

RETHINKING TIBETO-BURMAN: LINGUISTIC IDENTITIES AND CLASSIFICATIONS IN THE HIMALAYAN PERIPHERY

MARK TURIN (UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE & CORNELL UNIVERSITY)

INTRODUCTION

“To be human you must have a tribe. To have tribe you must have mother tongue” stated a Shona tribesman, when asked by the fieldworker John Hofman for a definition of his identity (Hofman 1977: 289). While by no means a universal truth, this assertion encapsulates a widespread sentiment held by both indigenous peoples and those who study them: that language and identity are inextricably linked. In this short article I offer some structured reflections on linguistic identities along the Tibetan margins and the classificatory tools that are used to define them. In particular, I argue against the uncritical extension of models of linguistic classification to categorise ethnic communities in the Himalayan periphery.¹

INVOKING AND DEBUNKING TIBETO-BURMAN

It is common practice for scholars to refer to many of the minority ethnic groups of the greater Tibetan and Himalayan region as ‘Tibeto-Burman’. The terms ‘Tibeto-Burman ethnic group’ and ‘Tibeto-Burmese people’ often appear as erroneous shortcuts for an array of standard characteristics believed to be shared by various peoples: being more egalitarian, consuming alcohol and meat, practising shamanism and animism, and generally not being part of one of the ‘great’ religious traditions of Hinduism or Buddhism which surround them.

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The incorrect deployment of linguistic terminology to convey ethnic or social characteristics is extremely common in Himalayan studies, as illustrated by the following few examples. The anthropologist James Fisher writes that the “predominantly rural population at the periphery, whether Tibeto-Burmese [*sic*] or Indo-Aryan, was too remote, scattered, poor, and uneducated to launch an effective movement against the powerful groups which controlled the centre” (Fisher 1997: 13). The French scholar Gérard Toffin addresses the “classifications of the Tibeto-Burman hill tribes into Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Thakali” (cited in Gellner *et al.* 1997: 15), while Christian Schicklgruber suggests that ‘the Khumbo’ are distinct from “many other Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups” in terms of marriage practices (Schicklgruber 1993: 343). The Nepali intellectual Prayag Raj Sharma describes the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley as being of “mixed Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman extraction” (Sharma 1993: 364) and the British-trained anthropologist Gil Daryn describes the Magar and Rai communities as “both of Tibeto-Burmese [*sic*] origin” (Daryn 2003: 171). Healthcare professionals are also wont to conflate linguistic with ethnic classifications, as illustrated by Pratima Poudel Acharya and Fiona Alpass who posit that their “data analysis showed Indo-Aryan and lower caste ethnic groups had significantly lower weight babies than Tibeto-Burman and Newar groups” (Acharya and Alpass 2004: 40). As a final example of the imprudent mainstreaming of linguistic classification to map ethnic or social categories we need look no further than the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the bastion of trusted popular information, from which we learn that:

Of the three principal ethnic groups in the Indian subcontinent—Indo-Europeans, Tibeto-Burmans, and Dravidians—the first two are well represented in the Himalayas, although they are mixed in varying proportions in different areas (2004).

Although widely used and generally accepted, such uses of the term ‘Tibeto-Burman’ warrant closer examination and critical re-evaluation. First of all, no group or person can be said to be, or speak, ‘Tibeto-Burman’, since Tibeto-Burman is simply the language family that comprises all extant and extinct languages under its umbrella. Tibeto-Burman is therefore neither an ‘ethnic’ category nor is it a classification that can be used to impute socio-cultural behaviour. Just as nobody actually speaks ‘Romance’, or is ‘Germanic’, so too there are no speak-

ers of a language called ‘Tibeto-Burman’ and no clear set of cultural characteristics which can be attributed to all ethnic communities who speak languages belonging to this family. Instead, we may simply say that the Himalayan region is home to millions of mother-tongue speakers of languages that are part of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Finally, the term ‘Tibeto-Burmese’, illustrated in two of the above examples, is as linguistically inaccurate as it is ethnically dubious. While referring to the language family as ‘Sino-Tibetan’ or ‘Sino-Bodic’ rather than ‘Tibeto-Burman’ implies that one is taking a stance on the genetic affiliations of subgroupings within the language family, the term ‘Tibeto-Burmese’ is simply incorrect and conveys no specific cultural or linguistic meaning.

There are several reasons why the above point is worth making. First, the phrase ‘Tibeto-Burman (speaking) ethnic group’ betrays a widespread misunderstanding of linguistic classification and a reluctance on the part of many non-linguists to examine what the term actually conveys in the greater Himalayan context. Second, and more importantly, the proliferation of this vague ethnolinguistic category implies a sense of cohesion between an ancestral origin and a contemporary, spoken mother tongue, when in fact such cohesion rarely exists. Similarly, just because English and German are related languages, it does not necessarily follow that this close linguistic relationship engenders an intimate social tie or shared cultural worldview between English and German speakers.

In the context of Nepal, for example, a case in point are the Newar, who speak a Tibeto-Burman language but whose culture has been so profoundly influenced by values from the south, that it would be incorrect to represent the whole Newar population as sharing cultural traits with ethnic groups in Yúnnán—who also speak Tibeto-Burman languages—solely on the basis of linguistic classification. This point was succinctly made by the Newar linguist Kamal Prakash Malla when he spoke of Newar literature being the “most tangible evidence of the symbiosis between a Tibeto-Burman language and the Indo-Aryan culture” (Malla 1982: 4).

Malla’s example is particularly apt since the term ‘Tibeto-Burman speaking’ is often used to convey the sense that a community has no historical literary tradition or documented written culture. The Newar of the Kathmandu valley and beyond, with their ornate architecture, refined art and classical language, are thus Tibeto-Burman in linguistic

classification only and share few of the typical or ascribed characteristics of minority ethnic communities who speak Tibeto-Burman languages. Similarly, aside from linguists, it is distinctly rare for scholars of or from Tibet to refer to Tibetans as speaking a ‘Tibeto-Burman language’, even though the classification would be correct. Literate forms, such as Tibetan and Burmese, are thus commonly held to be the parent languages from which other spoken tongues derive, placing them hierarchically above modern ‘Tibeto-Burman languages’.

Discussing language and ethnicity in South and Southeast Asia, Harold Schiffman draws a useful distinction between what are historically presented as the “overt manifestations of ‘high’ linguistic culture”, the codified, written and official forms, and the covert or ‘folk-cultural’ aspects which are more likely to be implicit, unstated and unofficial (Schiffman 1999: 431). The same conceptual distinction may be extended to Tibetan and Himalayan studies, in which Tibetan, Dzongkha and Newar comprise the former category, and ethnic groups speaking unwritten Tibeto-Burman languages make up the latter. Now that activists in many minority ethnic groups across the Himalayan region are engaged in the highly political process of re-creating or ‘inventing’ written traditions and developing scripts for their previously oral languages, and while countless rural Tibetans remain illiterate, it is apparent that we need to move towards a more nuanced understanding of what, if anything, constitutes ‘high’ and ‘low’ linguistic culture.

A further hazard in using the term ‘Tibeto-Burman speaking’ as a convenient ethnic label is that it appears to locate the peoples and groups it describes in a geographical space specifically related to Tibet or Burma. What of the minority groups in Yúnnán, Baltistan, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Spiti, who speak Tibeto-Burman languages but who may have no dealings with Tibet or Burma? It serves us well to remember that the Tibeto-Burman language family draws its name from the status of two dominant ancient literary languages, Burmese and Tibetan, and not from a field-based appraisal of contemporary linguistic distribution and diversity.

While the linguistic classification of languages as Tibeto-Burman (versus Austro-Asiatic or Indo-Aryan) is precise, the use of linguistic terminologies and models of classification to label ethnic groups is much more problematic. The construction of any group’s ethnicity cannot simply be reduced to a one-to-one correlation with their spoken language. As Joshua Fishman notes:

...the language and ethnicity link itself has also been subjected to a good deal of scrutiny and speculation, some of it going back (and still ongoing) across millennia of philosophical and scientific inquiry. Although language has rarely been equated with the totality of ethnicity, it has, in certain historical, regional and disciplinary contexts, been accorded priority within that totality (Fishman 1999: 4).

The linguistic classification of a spoken language is clearly not diagnostic for the cultural habits or ethnic worldviews of its speakers. For most ethnic groups across the Himalayas, a spoken mother tongue is but one of several important elements in the constellation of interlinked factors making up their ethnic self-image, which also include descent structures, residence patterns and religious practice.

Many publications in Nepal, both in English and Nepali, nevertheless continue to use the phrase ‘Tibeto-Burman speaking’ or even ‘Mongolian’, to attribute putative ethno-racial characteristics to communities speaking related languages. The political scientist Selma Sonntag, writing on language planning in Nepal, favours the term ‘Tibeto-Nepalese’ instead (Sonntag 2001: 165). While not in widespread use, this term conveys the sense that the languages spoken by the groups in question are both less than the totality of the Tibeto-Burman language family and firmly rooted within the national borders of modern Nepal.

An interesting issue emerges when organisations struggling for the uplifting of specific ethno-linguistic groupings take on, proliferate or even actively conscript the same essentialist terminology which social scientists have sought so hard to reject. Such stereotypes then insinuate themselves into ethnic communities’ own descriptions and representations of themselves as indigenous and homogenous. It becomes clear that as linguists, social scientists and area studies scholars, we still lack an effective metalanguage for describing and categorising lived ethno-linguistic reality. As Nancy Dorian put it, we require “a language for talking about language” (Dorian 1999: 33).

LESSONS FROM THE INDOSPHERE

As a relatively young discipline, Tibetology may benefit from a critical appraisal of the theories which have been formative for other area studies, specifically Indology. In India, as many have noted, language has

long been intimately interwoven with the religious complexes of the subcontinent. Schiffman suggests that the most salient feature of ancient Indic linguistic culture may have been a “concern for the preservation of sacred texts and the purity of the language in which they were composed” (Schiffman 1999: 433). This, in turn, has shaped modern Indian views towards spoken tongues, linguistic change and lexical borrowings, and has helped scholars better understand such attitudes. Prejudice towards variant linguistic forms is also attested in the Tibetan context, as noted by Nicholas Tournadre and Sangda Dorje in their introduction to the *Manual of Standard Tibetan*:

Many Tibetans, as well as some non-Tibetans consider that only Literary Tibetan has a true grammar. Educated Tibetans are mildly disparaging of their spoken language, which they consider “vulgar” or “ordinary” (Tib. *phal skad*). Only classical Literary Tibetan is well regarded enough to be “blessed” with grammar (Tournadre and Dorje 2003: 26).

The sense of wonder at the elegance and sophistication of classical or literary languages is one that is shared by many observers. Sir William Jones, the great Orientalist, was alleged to have praised Sanskrit for its ‘wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either’ (de Bary 1958: 590), a sentiment echoed to this day by some textual scholars of Tibetan and Sanskrit. A result of such an approach, as so clearly noted by András Höfer, can be that scholars approach the unwritten and endangered languages spoken by Himalayan ethnic groups as deviant or ‘broken’ forms of a poorly-remembered classical language, rather than as viable linguistic varieties in their own right (Höfer 2000: 234-35).

MOVING ON FROM TIBETO-BURMAN: THE THAKALI EXERCISE IN FORGETTING

In the remainder of this paper, I turn my focus to two ethnic communities in Nepal, the Thakali and Thangmi, who offer compelling, contrastive examples of the shifting nature of ethnolinguistic awareness and self-identification.

According to the contested *Population Census of Nepal 2001*, less than half of the total Thakali population of 13,000 speak Thakali—a Tibeto-Burman language—as their mother tongue (see Turin 2000 for a critique of the census). While the Thak Khola valley of lower

Mustang district, Nepal, was their traditional homeland, new business and trading opportunities have resulted in mass Thakali out-migrations to urban centres and the lowlands bordering India. The declining use of the Thakali language, however, predates the shift in residence patterns and is more closely linked to the negative values associated with rural speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages and their cultural habits which emanate from the Nepali nation-state at the centre. While the Thakalis' growing alliance with Hinduism and their concomitant turning away from shamanism and village Buddhism are well documented by anthropologists working in the Himalayas, their changing speech patterns have been rather overlooked. As early as 1958, Iijima reported that Thakalis generally did not converse in Thakali (Hutt 1986: 16), and the trend continues to the present day. Despite pleas by the Thakali Central Cultural Committee, few Thakali are making an effort to learn their language and practically no children from the community speak Thakali as a mother tongue. Nevertheless, most Thakali adults continue to believe that the existence of the Thakali language is central to their sense of a collective Thakali identity, even if they themselves do not speak the language.

While the traditional portrayal of ethnic Thakali as willing converts to the social ideology of Hinduism (Tucci 1952; Fürer-Haimendorf 1966) continues to be challenged (Fisher 1987, 2001), the fact remains that Thakali society has undergone dramatic transformation in the space of two generations. The concomitant decline of the Thakali language is generally presented by members of the Thakali community as an unfortunate by-product of the necessary urbanisation and internationalisation of the Thakali community and its growing alliance with the norms of Hindu Nepal. Critics from within the community suggest that the previous generation inadvertently threw the baby out with the bath water in that the Thakali language was jettisoned along with the cultural, dietary, religious and marital practices which were thought to be unfashionable and undesirable within the context of a rapidly modernising nation. In its present endangered state, the Thakali language has become the focus of a campaign for preservation and documentation, led in part by members of the Thakali Research Centre.

LIVING TIBETO-BURMAN: THE DYNAMISM OF THANGMI

Articles in the popular and academic press inform us that the world's endangered languages are dying out. There are books devoted to language death (Crystal 2000) which attempt to find a mathematical basis for predicting the inevitable decline of indigenous and unwritten languages in the face of the juggernaut of national and international, written and official languages. This portrayal is symptomatic of a simplistic and backwards-looking fatalism which dictates that progress necessarily challenges traditional socio-linguistic life when the reality is often more complicated. There are signs of hope amidst the otherwise grim visions of language decline and extinction, as illustrated by the following example.

In contrast to the Thakali case outlined above, 19,000 of the around 30,000 ethnic Thangmi population of Dolakha and Sindhupalchok in eastern Nepal still speak their Tibeto-Burman language as a mother tongue. In many of the remote villages where Thangmi is spoken, the language is still vibrant and growing even while it is being eroded elsewhere by the widespread use of Nepali. There are numerous signs of linguistic vigour and life: new songs in the Thangmi language, Thangmi first names replacing the Hindu Krishna and Shanti which were so prevalent among the previous generation, and Thangmi neologisms coupled with an indigenous desire to preserve oral traditions narrated in the mother tongue.

Specific examples of activities which help to reinvigorate the Thangmi language include parents giving their children names of culturally-important plants and animals, or of well known Thangmi shamans from times past, and Thangmi men and women creating new Thangmi words, such as the intentionally ironic *ban-pali* (friend-pl) for 'Maoists', or *wakhe-badi* (voice-box) for 'radio' and *mesek-ban* (eye-friend) for 'spectacles'. If these neologisms catch on, and many do, they may quickly become adopted by whole hamlets of Thangmi speakers.

On the language documentation side, there are at least three Thangmi individuals pursuing dictionary projects. Their focus has been exclusively on word collection or lexicon hunting and they compete with one another, and with foreign linguists such as myself, about how many words they have collected. Some are more rigorous than others, and word counts can be artificially bolstered by incorporating a massive number of loan words from Nepali.

The real search, however, is for a script, which Thangmi language activists hope will validate their claims to antiquity and autochthony. While most Thangmi are reconciled to using a slightly modified form of the Devanagari script to write their language, and sensibly believe that they never had their own unique writing system, some of the more militant members of the community are eager to unearth any indication of a uniquely Thangmi script. It is often said that the Thangmi language once had its own script but has since lost it, a kind of fall from linguistic grace. Such a belief reflects the widespread if mistaken assumption that all 'real' languages were once written as well as spoken.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN SEARCH OF THEIR SCRIPTS

The desire for a script is understandable from many perspectives, particularly when one bears in mind the verdict of Nepal's National Language Policy Recommendations Commission. The Commission presented its report to the government on April 14, 1994, including a four-fold stratification of languages spoken in Nepal, ranked on the basis of having a written tradition. At the top, ranked in first position, were those languages with elaborate and well-attested written traditions, such as Nepali, Newari, Maithili, Limbu, Bhojpuri and Awadhi. In second position came languages "in the process of developing a written tradition" such as Tamang, Gurung and numerous others (Sonntag 2001: 169); in third position came those languages without a written tradition, while the dying languages, such as Raute, were listed last. In this hierarchical caste-system of languages, in which script and literacy are placed as the highest units of value, it is of no surprise to learn that language development activities by ethnoactivists and language promoters commonly include the following components: 'graphisation' or the establishment of an orthography and spelling conventions; 'standardisation' which is the process of making one speech variety a 'super-dialectal' norm, and 'modernisation', the extension of the lexicon to cope with the experiences of the modern socio-linguistic world (Webster 1999: 556).

All but eight of the many languages spoken in Nepal as mother tongues by indigenous peoples have no literate tradition. The lexicalisation of a language and the development, or resurrection, of a suitable script or set of orthographical conventions are prerequisites for intro-

ducing a language into education as the medium of instruction, the latter being a primary aim of many language activists.

A few general issues relating to language documentation and lexicalisation are worth noting. First, the process of standardisation required for a pedagogical grammar, textbook or dictionary necessarily results in a degree of language simplification. Just as divergent spellings of words and regional variations of speech were constrained by the standardisation of English grammar and spelling by Samuel Johnson, so too the development of writing systems for Nepal's indigenous languages are resulting in the standardisation of the spoken language and the concurrent elevation of one speech variety or dialect to a normative position. There are at least two dialects of Thangmi, for example, and in the process of developing a suitable writing system and corpus of pedagogical materials in the language, one variety (or a synthetic mixture of both) will necessarily be promoted as standard and representative. Given the highly diverse and heterogeneous ethnolinguistic tapestry of Nepal in particular, and the Himalayan region in general, the process of linguistic standardisation can be expected to be complicated. Minority groups the world over will sooner learn a national language than adjust their own speech forms to resemble that of their immediate neighbours.

Second is the issue of which script to choose or whether to invent an entirely new one. Various scripts exist within Nepal, the two dominant ones being the Nepali or Devanagari script and the Tibetan script. Other languages with attested pre-existing scripts include Newar, Limbu and Lepcha (or Lapche). Indigenous peoples speaking languages without a literate tradition have three realistic options for developing scripts: Nepali, Tibetan or devising their own.

The advantage of the Nepali script is that it is widely recognised and understood by citizens from different ethnic backgrounds, largely on account of the growing education sector and the boom in print media post-1990. The disadvantage is that the phonetic basis of the Devanagari script imposes orthographical constraints on the sounds it is able to represent. In addition, many of the indigenous communities in Nepal who speak Tibeto-Burman languages are loath to use a script derived from Indo-Aryan languages to which their language is genetically unrelated. The 'Nepalification' through script or lexicon of indigenous Tibeto-Burman languages is strongly resisted by many members of the ethnic nationalities movement in Nepal.

The advantage of the Tibetan script, on the other hand, is that it derives from a language in the same language family as many of Nepal's indigenous and unwritten Tibeto-Burman languages. Some phonological features of Nepal's extant Tibeto-Burman languages, such as tone or breathiness, may therefore be more easily represented using the Tibetan script. At a symbolic and political level, 'Tibetan-ness' makes reference to a cultural heritage alternative to the dominant traditions championed by Hindu Nepal. The disadvantages of choosing the Tibetan script, however, are overwhelming. Most of Nepal's Tibeto-Burman languages are very far removed from modern Tibetan, both in terms of grammar and phonology. Membership in the same language family in no way guarantees linguistic similarity or the applicability of one script for all languages in the category. The complex spelling rules of modern Tibetan are also entirely inapplicable to unwritten languages which have no classical literary form.

Finally, some indigenous peoples of Nepal are developing new scripts for their mother tongues. While these attempts are laudable, they are also often unrealistic given the generally poor level of educational attainment of those involved in the process and the practical challenges in disseminating new scripts (publishing outlets, computer fonts, special schools). There are few professionally-trained lexicographers or linguists among those indigenous activists working on the development of scripts or compiling language corpora for these endangered languages. The desire for a script is an understandable aspiration given the psychological link often made between script = literate tradition = classical language = recorded history = cultural authenticity and power. Many indigenous people across Nepal see the development of a script for their language as important primarily because of the status that this will accord their community on the national stage, rather than for any resulting mother tongue or bilingual education programme that may ensue.

The challenge of finding the 'right' script is best illustrated through an example. Tamang, one of Nepal's most widespread ethnic languages, is spoken by over 1 million people or 5.19% of the total population of Nepal. The Nepal Tamang Ghedung, an ethnic organisation representing Tamang concerns at a national level, writes its name in three scripts: Nepali (Devanagari) for the benefit of most ethnic Tamang who are functionally literate and have passed through the Nepali education system; a modified Tibetan script (dispensing with

the complicated spelling conventions) on account of the language's place in the Tibeto-Burman language family and also because a growing number of Tamang Buddhists are versed in the Tibetan scriptures and its script; and English for its international audience. Such a tri-scriptural approach, while catering to all parties, is clearly pragmatically unworkable as a long term solution.

THE LAST WORD

My focus in this short article on the need for precise terminology for describing and analysing Himalayan cultural diversity is intended as a cautionary reminder that ethnic and linguistic categories should not be conflated. While scholars and activists across the Himalayas are addressing the standardisation and documentation of unwritten languages, there is insufficient discussion about the social and political implications of choosing one script over another to represent endangered spoken forms. Recognising that many minority language communities have accepted the idea that a 'proper' language must be written, I have focussed on the motivations which inform decisions for or against the use of certain scripts in the representation of these languages.

Dictionaries of endangered languages will be valuable both as records of the cultural wealth of their speakers and as useable resources for language acquisition. While it is likely that many of Nepal's minority languages will be reduced from communicative vernaculars to markers of symbolic identity within a generation, this tragic loss should not overshadow language revival activities such as those described above for Thangmi. The cultural values and political valences attached to languages, rather like linguistic forms themselves, are dynamic and changing. As scholars, we would do well to recognise this and to develop analytical tools that are robust and yet flexible enough to make sense of shifting ethnolinguistic identities.

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