

Research Report

The Chintang and Puma Documentation Project (CPDP)

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Project Description

The aim of this 3-year project (2004-2006) is to provide a rich linguistic and ethnographic documentation of two highly endangered but almost totally undocumented languages in eastern Nepal, Chintang and Puma. These languages belong to the Kiranti family of Tibeto-Burman. The Kiranti groups are known to have a rich and in many areas still highly active oral tradition, which has only sporadically been documented so far (Gaenszle 2002) and not at all for Chintang and Puma.

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal (2001), 98 languages are spoken in Nepal, but more realistic estimates go well beyond 100. The majority of languages spoken in Nepal are “tribal” languages belonging to Tibeto-Burman. The Kiranti subgroup has more than twenty, perhaps as many as thirty different languages and many more dialects (van Driem 2001, Ebert 2003). Chintang belongs to Eastern Kiranti (such as Limbu and Yakkha) and is spoken in Chintang VDC (Village Development Committee) of Dhankuta district. Puma, which can perhaps be classified as part of Central Kiranti (along with Bantawa Rai, Camling Rai and others), is spoken in the area in and around the Ruwa Khola, to the south of the Khotang bazar in Khotang district.

Both languages are highly endangered and are being supplanted by Bantawa, one of the major Kiranti languages (Rai 1985). In a rapidly increasing number of cases, however, speakers entirely give up their native language or Bantawa and switch to Nepali, the national *lingua franca*. It is likely that Chintang and Puma will no longer be spoken within one or two generations.

The constitution of Nepal guarantees the right of its citizens to receive their primary education in their mother tongues, and some of the indigenous languages (e.g. Tamang, Limbu, Bantawa) have been introduced in schools, while some (e.g. Camling, Gurung) are soon to be introduced in primary education as optional subjects in some regions. It has been possible

to do so because these languages had already been documented linguistically. A proper documentation of these languages, including the various speech genres, will therefore help not only to preserve them, but also help in the preparation of educational materials in the future.

The core objective of the project is to record language practices in context, following the methodology of the “ethnography of speaking”, and to provide the transcripts with rich linguistic and ethnographic annotations. In the case of Chintang, the project also includes a detailed study of language acquisition over the period of two years. This will help us understand the micro-process of language endangerment, the role of bilingualism and trilingualism in this process, and the social and psychological mechanisms that lead to language death.

In line with this interdisciplinary aim, the project team includes linguists (Balthasar Bickel, Novel Kishor Rai, Vishnu S. Rai) as well as an anthropologist (Martin Gaenszle) and psycholinguists specialized in child language (Elena Lieven, Sabine Stoll). The team thus involves scholars from both Nepal and Germany. In addition, the project employs six research assistants (RA), with M.A. degrees in linguistics from Tribhuvan University: Goma Banjade, Netra Paudyal, Arjun Rai, Iccha Rai, Manoj Rai, and Narayan P. Sharma.

The ultimate objective of the project is to make the materials accessible in a digital archive, which is based at the Max-Planck-Institute in Nijmegen. The project is sponsored by the Special Program for the Documentation of Endangered Languages (DOBES) of the Volkswagen Foundation, Germany, and is administered through the Department of Linguistics at the University of Leipzig (Germany) in collaboration with the Central Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur. The project is also part of the Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LINSUN) research program, a large-scale initiative for documenting endangered languages of Nepal that was launched in Summer 2002 by the Central Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University. It is supported by an international advisory board and aims at coordinating research efforts, developing local archives and sponsoring fieldwork training. The Chintang and Puma Documentation Project is one of the first to aim at realizing these goals in substantial depth.

First results of the Chintang project

Language situation

It became evident early on that the number of Chintang speakers is much higher than the census data suggested (officially there were only 8 speakers!). Our latest estimates suggest that there are around 3500 first-language speakers of Chintang and more than 3000 who speak it as a second or third language. In fact, it turned out that within Chintang VDC

most residents speak Chintang either as their first language or as an additional language. Only very few speak nothing but Nepali .

So far the data collected indicate:

- that most speakers in Chintang are multilingual;
- that there are three categories of Chintang speakers:
 - a. ethnic Chintang who speak Chintang as mother tongue,
 - b. ethnic non-Chintang (mostly other Rai) who speak Chintang as their mother tongue;
 - c. ethnic non-Chintang (including non-Rai) who speak Chintang as second or third language;
- that Nepali is spoken by practically everyone as a *lingua franca*.

Study of social organization and settlement structure

Data on the distribution of clans and marriage patterns were collected for the ethnographic part of our (ongoing) survey. Besides the 12 genuine Chintang clans, there are no less than 37 other Rai clans or quasi-clans (such as Dumi or Kulung, which are actually different Rai groups but are treated like clans) in Chintang VDC. This is a surprising variety of clans and testifies to the complex migration history of the area, since these non-Chintang Rai have apparently settled there in more recent times. The survey also indicates that marriage alliances mainly take place within the village VDC or else with members in neighbouring VDC.

Recordings

A considerable number of recordings (ca. 280 hours) could be completed during the first one and a half years, of which most have been cut into “sessions” (altogether 609 so far). While the large majority of these recordings are part of the Child Language Acquisition subproject (see below), a valuable corpus of oral traditions has been recorded, including myths, legends, folk stories, songs, and above all rituals. Moreover, ordinary language has been documented in the form of life stories, descriptive accounts, interviews, conversations.

The narrative tradition of the Chintang is different from that of the central Kiranti groups and does not seem to contain the well-known episodes of the creator couple or the orphan story. Nevertheless, there is a rich tradition of folk tales, historical legends and origin stories, which usually show considerable Hindu influence.

In the first year most of the major rituals and festivals of the annual cycle could be documented: the full moon festival in Baisakh, the fertility rituals in spring (*yupun*), the *nuwāgi* ritual cycle in autumn, as well as the six day *Wadhanmi* festival, the most important celebration of the Chintang

community. Further a number of life-cycle rituals (rice-feeding ceremony, marriages, funeral, etc.) and shamanic seances have been recorded.

The songs recorded so far are mainly creations of young Chintang speakers who were proud to have these recorded. It is not yet clear in what respect one can speak of a genuine Chintang tradition of songs, as there is a lot of influence across ethnic and linguistic boundaries in this field.

Linguistic analysis

Several dozen verbal paradigms have been collected and analysed. We have performed a complete morphological analysis of the affixal system and the stem structure (compound and bipartite stems). The Chintang verb inflects non-periphrastically for tense (past vs. nonpast), aspect (perfective/simple vs. perfect vs. imperfective), polarity (affirmative vs. negative), mood (indicative vs. subjunctive), and agrees in various alignment patterns with the single argument of intransitives (S) and with both the A (actor) and P (primary object) arguments of transitives. The system is supplemented by a rich array of clitics (enclitics and endoclitics) and (both derivational and inflectional) stem compounds. The most surprising discoveries are (a) free prefix ordering (Bickel et al. 2005a), (b) triplication that is demonstrably not based on recursively applied reduplication, and (c) the marking one kind of imperfective aspect as the last morpheme in a suffix string. All three findings violate universal expectations and play a key role in the second year of the project.

Along with morphological analysis, we have recorded and analysed the phonology. Special attention was given to minimal pair collection and to determining syllable and word structure. The minimal word is CV, where the onset is supplied by a glottal stop if there is no underlying consonant present. Grammatical words are regularly composed of several smaller phonological units that play a key role in the distribution of affixes.

Child Language Acquisition Study

We have been recording six children over a period of eighteen months. Two children were two years old at the beginning of recording, two were three years old, and in addition we recorded two babies aged six months at the beginning of the study. The babies were added to the study in order to get an impression of speech directed to prelinguistic infants, the socio-cognitive development of the children, and the general environment of their growing-up. This will give us the social contexts of when language is used to prelinguistic infants, what languages the child is exposed to, and how much child-directed speech there is. The children were chosen by our research assistant and then recorded on a monthly basis with video. The two- and three-year-olds were recorded once a month for approximately four hours.

The babies were recorded for two hours every two months. The recordings within a monthly cycle were not necessarily consecutive, but the most important factor for recording was a natural environment with the mother being partly present and the child being active. The criterion was that the recordings of one cycle took place within the same week. The children were recorded in their typical daily activities with family, other children and other adults present. After the babies complete their first birthday, they are recorded only every three months. The data is collected by our research assistant with the support of local assistants, who are familiar with the families and their daily life.

In addition to the transcriptions, translations, and glossing, we coded three cycles of the babies, the two-year-olds and the three-year-olds in order to assess the environment in which language acquisition takes place. We coded for all the utterances of the child and all the utterances addressed to the child, pointing for the child and by the child, showing of objects to the child and by the child, and any kind of teaching the child was involved in. This will allow us to analyse the recordings systematically.

First results of the Puma project

Language situation

According to our preliminary survey, the Puma language is spoken mainly in Diplung, Mauwabhote, Pauwasera, Chisapani and Devasthan VDC. In these VDCs the Puma as an ethnic group are clearly in the majority. Most Puma above 30 still have some knowledge of the Puma language, but competence varies considerably. There are quite a few elders who possess cultural knowledge but no longer speak Puma, while there are younger people with little cultural knowledge but do. Language competence appears to vary from family to family. Especially the villages along the Beltar-Khotang trail (which is a major supply route for the Majh Kirat region) have fewer speakers, while the villages off such trails are more conservative. Clearly, the VDC of Mauwabhote falls in the latter category: here even smaller children speak the language fluently. Besides the core area of the above mentioned 4 VDCs, Puma is spoken by emigrant Puma in Beltar, Siddhipur, and Madibas, as well as in a number of other villages. Careful estimates roughly confirm the official number of Puma speakers to be ca. 4000. However, many Puma speakers feel that their language is of little value, and thus retention tends to be very low.

Study of social organization and settlement structure

Our preliminary survey covers about half of the above-mentioned core area. The average number of households per ward is around 35-40 and thus much lower than in the case of Chintang VDC (where the average is around 100).

Thus the fact that the core area extends over 5 VDCs has to be seen against this background: as a group, the Puma are not much bigger than the Chintang. The survey of clans also confirms this. The number of Puma clans is usually given as twelve: these are divided into two groups, the *sāt pāchā* ('seven clans') who descend from Dabalung, and the *pāñc pāchā* ('five clans') who descend from Palung. Both groups are said to derive from one and the same ancestor, as Dabalung is seen as the elder brother of Palung. While this division may look like a moiety system, the duality does not have any implications for marriage: as long as the principle of clan exogamy is observed, marriage alliances are possible both within and across the two proto-clans. In any case, it is clear that the "senior" proto-clan is much larger and, in fact, many of the clans have already subdivided into sub-clans through a practice of sanctioned fission which is possible after seven generations in the patriline. The wards in the Puma core area are generally dominated by the Puma, numerous hamlets being exclusively inhabited by them. As compared to the Chintang situation, there are relatively few outside immigrants. However, there are a significant number of Chetri (mainly of the Khadka clan), and there are also several households of Bantawa, Camling (other Rai groups), Kami and Sarki (Nepali speaking occupational castes). Interestingly, the immigrant Rai usually adopted the local Puma language as their mother tongue.

Recordings

In the first one and a half years a total of 210 sessions were recorded. As among the Chintang, a collection of ordinary conversations, life stories, and descriptive accounts constitutes a corpus for the study of everyday language use. A major round of recordings, done during our stay in the core area in autumn 2004, provided a broad variety of genres, including elaborate myths, ritual invocations, recitations and songs.

The Puma narrative tradition (unlike the Chintang tradition) is clearly a variant of those central Rai traditions which have a closely related body of episodes ranging from creation through a divine couple, the orphan culture hero, to a history of migration and first settlement. As among various other Rai groups, the divine couple is known as Sunnima and Paruhang, whereas the orphan culture hero is known as Hetchakupka (similarly as among the Chamling).

Most of the seasonal rituals could be recorded, mainly in collaboration with an elder who is a ritual specialist (*ṅapon*): *samkha*, *phagu*, and *candi nāc*, the fertility rites celebrated in April/May, and the harvest rituals, *nuwāgi*, in September. Further, two ancestral blood sacrifices (*khaliphenma*), one rice-feeding ceremony, and one marriage ritual were recorded, as well as shamanic seances.

As in Chintang, Puma youths are enthusiastic song-writers. Many young males and females have asked us to record their newly created songs, many of which deplore the loss of their mother tongue and ancestral language. But there is also a rich heritage of more traditional songs which could be documented (e.g. *dohori*).

Linguistics

Analysis of Puma verb forms brought out an unexpectedly complex conjugation system, manifesting itself through both categorical and lexical factors on stem alternations (ablaut, various gemination patterns) and affix allomorphy. We recorded over 100 intransitive verb paradigms in the past and non-past affirmative and negative, plus around 30 transitive verb paradigms in the same tense and polarity categories. A complete analysis of the system is now available as an MA thesis (Stutz 2005). One important discovery was the regular use of a prefix *kha-* to mark generic-patient (antipassive) forms with about two dozen verb stems. In other Kiranti languages (including Chintang), generic-patient forms are formed by intransitive inflection of transitive verbs, resembling noun incorporation (Weidert & Subba 1985, Angdembe 1998, Bickel 2004). The same prefix *kha-* has also made its way into the agreement paradigm, where it marks forms with a first person nonsingular patient (Bickel et al. 2005b). This has been reported for other Kiranti languages (Ebert 1991), but the Puma data now reveal the origin of this prefix as a generic-patient marker that became obligatory with first person nonsingular patients (perhaps as a face-saving strategy, since it avoids specific mentioning of ‘us’ as patients).

Project website: <http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~ff/cpdp>

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