

A Grammar of the Thangmi Language

by Mark Turin

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Reviewed by Heleen Plaisier

The grammar of the Thangmi language is now documented by Mark Turin in a monograph that serves as a true monument to the Thangmi language and culture. Linguists will greatly appreciate Turin's exemplary linguistic description, but this remarkable book is not merely of interest to those specialist colleagues. Turin's expertise combines anthropology and descriptive linguistics, and in this treasure trove of new information on the Thangmi, Turin offers us the best of these two fields. The monograph includes comprehensive discussions of many aspects of Thangmi life and culture, so that much of this book will appeal to anyone who is interested in the cultural and linguistic diversity of Nepal.

Thangmi is an endangered Tibeto-Burman language, which is spoken in Dolakhā and Sindupālchok districts in Nepal, and in Darjeeling district in India. Overall, the Thangmi are represented by more than 40,000 people, but it is estimated that just 20,000 people speak the Thangmi language. The Thangmi people designate themselves as Thangmi, though their shamans call the group Thani, and in Nepali they are referred to as Thami. The monograph is based on Turin's doctoral dissertation, for which he undertook a series of fieldtrips between 1997 and 2004 to Dāmārān in Dolakhā and Cokaṭī in Sindhupālcok of Bagmatī zone in Nepal and to Darjeeling district in India.

The first volume of this monograph starts out with a straightforward discussion of the genetic affinity and linguistic classification of Thangmi, which is followed by a discussion of the Thangmi ethnolinguistic context. This part gives ample attention to the distribution of Thangmi speakers, language status, dialects and multilingualism, the Thangmi mythological world, religious beliefs, indigenous ethnonyms and place names and an overview of the few previous studies on Thangmi. This chapter also discusses the complex details of the Thangmi clan and kinship system, which can be regarded as reflections of the intricate nature of Thangmi socio-cultural life. This ethnolinguistic chapter stands out by being much more

exhaustive than the cursory introductions found in most grammatical descriptions.

The chapters that follow present Turin's linguistic description. Thangmi has thirty-two consonants and six vowels and does not distinguish vowel length. There are also seven diphthongs, which are particularly common in loans from Nepali. Turin carefully describes and discusses Thangmi phonology and some morphophonological regularities, giving minimal pairs and further examples, including any possible influence of Nepali. The nominal morphology includes comprehensive descriptions of nouns, adjectives, pronouns and numerals. The grammatical cases distinguished in this grammar are absolutive, ergative, instrumental, genitive, locative, comitative, ablative and direct or indirect object markers. The native Thangmi numeral system, which is losing ground in favour of the Nepali numeral system, displays some intriguing features that include numeral classifiers. The verbal morphology of Thangmi is extremely complicated, as it codes verbal agreement for agent or subject and object. Turin's analysis of this intricate system in Thangmi is followed by descriptions of verbal constructions and morphosyntax.

Turin's detailed description of the complex verbal agreement system of Thangmi elucidates the linguistic position of Thangmi within the Tibeto-Burman languages. Thangmi is now convincingly shown to be closely related to Barām, which is spoken in Gorkha district in central Nepal, and both languages should be placed close to Newar. Thangmi is also related to the complex-pronominalising Kiranti languages, which together with Newar have been referred to as the Mahākirāntī group. Turin's description shows that Thangmi is not canonically Kiranti. For example, in striking contrast to many Kiranti languages, Thangmi verbs on the whole show no paradigmatic stem alternations. Verbal agreement morphemes are never superfluous and may not be dropped. Thangmi also exhibits a pattern of split ergativity, which is similar but essentially different to that of the Kiranti type.

The second volume contains translations and analyses of forty-five Thangmi texts, which add up to an impressive three hundred pages. These texts were recorded by Turin himself during his fieldwork and represent a variety of speech styles, ranging from shamanic narratives and monologues to spontaneous colloquial conversations between Thangmi speakers. The texts are followed by an extensive Thangmi-English-Nepali

dictionary, which includes example sentences and phrases. The second volume concludes with appendices, a bibliography and an index to both volumes.

Turin recognises two dialects in Thangmi, one spoken in Dolakhā and another in Sindhupālcok. He focuses on the dialect of Dolakhā, but frequently indicates differences between the two dialects. The Dolakhā dialect exhibits a verbal agreement system that appears to be more complete and archaic than the verbal morphology of the Sindhupālcok dialect. In terms of nominal morphology, the Sindhupālcok dialect seems more complex, preserving a range of locative case suffixes and numeral classifiers that are not present in the Dolakhā dialect. Turin also discusses how little socio-economic interaction there is between the two dialect groups and how Thangmi speakers place great emphasis on the dialectal differences between the two groups.

Throughout the book, sample sentences are used to elucidate and contextualise analyses, and the texts and dictionary that are provided furnish the reader with further information. If there were one small criticism to make, it would be that not all parts of this monograph are evenly balanced, as some sections go into considerably more detail than others. Also, it would be interesting to read more on the different parts of speech, types of nominalisation and tense in Thangmi. These are only minor points that do not diminish the magnitude of this work. Turin's style is clear and comprehensive, and his analyses are transparent and convincing. This monograph documents and describes previously undescribed aspects of the Thangmi language, clarifies earlier linguistic discussions and contains new manifestations of the Thangmi language, which makes it an immensely valuable storehouse of information on Thangmi. Mark Turin's wide interests and extensive research have resulted in a magnificent grammar that should serve as a compelling model for future descriptive linguists and should be treasured by all those interested in the various linguistic and cultural traditions of Nepal.

