

### Citation

Jagar Dorji (2011) Hen Kha: A Dialect of mangde Valley in Bhutan, *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 24 (Summer 2011), pp.69-86.



## Hen Kha: A Dialect of Mangde Valley in Bhutan<sup>€</sup>

Jagar Dorji\*

### Abstract

*Language is the main mechanism by which we humans understand each other. Binding a community, region or nation, language provides a major cohesive force that serves to identify and distinguish amongst societies and cultures.*

*In Bhutan, a Himalayan nation of about 650,000 people, nineteen unique dialects can be found within its borders, with a marked diversion in the eastern half of the country. With a comparatively small geographic area of some 37,000 square kilometers, this is testimony to the country's vast cultural wealth. However, challenges brought along with the processes of modernisation which had begun only fifty years ago, are placing these languages in jeopardy as there is a growing shift towards other, more international languages.*

*This paper presents research on Hen Kha, a dialect of the Mangde region found in the central district of Trongsa. As dialects around the world are perishing at an alarming rate, there is a deep concern about the future of Hen Kha and the other dialects of Bhutan whose presence helps reveal the cultural diversity of the country. The present analysis*

---

<sup>€</sup> This paper was presented at a special joint Association for Asian Studies (AAS) — International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) conference, Honolulu, US, 31 March–3 April 2011. I am thankful to Ms Ariana Maki for her comments and suggestions.

\* Member of Parliament, National Council of Bhutan; correspondence: jdorji@gmail.com

*explores the effects of modernisation and urban migration on local vernacular, as well as the grass root efforts to conserve such languages, such as communities that are actively cultivating programming in the local dialect. Fortunately, there is still time for Bhutan to actively preserve such dialects so that they do not disappear into oblivion.*

## **Introduction**

Language is more than a means of communication. It is through language that we identify and distinguish ourselves from others (RGoB, 1999).

We also establish our connections with others through language. In Bhutan, Dzongkha has been the national language since 19608, though its usage dates to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century.

The geographical area of Bhutan is approximately 37000 square kilometers, and is home to about 650,000 people. For its size and population there are nineteen recognized dialects spoken in the country, which have been categorised into eight groups. In practice, however, if one were to travel cross-country, a different dialect can be found in almost every valley. Dzongkha, the national language, is predominant in the western part of the country, although with varying accents and tones, whilst in eastern Bhutan there is a greater diversity of distinct dialects.

## **The dialects of Bhutan**

The dialects of Bhutan can be roughly categorised as follows, almost all of which fall into the Tibeto-Burman family of languages:

The *Dzongkha Group* includes the Chhochha Ngacha, Drogpa Kha and Ngalong Kha. Ngalong Kha, which is the same as Dzongkha,

is spoken in the seven districts of western Bhutan. Chhochha Ngacha is spoken in small pockets of Mongar, Lhuentse and Trashigang districts in the east while Droghpa Kha is spoken by the semi-nomadic dwellers of high altitude settlements. Though a shared language, the particular accent of each group is a telltale sign of their homeland.

- *Bumthang kha* Group is named after the dialect spoken in the north central district of Bumthang. This dialect, with some variation in accent and intonation, is spoken in Khen districts to the south, and areas in Lhuentse and Trongsa districts. Though Chali Kha, spoken by the Chali community in Mongar, and the Zala Kha spoken in Trashi Yangtse district are distinct from Bumthang Kha, they have been classified in this group.
- *Tshangla* group includes dialects spoken in the districts of Mongar, Trashigang, Pema Gatshel and Samdrup Jongkhar. Though it covers a wide geographic area, there is almost no variation in the vocabulary used. The next three dialects are linguistically isolated and found in small pockets of the country.
- *Lhobi Kha* is spoken only in the south western part of the country by a small ethnic community.
- *Gongdue Kha* is heard only in the lower part of Mongar district.
- *Mon Kha* is spoken in smaller communities spread through the rugged terrain of south central Trongsa district as well as a small community to the west of the Black Mountain range in Wangdue Phodrang district.

- *Indo Aryan* languages are spoken by immigrant Bhutanese who arrived via Nepal and northern India. This group includes a number of regional/kinship group dialects such as Lepcha, Rai, Limboo, Tamang, Sherpa, Gurung and Newar.

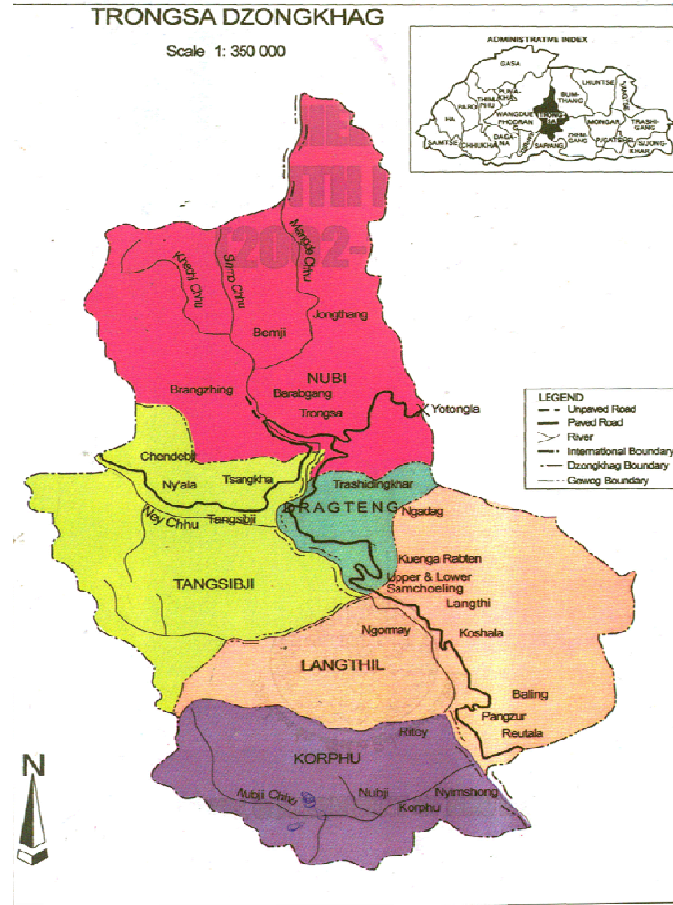
*Hen Kha*, the focus of this paper, is spoken in parts of Trongsa and Wangdue Phodrang districts. While the linguist G. van Driem (1990), inserted this dialect into the Bumthang kha family, in fact, these dialects are not mutually understandable and deserve their own category.

### **Hen Kha in the Mangde District**

The name Hen Kha, or ‘early language’, suggests that it may have preceded other languages. Today’s speakers of Hen Kha are found confined to the eastern, northern and western buttresses of the Black Mountain ranges. Hen Kha is also known as Nyn Kha or Nga Ked. Van Driem and the School of International Languages (SIL) classify Hen Kha as Tibeto-Chinese, Himalayan, Tibeto-Burman and Tibeto-Kinauri.

Around the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD the western regions of Bhutan came in contact with visitors and traders from Tibet and India, bringing economic, religious and social gains. This contact and its subsequent benefits gave the population the name of ‘Nga Long’, or early riser. It is thought that the people “rose from the darkness of primordial circumstances”, and incorporated significant amounts of Buddhist Dharma language into the dialect, which eventually came to be known as Nga-long-kha, the language of early riser. Hence, ‘Nga Long’ refers to the comparatively early development and advancement of a part of the country, a term that differs from ‘Ngoen Lung’, referring to settlements that pre-existed that rising from the darkness.

*Map of Trongsa (Mande) district*



In Mangde, each dialect is usually referred to by the name of the village in which it is spoken. For example, in the Tangsibi Gewog it is known as Tangsibjee Kha or Tshangkhapai Kha, in Chendebji as Chendebjipai Kha and so on. This pattern has led to the almost total abandonment of the general term Hen Kha. Apart from a few older people and the 1991 study conducted by the Dzongkha

Development Commission of the Royal Government, the term Hen Kha might have become obsolete. Many adults that I spoke to in the course of my research had never encountered the term Hen Kha.

### **The Geography of Hen Kha**

Hen Kha is delineated on the map by a liver shaped area in the centre. It is a dialect of few settlements in Wangdue Phodrang, formerly known as Shar region.



*Source: George van Driem, Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region, Vol. 1: Dzongkha. Please note: the northern boundary today is different from what appears in this map.*

The map reveals that settlements using Hen Kha are essentially bounded on the east and west by the Dang Chu (river) and the Mangde Chu in Mangde district (Map 2). Its northern boundary abuts the Himalayas, while its southern reaches stop along the foothills, which border a humid and malarial region.



In Mangde district the Mangde Chu (river) creates the boundary between Hen Kha and non Hen Kha speakers. Bumthang Kha speakers live on the east side of the river while Hen Kha speakers live on the west, with the exception of four small communities that will be described in due course.

The settlements to the west of Mangde Chu, where Hen Kha is spoken are Pang, Bemji, Kaba, Daba, Sinphu, Chela and Drengzhi in the Nubi County; in Chendebji, Nyala, Drangla, Tshangkha, Tangsibji and Kela in Tangsibji County; in Changra, Tang-je<sup>1</sup>, Eusa and Trashi Dingkha in Dragten County.

Some elder people in Eusa say that in the earliest years of the 20th century, prior to the reign of the first King of Bhutan, the community consisted of about thirty households called *khrelpa* (thraep), or tax payers. Later, people from elsewhere came to serve the King and settled there, creating a multi-lingual community. These later settlers now outnumber Hen Kha speakers.

To the west of Mangde and in high altitude valleys of the Black Mountains, there are isolated settlements that speak Hen Kha. They are Rukubji, Bumpailo and Phobjikha, all of Wangdue Phodrang district. Although these villages speak the same dialect, there are variations in certain vocabularies, tones and diction among the different settlements. Through the particularities of speaking, it is possible to identify the village of the speaker (*sample conversation from two different regions on video*).

The linguist George Van Driem maintains that Chutoebi Kha and Labi kha spoken in Sephu Gewog, to the east of Black Mountain range, are the same. This is arguable. In the past, the people of Sephu Gewog were traders, carrying their merchandise far and wide. This was how they learnt to be able to understand and even speak in many dialects. However, Labi Kha is not easily

comprehensible to a Hen Kha speaker. According to SIL, in order to belong to the same dialect or the same dialect group, two languages must share at least 85 percent of their vocabularies. The average Hen Kha speaker would certainly comprehend much less than 15 percent of the conversations with the native of Sephu village.

What can be established from Van Driem's statement is that Labi Kha may also be one of the earliest dialects spoken in the country. Hence, the term Hen Kha is not limited to one dialect and therefore must include Labi Kha. It is assumed that since as traders they made contacts with Tibet in the north and Nga-long region of Bhutan to the west, Labi Kha has dzongkha and Tibetan influence, since many vocabularies used in the Labi Kha are similar to Dzongkha and Tibetan.

There is however, a closer social and economic association between the speakers of Labi Kha and Hen Kha until about twenty years ago. Generally, Hen Kha speakers raised sheep, providing them with wool, meat and organic manure for their farms. Between April and September, natives of high altitude settlements (the speakers of Labi Kha) herded sheep for a fee, exchanging their services for low altitude cereals. This business relationship encouraged frequent interaction between the two groups. Also, until recently, Bonpo orators from the Labi Kha speaking areas were annually invited to Hen Kha speaking villages. Religious ties such as this might have further encouraged understanding between these groups.

Again, according to Van Driem, Hen Kha has the following lexical similarities with other languages of Bhutan. 75 to 77 percent of its words are lexically similar to Bumthang Kha, 69 percent similar to the language of Kurtoe, 65 to 78 percent similar to Khen Kha and 60 percent with Dzongkha. If two languages with less than 85

percent words common to each other belong to the same group, then these languages fall within the Dzongkha group, but the classification shown in the beginning of this article indicates differently.

### Comparison of words between languages of Bhutan

The table below shows a comparison of vocabularies between two dialects of Hen Kha and Zhag Ked with Dzongkha. A rough English translation is also provided.

#### Day-to-day conversation and vocabularies

Hen kha	Zhagked	Dzongkha	English
Ngai bren	Ngai bran	Nga gi shed	I know
Neyi bren	Ngei bran	Ngache gi shed	We know
Yeyi bren (singlur)	Weri bran	Choera gi shed	You know
Yidi bren (plural)	Yinji bran	Chaed ki shed	You know
Khi bren	Khiji bran	Kho /Mo gi shed	He/she knows
Boeyi bren	Boji bran	Khong gi shed	They know
Tsoenda sho/shey	Tshor shai	Tshur shog	Come here
Thamda shoo/shi	Thur galae	Phar song	Go there
Uda yi-dze-lo/ uda-chu-dze-lo	Ao gaimila	Gatey Joney-mo	Going where?
Aewae ra-dze-lo ? Aewae tshangdze lo	Arba ra-mi-la?	Nam 'Ong-ni-mo?	Coming when?
Mi-yi-ga/michuga	Megaila	Mi-jo-ga	Not going?
Laeshi/laachugshi	Gaiba /Chongba	Yar-soyi	Gone
A-dzo nee/bongee	Otshor nilae	Ana doed	Sit here
Yoen-da-lang/langee	Khag Yangae	Yar long	Stand up

Doe/doegyí	Dodlai	Nyaeda	Sleep
Shae-ma-chae	Tshor-mabu-ye	Daebe mabey	I beg you
Dangnee	Thenla	Kha-nyim	Day-before
Dawl	Dangla	Khatsa	Yesterday
Dasu	Dasum/dusum	Dari	Today
Naembae	Yamba	Naba	Tomorrow
Naemu	Nasmung	Naatshe	Day after

### **Food and grains**

Roo	Ruk	Tshoem	Curry
Zoo/zayee	Zooye	Za	Eat
Khu	Khurba	Khule	Pan cake
Sehm	Iba	Rae	Paddy
chhung	Thrung	Chhum	Rice
pChhi	Phi	pChhi	Flour
Nes	Nad	Naa	Barley
Zeng	Kar	Kaa	Wheat
Bangal	Bangala	Ema	Chilli
Gaerae	Chara	Gerey	Sweet Buckwheat
Braem	Branma	Bjo	Buckwheat
kyaduhm	Ashom	Ashom/gaeza	Maize
Kheh	Khoe	Chhu	Water
Kapch	kebtang	Kebta	Bread

### Animals

Khawm	Khaga	bJam	Hen
Khag	Khari	Bjapoe	Rooster
Khuechu	bJaoya	bJichu	Chicken
Bah	Bah	Bah	Cow
Bar	Bari/Buri	Lang	Ox/bull
Idza	Bouya	Bouchung	Calf
Pra	Pra	pCha	Monkey
Sabar	Sawar	Phao	Wild dog
Wom	Wam	Dom	Bear

### Hen Kha Grammar

In Hen Kha, a pronoun is gender neutral while there are verbs for singular and plural nouns. For example, *khi ra do de* (he/she is coming); *boe tsangdo de* (they are coming); *'nga yigdo* (I am going); *ney lachbugdo* (we are going); *ye sho lo wae?* (you (singular) please come ok!); *yid sheylo wae?* (you (plural), please come ok!).

In Dzongkha the plural form of the verb is identified by the nouns, however, in Hen kha both nouns and verbs can be singular or plural. When the subject changes from singular to plural, the verbs in object also change as shown in Table 2 below. In most dialects of Bhutan, the plural form of the verb is understood through changes in nouns/subjects. The verbs remain same irrespective of whether the subjects are singular or plural.

Table 2: the use of plural and singular nouns and verbs

Nouns	Verbs		Singular/ Plural
ཁོ/མོ/ He/she	འདྲེན་པོ/ is coming	དྲི་འདྲེན་པོ	གཞིག་ཚེག/ Singular
མོས་པོས་/ They	ཚང་དོ་འདྲེན་པོ/ are coming	དྲི་འདྲེན་པོ	མང་ཚེག/ Plural
ང་།/ I	ཞེག་དོ་འཇུག་དོ/ am going	ལྷོ་ལྷོ་འཇུག་དོ	གཞིག་ཚེག/ Singular
ཞིང་འབྲས་པོ།/ We	ལྷོ་ལྷོ་དོ་འཇུག་དོ/ are going	ལྷོ་ལྷོ་འཇུག་དོ	མང་ཚེག/ plural
གཤམ་འཇུག་དོ/ you	ཤོག་ལོ་འཇུག་དོ/ come	ལྷོ་ལྷོ་འཇུག་དོ/ ok!	གཞིག་ཚེག/ singular
ཡིང་འཇུག་དོ/ you	ཤོག་ལོ་འཇུག་དོ/ come	ལྷོ་ལྷོ་འཇུག་དོ/ ok!	མང་ཚེག/ plural
ཁོ/མོ/ he/she	ལས་ཤི་ཡིང་མོ་ཡི་ཤོག་དོ/ has gone	ལྷོ་ལྷོ་འཇུག་དོ	གཞིག་ཚེག/ singular
མོས་པོས་/ They	ལྷོ་ལྷོ་དོ་ཡིང་མོ་ཡི་ཤོག་དོ/ have gone	ལྷོ་ལྷོ་འཇུག་དོ	མང་ཚེག/ plural

**Note:** Words in the bracket ། are Dzongkha.

### How important is Hen Kha?

Hen Kha is the dialect of a very few communities. Its modern speakers conform to a distinct geographic area around the Black Mountains. Located in the centre of the country, they could have migrated elsewhere, yet remained in this harsh environment, infested with wild animals and pests. The resourcefulness that Hen Kha speaking culture has demonstrated over the centuries shows a unique approach to deriving necessities from the surrounding environment, be it clothing, food or shelter. Hen Kha, as do all dialects of Bhutan, adds to cultural diversity. Bhutan's uniqueness is partly characterized by its cultural divergence despite its small size and population. Frequently, accumulated knowledge is encoded in written language (Barth, 2000), but this is not the case in dialects, which must ensure survival of the tradition through effective oral transmission. According to the DDC survey (1991), research into language (for that matter the dialects) can expand the understanding of Bhutan's rich cultural heritage and linguistic history. Unfortunately, as the number of speakers declines, the

impetus to learn Hen Kha similarly decreases, further endangering the dialect.

*Table 3: Speakers of Hen Kha in different parts of the region*

District	County/villages	Number of speakers	
		1991	2010
Mangde/ Trongsa	Tangsibi Gewog:	1848	1198
	Dragteng Gewog:	697	1280
	Nubi Gewog:	3500	1522
Shar/Wangue Phodrang	Athang Gewog:	208	505
	Dangchu Gewog:	1299	885
	Phobji Gewog:	1929	1930
	Sephu Gewog:	n.a	530
	Gangtey Gewog:	n.a	814
	Rubisa Gewog:	n.a	30
	Bjena Gewog:	n.a	4
	Total		11472

*Source: Population and Census, 2005 and personal collection 2010.*

### **Hen Kha Today**

The 1991 census indicated there are 11,472 speakers of Hen Kha. My personal research has revealed that as of October 2010, this number has dropped to 8,692. Rural-urban migration and shifting of landless families to new settlement areas are two driving factors for this drop in population.

### *Modernisation and Hen Kha*

Recent research reveals that despite rigorous efforts by the Dzongkha Development Commission, Dzongkha seems to receive

lukewarm interest<sup>2</sup>, and there is even less interest in local dialects. Not surprisingly, this study suggests English has less of a problem attracting learners, primarily due to its international nature and the wholesale importation of English terms for new technology.

There are a number of trends that threaten regional dialects, as systematized by Ethnologue<sup>3</sup>, which can be applied to the present state of Hen Kha in Bhutan:

### **Modernisation trends**

Many dialects in Bhutan have become essentially non-functional in relation to governance and development. Local speakers must adopt the lingua franca in order to understand and communicate scientific and technical terms. As Bhutan began modernizing at a comparatively late date, the jump has been primarily to English for trade transactions as well as economic, political and social relations. If this has not resulted in abandoning local dialects, it has definitely diluted the vocabularies making it sound like a different dialect.

### **Internal migration and movement**

Historically, the population of Mangde, as in most of Bhutan, lived on subsistence farming. Slash and burn and crop rotation methods were most frequently used in an effort to coax the most output from the harsh landscape. In an attempt to discourage this environmentally unsound practice, many families were granted more fertile lands, albeit in other parts of the country. Families who left their villages essentially abandoned Hen Kha once they arrived in their new communities as minority migrants. Migration due to other types of employment has had the same effect on Hen Kha speakers once they shift to a new region.



### **Youth and Hen Kha**

It is up to the youth to carry on local dialects; however, given the voracious appetite of Bhutanese youth for foreign cultures, many are less open and proud of their dialect and culture. Rather, it is a sign of status to concentrate on English over local language, and often over Dzongkha, much to the detriment of the dialect. However, there is cause for some hope.

In my conversations with students from Hen Kha speaking villages studying in three different schools, it was revealed that an overwhelming majority currently speaks the dialect fluently and believes the dialect will not disappear, though in school it is used only about half of any given day. As these students are required to study two main languages—Dzongkha and English—most are pre-occupied with those classes.

Further, in some cases parents prefer to speak Dzongkha or English with their children. Sometimes this can be attributed to modernisation in Bhutan. By creating a greater network of roads and transportation, couples from different linguistic groups have started families; families whose children tend to live with whatever language is more strongly emphasized. In this way, intergenerational transmission of a dialect like Hen Kha is subject to reduced use or loss. One 2003 study revealed that many people tend to initially become bilingual and later shift to mono-lingual, preferring to use the acquired language (generally Dzongkha or English) and leaving out the dialect of their youth.<sup>4</sup>

### **Consequences of Losing Hen Kha**

First, as dialect is closely linked to culture, its loss may lead to disruption in the social and cultural grounding of that speaker. Secondly, it is a loss of linguistic diversity for the linguistic and

social environments. Thirdly, for the scholarly community, it represents the loss of the oral history and traditions of an entire subculture. Each language or a dialect, along with its associated folklore, contains history; tales and language that reveals how people lived, toiled the soils and tended their animals, who and what they worshiped and how they organized their social affairs.

### **Suggestions to Preserve the Dialect**

The first avenue of preservation lies in education. There are several reasons for introducing students to dialect diversity as a systematic part of the language arts curriculum. First, there is a need to challenge popular myths about dialects. In Bhutanese culture, there seems to be a marked misunderstanding of the role of dialects in society, with many subcultures viewing local languages with embarrassment and shyness. To many modern Bhutanese, to suggest that local dialects should be a source of pride is met with the same skepticism as would a modern geophysicist claiming the earth is flat.

In order to understand the true dynamics of language and its role in society and education, students need a basic understanding of the nature and development of dialect differences. Students have a right to obtain accurate information about dialects, which provides them with the opportunity to confront current dialect stereotypes and prejudices.

The study of dialects also offers a unique, fascinating window through which the nature of language may be viewed. Dialect diversity seems to pique practically everyone's natural curiosity, and this inherent interest can be seized upon to help language come alive for students. Language comes alive when students actively examine how language varies over time and space, including regional, social, ethnic, gender, and other types of social

and physical 'space'. For example, the fact that the Hen Kha counting systems stops at the number twenty and thereafter the counts are in the repeated scores such as two scores, three scores, ten scores, fifteen scores and 20 scores imply the humble and minimum needs of earlier times.

The active study of dialect structure further offers an approach for developing critical thinking skills in students. Dialect differences provide a natural laboratory, allowing students to hypothesize about certain dialect forms and then pursue first-hand research. This type of scientific inquiry can help develop higher order thinking skills in students.

Radio is an effective medium for communication, and most valleys provide an opportunity to broadcast on local radio stations in the dialect of that valley. For example, as people approach Shar valley, the local radio station reveals characteristic Shar cadence and tones, yet while heading over Pelela towards the east, the local radio switches to Hen Kha, followed soon after by other Mangde dialects, Bumthang kha and Tshang La as one proceeds eastward.

### **Conclusion**

The Kings and leaders of Bhutan have brought in unprecedented and rapid progress in terms of economic development. At the same time, there has been a concerted effort to preserve long-standing traditions in the face of such change. It was less than four years ago that our beloved Monarch handed the country over to the people, establishing democracy and being granted the opportunity to directly participate in our future.

Bhutanese dialects, Hen Kha or otherwise, are part of the backbone of our culture. In Mangde valley alone the four major dialects, with their variations in diction and style, and the richness

of the associated folklore in each provide sources to better understand how these peoples have negotiated the past and see the future. Each dialect offers a notable opportunity for proper academic research regarding its history and development. However, the available pool of dialects is deteriorating year by year. For example, there is a dialect in Bhutan which has only one speaker remaining, an elderly woman. It seems likely that the rate of loss will outpace our efforts to preserving them unless additional initiatives are put into place.

On the other hand, this Association of Asian Studies Conference has given me the opportunity to present, superficial as it may be, a recent study on this unique dialect of Mangde Valley. As a speaker of Hen Kha, I will feel the impact of losing this dialect more acutely than others. I conclude here with an aspiration that the concerns expressed in this paper will be heeded by fellow academics, and that this study will encourage additional work towards the preservation of local languages.

#### **References**

- Lewis, M. Paul (ed.) (2009). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Sixteenth edition. Dallas, Texax. <http://www.ethnologue.com/>
- Namgyal, S (2003) *Language Web of Bhutan*. Thimphu: Norbu Rabten Press.
- Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) (1999). *Bhutan Vision 2020*. Thimphu: Planning Commission.
- Wolfram, Walt (1990). <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9215/arts.htm>
- Van Driem, George (1990). *Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region, Vol. 1: Dzongkha*. Thimphu: DDC