Volume 19, Number 2
July 1992

CONTRIBUTIONS TO NEPALESE STUDIES

Journal of
Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies
Tribhuvan University
Kirtipur, Nepal
CNAS

CONTRIBUTIONS TO NEPALESE STUDIES CNAS VOL. 19, NO. 2 JULY 1992

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का.प्र.जि.का.अ.का.प.द.नं. ३२-०३०

IN QUEST OF MAHĀKIRĀNTĪ

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The birth of Mahākirāntī

After my grammatical studies of Limbu and Dumi, I undertook to make a study of Lohorung.[1] Before this work could be completed, I was called to Bhutan in 1989 where I was asked to write a first grammar of Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan. Simultaneously, the Royal Government of Bhutan asked me to undertake the "First Linguistic Survey of Bhutan" in order to establish the number of speakers, genetic affinity and distribution of all the languages of the kingdom. This ultimately led to the appearance of *The Languages and Linguistic History of Bhutan* and to the establishment of a permanent Linguistic Survey of Bhutan under the Dzongkha Development Commission in line with the Royal Government's language policy of studying and preserving the country's diverse native linguistic heritage.

During the course of this work, I was anxious to find a language in Bhutan which was like the Kiranti languages I had studied in Nepal. In the initial stages of the survey, no such language presented itself, but I was exhilarated when I ran across a speaker of the language known as Gongduk in Monggar and found that his language exhibited a conjugation much like those of the Kiranti languages, and afterwards I journeyed to the remote Gongduk speaking area itself. Before the first survey had been completed, I was to learn that Gongduk was not the only language in Bhutan with a Kiranti-type verbal agreement system. Black Mountain Monpa also has a Kiranti-type conjugation. This led me to hypothesize that these languages might be closely related to the Kiranti languages and possibly form a genetic grouping together with the Kiranti languages, a grouping which, in my thoughts, I called Mahakiranti. I dreamt of finding a link between Kiranti and Lepcha, and the Gongduk personal pronouns led me to suspect that future research might uncover such a link. Of course, I knew that conjugational systems showing agreement with more than one actant were widely attested throughout Tibeto-Burman and were not limited to Kiranti (van Driem 1993a), and I also knew that DeLancey (1989:320) was on the right track

Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol. 19. No. 2 (July 1992).

when he wrote that "the notion that all of the Tibeto-Burman languages exhibiting a suffixal agreement paradigm belong to a single branch of the family is certainly dead". Relegating all languages sharing certain features of cognate verbal morphology to the same genetic sub-grouping would lead to a ludicrous phylogeny for Indo-European, and this is certainly the case for Tibeto-Burman as well.

Nonetheless, the tantalizing prospect of possibly discovering a Kiranti or Kiranti-like language in Bhutan led me not to discard my Mahakiranti hypothesis. When the Swiss linguist Balthasar Bickel visited Bhutan in 1991, I playfully told him that I had discovered two Kiranti languages in Bhutan. Suspecting that I might have fallen prone to a bout of levity, Bickel asked me whether this was really true. My knowledge of these languages was still quite limited, and because of the lack of stunning lexical correspondences between Gongduk, Black Mountain Monpa and the Kiranti languages, I chose to evade this question,which did not require much effort amidst the banter and mirth which prevailed at the house of my Bhutanese friend Karma Tshering that evening. Privately, therefore, I continued to entertain the Mahakiranti hypothesis until such time as a closer assessment was possible.

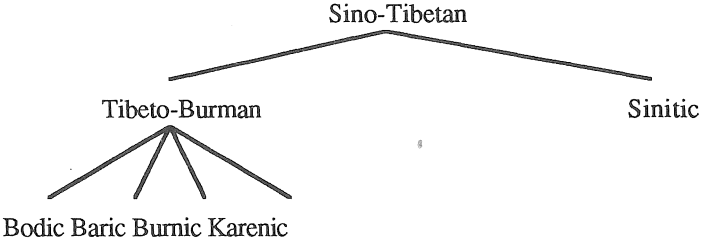
Alas, subsequent scrutiny of Black Mountin Monpa revealed that this language was clearly an East Bodish language and therefore not a candidate for Mahakiranti. Closer investigation of Gongduk similarly proved that the language was not an obvious candidate for my Mahakiranti construct, and I tentatively identified Gongduk as an independent sub-grouping within Himalayish, although the possiblity that a Kiranti-Lepcha link might be established in the future cannot be excluded.

Fruits of the Quest in the East

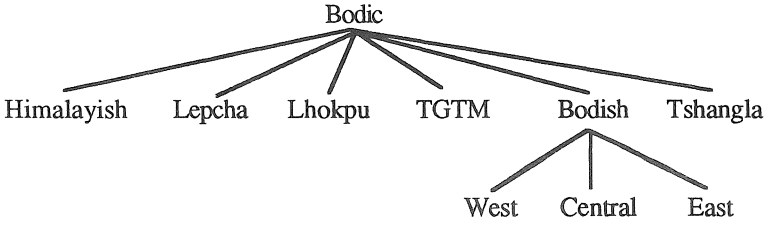
In synopsis of the results of First Linguistic Survey of Bhutan, there are nineteen languages spoken in Bhutan. This number includes (1) Tibetan, which is somehow not really viewed as "a language of Bhutan", mainly because it cannot be identified with any particular geographic location within Bhutan, and (2) Nepali, which is not originally native to the kingdom but is now very much considered to be one of the languages of Bhutan, spoken in the southern belt. The Nepali of these eastern pioneers has come to diverge from standard Nepali in much the same way as Afrikaans has from Dutch. Dutch came to be spoken on the Cape shortly after Jan van Riebeeck landed there in 1653, which gives Afrikaans a considerably greater time depth than "ṭāḍhe" Nepali. Nonetheless, certain developments in "ṭāḍhe" Nepali and Afrikaans are highly similar, such as the changes in the tense and agreement system of the verb. The influx of Hindi loans and calques into Bhutanese Nepali parallels the many English borrowings in Afrikaans. Bhutanese

Nepali is spoken predominantly by people who became assimilated in a process of linguistic and cultural Indo-Aryanization during their historically documented eastward migration, and most Bhutanese Nepali are of Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Limbu, Newari or Rai extraction. This too parallels the complex ethnic make-up of the Afrikaans speaking population, whereby even the linguistic background of the "white" segment of the Afrikaans speaking population is mixed, much of it being of German ancestry. Therefore, the Nepali spoken in southern Bhutan merits detailed study by scholars of Indo-Aryan linguistics and language change.

With the exception of Nepali, all languages spoken in Bhutan belong to the Bodic branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family.



With the exception of Tshangla, Lhokpu, Lepcha and Gongduk, the Tibeto-Burman languages of Bhutan belong to the Bodish sub-branch of Bodic.[2]



(3) Several Central Bodish languages are spoken in Bhutan. The most prominent of these is Dzongkha, the national language. Historically, Dzongkha is the Bhutanese vulgate of the ancient language, the literary exponent of which is Classical Tibetan. Classical Tibetan, known in Bhutan as Chöke "language of the Dharma", has served as the literary and administrative language throughout Bhutan for centuries, and the name of its Bhutanese vernacular form, Dzongkha, literally means the *kha* "language" spoken in the *dzongs* or military strongholds throughout Bhutan. Dzongkha is the native language of the 'Ngalong population of western Bhutan. The

'Ngalong migrated to western Bhutan from Tibet in the 9th century, just as the Anglo-Saxons migrated to Britain from the Continent in the 5th century. Other Central Bodish languages in Bhutan other than Tibetan, already mentioned above, are Brokpa, Brokkat, Lakha and the curious Cho-ca-nga-ca-kha, the sister language of Dzongkha, spoken in the Kurichu Valley.

(4) The East Bodish languages of Bhutan can be divided into an Archaic East Bodish branch and a Mainstream East Bodish branch. The Archaic branch consists of the western and eastern dialects of Black Mountain Monpa, the former known as 'Olekha, after the clan name 'Ole. Mainstream East Bodic includes Dzala, Chali, Dakpa, Bumthang, Kheng, Kurtöp and the one dialectally diverse language known variously as Mangde, Henkha, 'Nyenkha, 'Adap or Phobjikha. If the Bumthang, Kheng and Kurtöp languages were to be considered three discrete dialect continua within a single "Greater Bumthang" language, a view which is somewhat defensible on purely linguistic grounds, the number of languages spoken in Bhutan would be reduced to seventeen. The East Bodish languages occupy all of central and northeastern Bhutan.

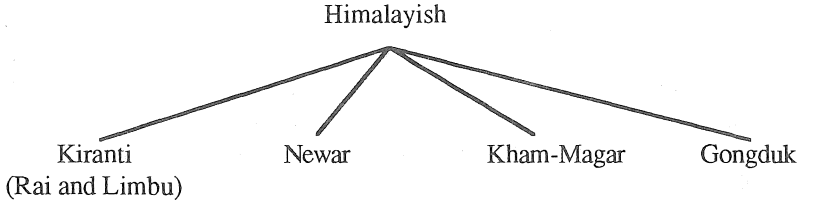
(5) The main language in eastern Bhutan is Tshangla, better known as Sharchop or Shâchop. The exact phylogenetic affinity of this language is uncertain, but it has been designated here as a sub-grouping within Bodic. (6) Lepcha is spoken in an enclave in south-western Bhutan. Although the Lepcha homeland lies primarily in Sikkim, the Lepcha speaking enclave in Bhutan is of some antiquity. (7) Lhokpu, the language of the ḍoyās, is spoken in southwestern Bhutan, but its former extent must have been greater. Lhokpu, or an extinct Lhokpu-like languge, appears to be have been the linguistic substrate onto which ancestral Dzongkha was first transplanted. The language is curious in that it shows some lexical similarities to Kiranti, although these will have to be subjected to more thorough investigation. Yet the language shows no verbal agreement of the Kiranti type. (8) Gongduk is the only language in Bhutan other than Black Mountain Monpa to exhibit an elaborate conjugational morphology of the Tibeto-Burman type, with agreement with more than one actant. It is spoken in an inaccessible mountainous area within the Kheng district overlooking the intraversable torrent of the Kurichu.

The finding of Mahākirāntī

Benedict (1991) coined the term "extinct proto-language" to denote a hypothetical proto-language which has been shown never to have existed. Such is the case for Austric, which was proposed by Wilhelm Schmidt (1906) and was supposed to have given rise to the Austronesian and Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer, Munda, Nicobarese) languages. If an assumed proto-

language is shown by comparative research not to correspond to any historically real common ancestral phylogenetic mother tongue, then this defunct hypothetical construct can be called an "extinct proto-language". Was Mahākirāntī then an extinct proto-language?

To answer this question, let us first look at the tentative phylogeny of Himalayish languages which I proposed in *The Languages and Linguistic History of Bhutan.*



It is often pointed out that the status of sub-groupings within Sino-Tibetan is uncertain, a tell-tale testimony to the state of the art. I have recently cited several authoritative but quite different views on higher-level sub-groupings in Tibeto-Burman (van Driem 1994b). The highly tentative nature of certain lower-level sub-groupings must also be stressed. Although some groups, such as East Bodish, manifestly represent real phylogenetic units, some other groupings remain rather hypothetical. For example, it may prove untenable to classify Lhokpu outside of Himalayish, and it may prove incorrect to classify Gongduk within Himalayish. In fact, the reality of the Himalayish grouping itself is moot.

It will be my contention here that Mahakiranti is presently a more well supported hypothesis than Himalayish, and that Mahakiranti consists of at least Kiranti and Newar. I have argued that there is a Newar-Kiranti genetic link, and these arguments are supported by Genetti's Dolakha Newar data and Jørgensen's Classical Newar studies. On the basis of a comparative study (van Driem 1994a),it has been demonstrated that the Dolakha verb is shown to be a generally more faithful reflexion of the Proto-Newar system than the Classical Newar verb. On one hand, Classical Newar has retained vestiges of a verbal agreement system like that exhibited in Dolakha. On the other hand, Classical Newar exhibits the rudiments of the conjunct-disjunct system of modern Kathmandu Newar.

Dolakha conjugational affixes can be readily related to their cognate morphemes in other Tibeto-Burman verbal agreement systems. Yet, certain features of the Dolakha verb suggest a closer genetic relationship with the Kiranti languages, e.g. the fact that the Dolakha reflex of the Tibeto-Burman

proto-morpheme *<-u> is a suffix, and that this suffix indexes third person patient involvement. Comparison of the verbal morphology constitutes only one type of evidence which has yet to be corroborated by regular lexical and phonological correspondences, but inflexional comparison provides evidence of a highly sound and compelling kind, and, to our present state of knowledge, this evidence points towards a greater genetic affinity between Kiranti and Newar. The probability of finding regular lexical and phonological correspondences between Kiranti and Newar seems high, for various scholars have speculated about a closer genetic link between Kiranti and Newar. The linguistic evidence therefore supports the idea that the Kiranti kings, mentioned in the chronicles and who long ago reigned in the Kathmandu Valley, may very well have been ancient Newar. If so, they may at that time not have been ethnically and linguistically all that different from their Kiranti brethren. Once the provocative results of Michael Witzel's extensive toponymical research in the Kathmandu Valley are published, more light may be shed on this matter.

At present, Kiranti and Newar together form the hypothetical genetic unit within Tibeto-Burman which I propose be known as Mahākirāntī. I sought in the East but found in the West.

Notes

1. This article is based in part on a paper which I presented at the 13th conference of the Linguistic Society of Nepal at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur on November 26th, 1992.
2. The abbreviation TGTM in the tree stands for Tamang-Gurung-Thakali-Manangba.

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