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THE FALL AND RISE OF THE PHONEME /r/ IN EASTERN KIRANTI: SOUND CHANGE IN TIBETO-BURMAN

By GEORGE VAN DRIEM

The Kiranti¹ languages are spoken in eastern Nepal and western Sikkim. What I call Eastern Kiranti in this article includes the languages Limbu, Yakkha, Yamphe, Yamphu, Lohorung and Mewahang. Further study will probably demonstrate that other languages spoken to the east of the *Sālpā* watershed, such as Sam, underwent the same developments described here and must also be included in Eastern Kiranti. The autonyms used by the Limbus, Yakkha, Yamphe, Yamphu and Lohorung are indicative of a close historical relationship between them. The Limbu call themselves *Yakthuḡba*; the Yakkha call themselves *Yakkha*; and the Yamphe, Yamphu and Lohorung refer to their language as *Yakhaba*.

In the historical evolution of the Limbu, Yakkha, Mewahang and Yakkhaba languages, word-initial Tibeto-Burman */r/ went to /y/, e.g. Limbu and Lohorung² *yam* 'body' vs. Dumi *ram* 'body' and Khaling *rwaam* 'body'; Limbu, Mewahang, Yakkha and Lohorung *yum* 'salt' vs. Dumi *riim* 'salt', Khaling *ram* 'salt' and Nachering *ram* 'salt'; Limbu *-ye-r/-ye-t/-ye-ʔl* 'laugh', Lohorung *yi-*³ 'laugh' vs. Dumi *re-ri-y/ri-* 'laugh', Khaling *ren-nā* 'laugh' and Nachering *rhēsa* 'laugh'; Limbu *-yeb/-yep-* 'stand' and Lohorung *-yeb-/yep-* 'stand' vs. Dumi *riph/rip-rep* 'stand', Khaling *rem-nā* 'stand' and Nachering *rēpa* 'stand'. In Thulung, this sound change seems to have been partial, conditioned by as yet unexplained factors, e.g. Thulung *reom* 'body', *yem-/yep-* 'stand up, shoot up' and *yo:* 'salt', unless some of these words in Thulung can be established as loans from neighbouring Kiranti languages. In Dumi, the phoneme /r/ has a palatal realization [ɹ] virtually identical to Czech ř. This palatal pronunciation in Dumi might be similar to the first stage in the process of the sound change which took place in Eastern Kiranti, if it is not just, as Benedict's reconstructions **g-ryum* 'salt', **rya-t* 'laugh' and **g-ryap* 'stand' would suggest, a product of Tibeto-Burman **ry-*. There does not appear to be any Kiranti evidence, however, justifying a treatment of Benedict's Tibeto-Burman initial **r-* and initial **ry-* as distinct entities at the Proto-Kiranti stage. The development of initial *r-* to *y-* in Eastern Kiranti was first mentioned by Shafer (1974: 149) when he stated that '*r-* is generally retained in the Western Branch and in Rodong [i.e. Chamling], that it may have become *r* grasséyé in the Khambu Unit, and that it tends to become *y-* in the other dialects of the Eastern Branch.' It is not surprising that this development was to have consequences for Eastern Kiranti phonology.

As a result of the merger of Tibeto-Burman **r-* and **ry-* in initial position in Eastern Kiranti, word-initial **r-* disappeared, leaving Tibeto-Burman **l* and **r* in complementary distribution so that they were re-analysed as two allophones of a single liquid phoneme //l/ with the following distribution: The allophone [l]

¹ In addition to the sources listed in the bibliography, my contentions and data are based on my own Lohorung and Yamphu data, collected in late 1988 and early 1989, and Martin Gänszle's data on Mewahang, collected during numerous long visits in the past few years to the Mewahang, of *Bālā*, whose language is identical to Hodgson's 'Bālāli' (Hodgson, 1857: 351–72, 1880: 194–215; Gänszle, personal communication, December 1988).

² In modern Lohorung, *yam* 'body' occurs only as a bound morph in the verb *yamnuma* 'to be strong, to be healthy'. Shafer (1953: 361) also appears to list Lohorung *yam-* as a bound morph.

³ In Lohorung, *yi-* is the bound root 'laugh' in the verb *yi-cama* 'to laugh'. The inflected portion of the verb *-cama* is historically an accretion, known in Kiranti as an aspectivizer.

occurred (1) word-initially, e.g. Limbu *la-p* 'wing', and (2) syllable-initially after a consonant except for glottal stop, e.g. Limbu *waʹanlumnetchin* 'we^{di} haven't bathed yet'. The allophone [r] occurred word-internally (1) in intervocalic position or after glottal stop, e.g. Limbu *murik* 'body hair', *mendaʹre kuho-rik* 'the hide of a goat', and (2) syllable-internally as the second member of a consonant cluster, e.g. Limbu *ɔkkɾɔkma* 'uvula'. The phoneme /l/ does not occur in syllable-final position in native Eastern Kiranti words, although it does occur elsewhere in Kiranti, e.g. Dumi *wa-l* 'rectum', Khaling *nöl* 'afternoon'. Clusters with a syllable-internal, post-consonantal [r] occur in Eastern Kiranti only in word-internal position.

After the Gorkha conquest in the second half of the eighteenth century, the influence of the Indo-Aryan language Nepali, or *Khas Kurā*, became increasingly felt in *Pallo Kirāt* 'Far Kirant', the homeland of the Limbu, Yakkha, Yakkhaba and Mewahang. Even before this time, speakers of Kiranti languages sporadically came into contact with speakers of Maithili and perhaps Bengali. Early loans were transphonologized so as not to violate native phonological laws of allophonic distribution, e.g. *ha-rundi* 'turmeric, curcuma' < Maithili *hardī*. Later Nepali loans, however, did violate native phonological laws of allophonic distribution and so introduced an alien phoneme /r/, e.g. Limbu *pi-r* 'pain, anguish' < Nepali *pīr*; Limbu *parne* 'ought' < Nepali *parne*; Limbu *dārta* 'registration' < Nepali *dartā*; Limbu *rumaʹl* /*rumat*/ 'handkerchief' < Nepali *rumāl*.

The introduction of the phoneme /r/ enabled a redistribution and re-analysis of native liquid allophones in Eastern Kiranti. In Limbu, compounds arose such as *haʹluŋ* 'fireplace stone', derived from *ha* 'tooth' and *luŋ* 'stone' with an unexplained linking glottal stop, not uncommon in compounds. The regular allophonic alternation between [l] and [r] began to break down for initial /l/ in nouns and verbs. For example, the phoneme /l/ in Limbu *la-p* 'wing' is realized as [l] in the phrase *pu-re ku-la-p* 'the bird's wing', whereas in early Limbu before the Gorkha conquest, I suggest that the phrase would have been realized as **pu-re ku-ra-p* 'the bird's wing', as in the old compound *mikwara-p* 'bat' < *mikwa* 'tear' and *la-p* 'wing'. In modern Limbu, initial /l/ in verbs such as *lakmaʹ* 'to lick' is realized as [l] not only in word-initial position, e.g. *piʹl-ille yum lagu* 'the bull licked the salt', but also inter-vocally, e.g. *piʹlhaʹ-re yum melagu* 'the bulls licked the salt'. In modern Limbu particles and stem-internally in verbs, however, the regular alternation between the allophones [l] and [r] remains without exception, e.g. *pha rɔk* 'only bamboo' vs. *siŋ lɔk* 'only wood', *wageraksan* 'you(sg.) made me wet' vs. *wagenlaksanən* 'you(sg.) didn't make me wet'.

The original allophonic distribution of the Eastern Kiranti liquid phoneme /l/ is best reflected in Limbu and least preserved in the Yakkhaba languages where /l/ and /r/ appear to have re-surfaced as independent phonemes much earlier than in Limbu. This fact and the local history suggest that the re-introduction of a phoneme /r/ in Eastern Kiranti is due to Indo-Aryan influence.

The Limbus constitute a populous group which remained virtually autonomous until the 1780s. Although, as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century, portions of *Limbuwān* came to fall under suzerainty of the *Sen* kingdoms of *Makvānpur* (in the present-day *Nārāyaṇī* zone) and *Vijaypur* (3 km. east of present-day *Dharān*) or owed allegiance to the maharajas of Sikkim, *Limbuwān* before the *Gorkhā* conquest in fact consisted of many local, independent Limbu kingdoms which were fiercely defended against intruders.

By contrast, the numerous Rai tribes were small, linguistically hetero-

geneous groups situated within the sphere of influence of minor Indo-Aryan dynasties to the south and the west. As small and scattered groups, the Rai may have been more easily subject to Indo-Aryan linguistic influence than a large and populous group like the Limbu. Furthermore, the influx of large numbers of Indo-Aryan colonists in *Vallo* 'Near' and *Māj̄h Kirāt* 'Middle Kirant' began soon after the *Gorkhā* conquest and has led to a situation whereby several indigenous Rai groups have become a minority in their own tribal homelands.

Whereas the liquid phoneme in the Limbu optative suffix *-rɔ̄/-lɔ̄* and the Limbu continuous suffix *-rɔ̄/-lɔ̄* exhibit regular allophonic alternation, the Lohorung optative suffix *-rɔ̄* and Lohorung continuous suffix *-rɔ̄* have been phonologized as */-rɔ̄/*. The only trace of the original allophonic distribution of the Eastern Kiranti liquid phoneme in Lohorung is in the allomorphy of the discontinuous morpheme of the negative gerund *mɛ-...-re ~ mɛ-...-le*, e.g. (1)-(2). Sentence (1) is a command issued when the speaker realized that it had begun to rain.

1. *Ce- mɛ-ho-p-le khim-pi lhett-ɛ!*
clothes NG-wash-NG house-LOC take-IMP
'Take the clothes back home without having washed them!'
(Nepali: *Lugā nadhoī gharmā lānuhos!*)
2. *Mɛ-kisi-re khar-an-ɛ! Mɛ-damsi-re*
NP-fear-NP go-2p-IMP NP-stumble and fall-NP
khar-an-ɛ!
go-2p-IMP
'Go without fear! Go without falling!' (Nepali:
Naḍarāī jānuhos! Nalaḍī jānuhos!)

Since the restructuring of the Limbu phonological system, perhaps around the time of the Gorkha conquest, changes have occurred in word-internal clusters containing the liquid phoneme. For example, Limbu *samrippa* 'silhouette' consists of *sam* 'spirit' and **rippa*. On the basis of Tibetan *hgrib-pa* 'grow dark', *grib* 'shade' and *sgrib-pa* 'darken, darkened', we are led to believe that the */r/* in *samrippa* is old. Therefore, I suggest that **rippa* derives from early Eastern Kiranti **krippa*. If the *[r]* in **sam-krippa* had not formed part of a cluster, one would expect to have **samlippa* in modern Limbu. By the same token, I suggest that there must have been a cluster-initial morpheme in early Limbu such as **-kre-?*, **-pre-?* or **-dre-?*, meaning 'small tree' and corresponding to the element *-re-?* in Limbu *khɔ̄-mre-?* 'peach tree' and *ti-ŋre-?* 'Crateagus crenulata'. Elsewhere, the distribution of *[l]* and *[r]* in modern Limbu reflects the early Eastern Kiranti allophonic pattern.

The different histories of liquid phonemes to the east and the west of the *Sālpa* watershed probably represent the most important sound change defining Eastern Kiranti as a subgrouping. Similarities in Limbu, Yakkha, Yakkhaba and Mewahang verbal morphology as well as shared lexical items unique to the cis-*Sālpa*-ine languages support the Eastern Kiranti subgrouping thus defined, topics which will have to be pursued elsewhere.

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