden). Larger studies in Belhare (B. Bickel, Zurich/Nijmegen) and Athpare (K. E. Ebert, Zurich) are in preparation (cf. also Ebert 1991, Bickel 1992). For other Eastern Kiranti languages, in depth-studies have not been carried out so far.

7. Further Tibeto-Burman languages in East Nepal are **Dhimal** in the Terai (rather closely related to the little known Toto language in North Bengal, further affiliations uncertain), Lepcha (small minorities in Ilam district), and **Mechi** (= Bodo) (a small minority in Jhapa district, perhaps two distinct dialects). A larger glossary of Dhimal, based upon LSN materials and on field research materials provided by S. Subba (Kathmandu) has been prepared by the author (unpublished ms.). Additional field research in this language was

conducted by S. Toba (Royal Academy). No modern data from the Lepcha and Mechi dialects spoken in Nepal appear to exist outside the LSN materials.

8. The unwritten Indic languages in the central parts of Nepal and eastward, most of them called by the ethnic label of **Danuwar**, are one of the least-known ethno-linguistic clusters in the country. Danuwar (also Denwar, etc.) appears to be an ethnic label like "Rai" or "Tharu", which does not denote one coherent language group; according to two of the few experts, this label comprises "about a dozen or so" distinct idioms (Kuegler 1974: 2). Among these, Done-Danuwar, (highly Nepalized) Rai Danuwar (no evidence for a substratum of any Rai language, perhaps a label for several distinct local idioms) and Kacarya are definitely distinct from each other. Other Danuwar idioms, recorded during LSN campaigns, may be dialects of Maithili or Bhojpuri. Other members of this ethno-linguistic cluster are the Darai (= Darhi in earlier literature) in Gorkha district, the Kumhale (potters) and those subgroups of the Majhi (fishermen, ferrymen) caste who speak neither Nepali nor Newari, but distinct Indic idioms (known by names like "Kuswar" and "Bote Majhi"; but there are also native terms like "Majhi *kurā*"). Most of these "small languages" appear to be rapidly vanishing now in favour of Nepali. In-depth studies have been carried out so far in one variety of "Rai Danuwar" (Kuegler 1974, Rai/Kuegler 1975) and in the Darai language (Kotapish 1973, 1975). The only modern study in Majhi idioms known to me is an unpublished paper (Hansson 1989). A complete survey of the Danuwar languages and related idioms is still a desideratum.

9. Besides the "Kusunda" language with its difficult genetic position, only a few languages appear to be neither Tibeto-Burman nor Indic. Dhangar-Kurukh in the eastern Terai is a dialect of the Dravidian Oraon or Kurukh language (cf. the materials in Trail 1973). According to the LSN materials, the Munda language of the Satar people in the eastern Terai does not clearly differ from other dialects of Santhali in Bihar. Speakers of the Munda language Ho or Mundari are also reported to live in Nepal (no data available). A distinct Munda language called Sardar was reported from Dhankuta district, and a distinct Dravidian idiom from Okhaldhunga (materials are said to exist within the LSN sample, but are not available to the author).

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