

Thomas Owen-Smith, Nathan W. Hill (Eds.)
Trans-Himalayan Linguistics

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Thomas Owen-Smith and Nathan W. Hill

Introduction

The Himalayan Region is home to around 600 languages (Turin 2007: foreword), making it one of the most linguistically diverse regions of the world.¹ But it is not only this diversity which constitutes the region's great importance for linguistics. The typological profiles of Himalayan languages are also striking, with many displaying features which are rare in Eurasia and in the Old World in general. A large number of language families are present in the region, and complex histories of ethnic mixing and language contact have created a contemporary linguistic landscape which is as challenging as it is exhilarating to research.

The mountains, though not an absolute barrier, hinder transport and communications. Even today travel in the hills of Nepal or Northeast India is more difficult than on the Indo-Gangetic plain, or for that matter the Tibetan Plateau (see footnote 2). This rugged topography has throughout history weakened the assimilating and centralizing tendencies of large states, and allowed for the existence of small, isolated communities living with a high degree of economic self-sufficiency and political autonomy. Such a pattern is reflected in other mountains regions of the world (Braudel [1949] 1976: 30–43; Gellner 1969: 1–2; Scott 2001: 13–22 *inter alia*), and not surprisingly fosters linguistic and cultural diversity.

Bàrtoli points out that mountainous areas tend to preserve archaic forms of speech:

nella storia del linguaggio...le isole sono di norma più conservative che i continenti..., e più le montagne che le pianure e le marine..., e più certe aree laterali che le aree di mezzo..., e più i centri minori che i maggiori

[in the history of language...islands are generally more conservative than continents..., mountains more so than plains or the seaside..., certain marginal areas more so than central areas..., and minor centres more so than major ones] (Bàrtoli 1925: 4)

Historical linguistics handbooks refer to these isolated enclaves of linguistic conservatism as “relic areas” (Campbell 2004: 216; Hock 1991: 440; Dimmendaal 2011: 159). Nichols uses the term “accretion zone,” and notes that rather than

¹ Our definition of the Himalayan Region is a wide one, including the Himalaya proper, the Tibetan Plateau, and the various mountain ranges which flare off from these in all directions, including the Hindu Kush, Pamir and Tian Shan, the highlands of Sichuan and Yunnan, and the hilly tracts of Northeast India, Bangladesh and Burma.

simply conservatism in such areas, the influx of languages from other places also affects their character:

An accretion zone...is an area where genetic and structural diversity of languages are high and increase over time through immigration. Examples are the Caucasus, the Himalayas, the Ethiopian highlands and the northern Rift Valley, California, the Pacific Northwest of North America, Amazonia, northern Australia, and of course New Guinea... Accretion zones generally contain representatives of major stocks in the vicinity as well as some languages with no outside kin. (Nichols 1997: 369)

Mountains differ from lowlands in that lowland areas have historically been prone to large-scale spreads of particular languages or groups of languages (on a family or group scale examples include Iranian, Turkic, Indo-Aryan, Sinitic; on a language scale examples include Mandarin Chinese, Persian, Hindi-Urdu) which submerge earlier languages spoken in the same space; while when new languages move into the mountains they tend to add to the linguistic diversity of the region rather than obliterate it (see Nichols 1992).²

Linguistic diversity is manifested in the Himalayan Region in a number of ways. Firstly there is the density of discrete languages spoken there. There is then the diversity of linguistic stocks represented, which totals roughly nine depending on where the region's boundary is drawn: Sino-Tibetan (or "Trans-Himalayan" – see below), Indo-European, Austroasiatic, Hmong-Mien, Tai, Turkic and perhaps Mongolic, as well as the presumed isolates Burushaski and Kusunda.

Within several of these stocks, multiple branches are represented in the Himalayan Region. For instance, in Indo-European all three subbranches of Indo-Iranian are present: both Eastern (Pashto, the Pamir languages) and Western Iranian languages (Dari, Tajik, Parachi,Ormuri) are spoken, as well as several branches of Indo-Aryan,³ and the Nuristani languages, which are proposed to stand at the same phylogenetic level as Iranian and Indo-Aryan (see Nelson 1986). Worthy of special mention is the heterogeneous Dardic group spoken at the far Northwestern reach of the Himalaya. The Dardic languages are generally considered Indo-Aryan but have not participated in a number of developments

² By this definition, the Tibetan Plateau may share more features with lowland areas and prototypical spread zones: although situated at a high altitude it is relatively flat and easy to traverse, and has been dominated throughout recorded history by the spread of a single language, Old Tibetan. However, as Zeisler (2005) and Tournadre (this volume) point out, the degree of diversity between the modern varieties collectively referred to as "Tibetan" is more akin to that of a family of languages than dialects of one language. The languages of the Tibetan Plateau also display some of the unusual linguistic features which appear to delineate the Himalayan Region as a typological enclave.

³ The details of subgrouping within Indo-Aryan itself are disputed (see Masica 1991: 446–463).

which are general throughout the rest of Indo-Aryan, preserving some extremely conservative features while innovating others which are quite untypical of Indo-Aryan and Indo-European in general (see Bashir 2003).⁴

The Himalaya's diversity is even better exemplified by the profusion of Sino-Tibetan/Trans-Himalayan language groups spoken on both sides of the range. In contrast to the Indo-Iranian languages, which moved into the area from elsewhere (originally from Central Asia and later from the Indo-Gangetic plain), the preponderance of high level Sino-Tibetan/Trans-Himalayan taxa within the Himalayan Region may indicate that it has always been the centre of gravity of this family (see van Driem this volume; Blench and Post this volume).

Aside from their phylogenetic diversity, Himalayan languages display typological features rarely encountered in the Old World. From a survey of some 350 languages from around the world, Bickel and Nichols (2003) propose that the Himalaya and the Caucasus can be considered “typological enclaves,” due to the high frequency in these two regions (both mountainous relic areas/accretion zones) of certain features which are otherwise rare in Eurasia, and generally in most parts of the world. The unusual features which characterise the Himalayan enclave in particular are very high levels of morphological synthesis, polypersonal agreement on verbs,⁵ complex systems of evidentiality,⁶ bipartite verb stems, radical double marking (including agreement for more than one argument on the predicate and as well as case marking on the arguments themselves, and marking of possession on both the possessor and possessee), and multiple classes for possessive marking in the noun phrase.

The multitude of languages in the Himalayan region and their typological diversity therefore more than warrant the steady stream of research on these languages, of which the current volume presents a recent selection. The volume arises from papers given and topics discussed at the 16th Himalayan Languages Symposium, held in September 2010 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; and it includes chapters on historical linguistics, and new descriptive work and original data on under-researched Himalayan languages.

The majority of papers in the volume deal primarily with Sino-Tibetan/Trans-Himalayan languages. Since the earliest days of research on languages of this

⁴ Strand (1973) and Bashir (2003) indicate that the group “Dardic” is heuristic rather than genetic, arguing that the Dardic languages are highly diverse, and do not display shared innovations which delineate them as a subgroup.

⁵ Defined as “unconditionally obligatory verb agreement with more than one argument” in Bickel and Nichols (2003: 10).

⁶ These include patterns which have been analysed as conjunct/disjunct in some languages (see e.g. Hale 1980; Watters 2006a), although questions have also been raised about the applicability of the terms “conjunct” and “disjunct” to certain languages (see e.g. Tournadre 2008).

family, different classifications have vied for adherents. Numerous scholars have proposed classification and subgrouping schemes, including the early work of Hodgson ([1828] 1972, [1848] 1972) and Konow (1909), and more elaborate proposals from the mid-20th century onwards (Shafer 1955; DeLancey 1987; Bradley 1997, van Driem 2001 *inter alia*). Few of these taxonomic proposals have weathered the years free of controversy. The disputed names for the family, Indo-Chinese, Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Trans-Himalayan – all of which appear at some point in this volume – are one indicator of the controversial status of the *Stammbaum*.

As van Driem relates in the present volume, “Indo-Chinese” originally grouped together all languages of Asia and Oceania. Over the decades various stocks were respectively distinguished and then removed from this presumed genetic unity. The term “Sino-Tibetan,” which has a close association with the University of California at Berkeley, inherited its reference from “Indo-Chinese.” Although “Sino-Tibetan” has varied in meaning, it is now normally understood to reflect a family with two primary branches, “Sinitic” and “Tibeto-Burman,” i.e. a binary split at the highest level between Chinese and everything else (see Matisoff 2003: 5–6). But as no decisive evidence has been put forward to suggest that all non-Sinitic languages of the family share a common innovation (or indeed that Sinitic languages share a common innovation to set them apart from all the rest of the family), some scholars are now searching for terms which reflect an agnostic approach to subgrouping.

Although von Klaproth coined “Tibeto-Burman” in 1823 to serve as a phylogenetically neutral term for the family of which Chinese, Tibetan, and Burmese are members, the now common use of the same term for all non-Sinitic members of the family makes it difficult to use it with Klaproth’s original designation (i.e. the whole family) without causing confusion. Consequently, other terms have been proposed, including “Sino-Tibeto-Burman” (see Tournadre this volume; Matisoff 2011: i), and “Trans-Himalayan” (see van Driem 2007, this volume). The term “Sino-Tibeto-Burman” acknowledges the three most prominent literate civilizations, although as Blench and Post (this volume) point out, most languages in the family do not have literate histories, and there is no *a priori* reason to think that these three languages are of any special significance in the structure of the family or in the reconstruction of its ancestor. The term “Trans-Himalayan” has the advantage of being more geographically neutral and less culturally biased, and as a geographic term it parallels the names of other language families such as Indo-European and Austroasiatic. To instantiate the advantages of this neutral geographic term, *Trans-Himalayan* is an apt title for this volume.

The typological divergence of Trans-Himalayan languages leads not only to disagreements over nomenclature and subgrouping, but also to differences of opinion about the morphosyntactic profile to be reconstructed for the proto-

language. Whereas Rgyalrongic and Kiranti languages show a high degree of morphological complexity (e.g. synthetic verb inflection including agreement for more than one argument, double marking of possession on possessor and possessee), Sinitic and Lolo-Burmese languages are more analytic in structure (e.g. zero agreement on verbs and simple juxtaposition of nominal elements in a possessive clause in some languages). Some scholars, most prominently LaPolla (1989, 1992, 1994), argue that verbal agreement systems are independent innovations in various branches of the family, arising from the grammaticalization of erstwhile independent pronominal forms. In contrast, van Driem (1993), DeLancey (1989, 2010a) and Jacques (2012) propose a highly synthetic proto-language which has experienced varying degrees of phonological erosion in different subgroups. Fully accounting for the extremely divergent typologies of languages across the family naturally presents difficulties for both sides of this debate. In the current volume DeLancey proposes that the simpler typology of the analytic languages can be explained by the fact that these languages underwent a process of creolization when they emerged as *lingua francas*. This proposal could account for the correlation between analytic typology and the settings of urbanization and state centralization associated with languages such as Chinese, Burmese, Tibetan, Newar, and Meithei.

Work on a *Stammbaum* for Trans-Himalayan also stands in a certain tension to what appear to be extremely complex histories of migration, contact, acculturation, and ethnic and linguistic shift (see e.g. Thomason and Kaufmann 1988; Hickey 2010) across the regions where Trans-Himalayan languages are spoken. The survival of remnant language isolates like Kusunda (see Watters 2006b) reminds us that there may once have been many more linguistic stocks in the Himalayan Region which were ultimately submerged by acculturation to the larger families. Various authors have argued that large areas where Trans-Himalayan languages are now spoken are the result of intrusive migrations, or acculturation and shift from now lost languages to Trans-Himalayan forms of speech (e.g. Grierson 1909; LaPolla 2001, 2009; Zeisler 2005, 2009; DeLancey 2010b, 2011 *inter alia*), but it has not yet been possible to incorporate these observations systematically into the theoretical models about the linguistic history of the area. In this volume Blench and Post consider subsistence and environmental vocabulary from languages of Northeast India, and reiterate their position earlier stated in Post and Blench (2011) that the high levels of divergence amongst the languages of Arunachal Pradesh and surrounding areas have not been taken into account in any of the classification schemes for Trans-Himalayan. They further argue that some of these languages are so aberrant that there is a distinct possibility they represent the outcome of a situation in which speakers of unknown language stocks or isolates acquired a Trans-Himalayan lexicon through varying degrees of contact and acculturation.

Terminological and subgrouping controversies also beset the Trans-Himalayan subbranches. Drawing from the Tibetan autonym *Bod*, Shafer posits four “Bodish” subgroups for languages spoken in the region of the Tibetan Plateau: West, Central, Southern, and East Bodish (1966: 78–123), of which he derives only Central Bodish and Southern Bodish from Old Tibetan (1966: 87). Although some researchers still see West Bodish as a meaningful grouping (see Biellmeier 2004), it is becoming increasingly clear that all of these forms of speech except for the East Bodish languages (see Hyslop this volume) derive directly from Old Tibetan (see Hill 2010). Many authors refer to the languages descending from Old Tibetan as “Tibetan dialects” (e.g. Denwood 1999: 21–36), but Tournadre (this volume) presents a forceful argument that these languages should be called “Tibetic” languages to acknowledge the degree of their divergence from one another.

The key to a successful analysis of subgrouping is the identification of shared innovations. As LaPolla (2001: 245) notes, many of the proposed subgrouping schemes for Trans-Himalayan do not give the reasons for their groupings. In this process, the distinction of inherited features from borrowed features is paramount. Three papers in the current volume aim to sharpen the distinction between inherited and borrowed vocabulary in the languages they study. Honda examines patterns of lexical diversity in Tamangic languages, looking to differentiate inherited Tamangic words from later borrowings from Tibetan. Hyslop attempts a preliminary comparative reconstruction of the East Bodish languages. With this reconstruction in hand she is able to show that several grammatical morphemes which Kurtöp shares with Tibetan are not cognate, as might first appear to be the case, but as they are not reconstructible to proto-East Bodish they must be borrowings from Tibetan. This approach is a step forward from earlier work that compares Tibetan directly to words in East Bodish languages. Pursuing a line of research which he began in 1998, Čašule presents new evidence of an Indo-European affiliation for Burushaski; on this occasion he focuses on kinship terminology. Although many Indo-Europeanists will regard his contribution with scepticism, his engagement with the methods and literature of this field, the well-spring and the touchstone for the methodology of historical linguistics, reminds us that our knowledge of Trans-Himalayan historical phonology, in which regular correspondences across what is taken to be cognate vocabulary in the modern languages have still not been established, has far to go.

Historical linguistics, as well as areal linguistics and typology, are absolutely dependent on descriptive work on contemporary languages. Unfortunately, few Himalayan languages have been researched in depth and many remain virtually undocumented. This situation is partly due to the remoteness of many mountain localities which makes fieldwork difficult, but also to the periodic imposition of travel restrictions to certain areas. Four contributions to the current volume

provide fresh data from *in situ* fieldwork on under-described languages. Huber presents the strategies of person marking in Shumcho, where a fairly complicated verbal agreement system indexes participants of main and logophoric clauses. Michaud examines the tonal patterns in numeral plus classifier phrases in Yongning Na, whose complexity presents a number of challenges for a tonological analysis. Peterson describes the phonology and various aspects of the morphology of the highly endangered language Rengmitca, which with its conservative segmental phonology could contribute greatly to the reconstruction of Proto-Kuki-Chin, or indeed Trans-Himalayan itself. Opgenort provides an initial grammatical sketch of another highly endangered language, Tilung, which holds a unique position within the Kiranti group, though now appears to be falling into obsolescence due to the spread of Nepali.

All four of these languages are small and vulnerable. In the Himalayan Region as in other parts of the world, modernization is eroding traditional economies and lifestyles, and ancestral cultures and minority languages are (understandably) being fast abandoned for national languages such as Hindi, Chinese and Nepali which facilitate employment in the mainstream of the national economy. In such a context, the work of linguistic description and documentation often goes hand in hand with efforts in language development and education working with the community in which a fieldworker does their research. The long-term survival of a language across multiple domains of use in the modern world essentially necessitates that the language be written. Consequently, orthography development is an area in which a linguist can assist in promoting a language's long-term viability. Bodt discusses issues in the development of Roman and 'Ucen orthographies for Tshangla, in view of the phonological variation across the language's dialects, and the influence of literacy in a more prestigious language, Tibetan.

Despite such efforts, under the current rate of development, and rapid linguistic and cultural loss, it is highly probable that a great many languages used in the Himalayan Region today will no longer exist as spoken languages within a few generations. As many voices have already warned, thorough and sensitive research on the minority languages of the Himalayan Region is a matter of urgency.

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