

The Himalaya form the mightiest land barrier on the face of our planet. Against this majestic range the world's two largest linguistic stocks meet, splashing up like a sea on both sides. The Himalayas are first and foremost the domain of Indo-European and Tibeto-Burman families of languages - an overwhelming majority of languages in the Himalayan region belong to either of these two families. Today most indigenous languages of the Himalaya are dying, endangered or threatened with extinction. Only few of them, such as Nepali, Tibetan and Kashmiri, have thrived. Professor George van Driem, at Leiden University, has been working on the documentation of endangered Himalayan languages since 1983.



A Dumi shaman with an entourage of officiants in eastern Nepal

Indo-European languages range geographically from Colombo (Sinhalese) in the southeast to Reykjavik (Icelandic) in the northwest. Nearly a hundred Indo-European languages are spoken in the Himalaya. The Tibeto-Burman family encompasses well over three hundred languages, and the majority of these languages are found in the Himalaya, particularly in the east.

In addition to Indo-European and Tibeto-Burman, four other major linguistic stocks encroach upon the Himalayan periphery. These language families are Altaic, Daic, Dravidian and Austroasiatic. At the same time, the Himalaya are home to two so-called language isolates, languages which cannot be demonstrated to be related to each other or, indeed, to any other known human tongue, i.e. Burushaski and Kusunda. Well nigh a thousand different languages are spoken in the greater Himalayan region. This is why my two-volume handbook entitled *Languages of the Himalaya*, which attempts to cover them all, is 1,400 pages long and contains many detailed maps.

Indo-European was first recognised as a language family, including Sanskrit and Persian, by the Leiden University professor Marcus van Boxhorn, who published the theory in book form in 1647 as an open letter to countess Amalia van Solms, the princess of Orange and wife of the Dutch stadhouder Frederick Hendrick van Oranje Nassau. This theory of linguistic relationship was quickly accepted in scholarly circles on the European continent, but only reached Britain in the 18th century.

Saving the Himalayan Languages

By George van Driem

Tibeto-Burman was first recognised as a language family in 1823 in Paris by the well-travelled and well-read German scholar Julius von Klaproth. He showed that Tibetan, Burmese and Chinese belonged to a single family of languages, whereas languages such as Thai, Mon and Vietnamese each belonged to other separate families. Tibeto-Burman is also known by the obsolete names Indo-Chinese or Sino-Tibetan, but these two labels actually designate an obsolete, mistaken model of the family tree.

Vanishing Ethnolinguistic Heritage

Today most indigenous languages of the Himalayas are dying, endangered or threatened with extinction. Only few of them, such as Nepali, Tibetan and Kashmiri, have thrived. Population genetic and linguistic studies have begun to unravel how the language communities of the Himalayas have become so incredibly diverse. Himalayan populations preserve much old genetic diversity. The biological ancestors of some language communities have evidently inhabited the region since the last Ice Age. The long period of habitation in a complex topography has enabled great linguistic diversification. These mountains preserve a rich and varied ethnolinguistic heritage. Our work helps to reconstruct the prehistory of peopling in the Himalayas and the whole Indian subcontinent.

Surprises in Nooks and Crannies



A 'Ngalop woman cooking at Neptengkha, a native speaker of Dzongkha in western Bhutan officiants in eastern Nepal

The nooks and crannies of the Himalayas are full of beautiful landscapes and lovely people, but they are also full of real surprises. Until the 1990s, both Gongduk and the Black Mountain language in central Bhutan remained totally unknown to science and to the outside world. Needless to say, the people in these language communities themselves, and their immediate neighbours, knew about their own existence. Yet even these people had no idea of how special their languages are in the context of Himalayan and Asian prehistory. Other truly special languages, such as the Lhokpu language of southwestern Bhutan, remained totally uninvestigated until they were first studied and documented by our research programme.

Alongside a language as distinct and unique as Gongduk, all of the rest of the highly diverse Tibeto-Burman family, from Mandarin Chinese to the Chepang language of central Nepal, appears monolithic and homogeneous by comparison. Gongduk may in fact represent a lost link in the hypothetical Sino-Caucasian macrofamily. At least, that is what my late colleague Sergei Starostin in Moscow-thought about this language that I had discovered in Bhutan. His theory remains controversial, but what is certain is that such languages hold the key to unravelling the long and hoary prehistory of Himalayan population movements.

The speakers of the language with no name of its own, high up in the Black Mountains, as well as the Lhokpu, a small tribal group in southwestern Bhutan, do not only just speak languages that are very special in the context of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Even the DNA of these people is special when viewed in the context of Eurasia as a whole, not just when compared with other local Himalayan populations.

Himalayan Languages Project

At Leiden University I have been working on the documentation of endangered Himalayan languages since 1983. Because this was not enough, in 1993 I raised money from the Dutch national research council and established a new programme of endangered language documentation entitled the Himalayan Languages Project. In 1996, Rolex, the world's most renowned maker of timepieces, also contributed to the Himalayan Languages Project.

Empowering Native Communities

The Himalayan Languages Project documents and safeguards the indigenous cultural and linguistic heritage of key endangered language communities out of the literally hundreds of languages threatened with imminent extinction in South Asia. The research is conducted under my guidance by hand-picked Ph.D. candidates and post-doc scholars. The languages are strategically chosen so as to target language communities which will best capture and reflect the ethnolinguistic diversity of the greater Himalayan region and which at the same time will shed the most light on the initial peopling of South Asia and on subsequent prehistoric migrations affecting the Indian subcontinent. Isolates and poorly researched groups are favoured, e.g. the Kho-Bwa cluster, Munda, Hrusish, Kiranti languages.

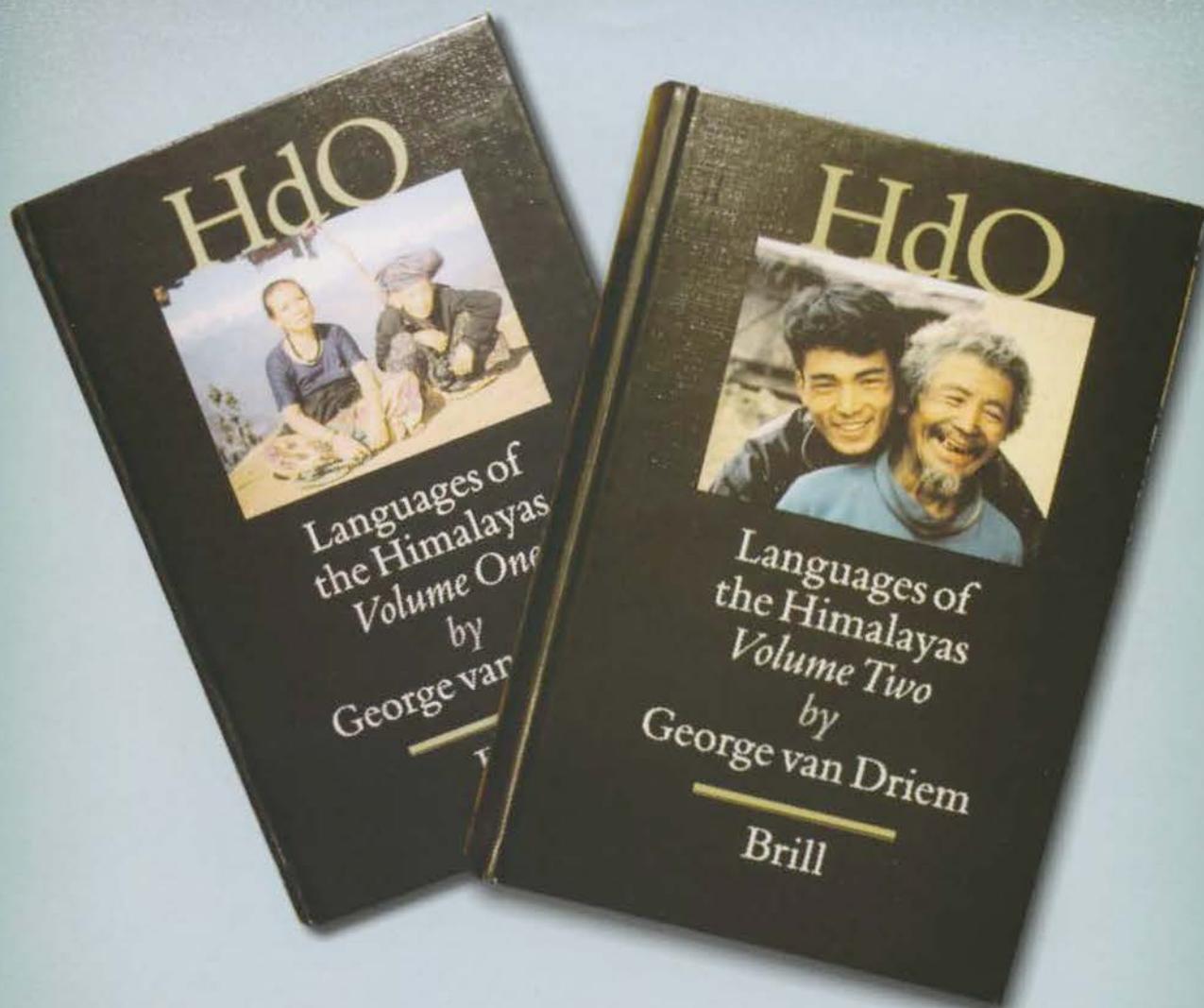


Aashish Jha (University of California at Berkeley), Surendra Raj Dhakal (Kathmandu) and George van Driem (Leiden University) with members of the Kusunda community in western Nepal earlier this year

George van Driem, Professor of Linguistics at Leiden University in the Netherlands, has been working on languages of the Himalayas since 1983. He has documented the grammar and lexicon of several hitherto undescribed languages, e.g. Limbu and Dumi in Nepal, Dzongkha and Bumthang in Bhutan. He is presently working towards the completion of yet half a dozen other grammars. In Bhutan, working for the Royal Government of Bhutan, he discovered two languages previously unknown to scholarship, i.e. Black Mountain and Gongduk. He is the Director of the Himalayan Languages Project, a research programme of Leiden University manned by a multinational research team conducting fieldwork in India, Nepal, Bhutan, China and Bangladesh to produce in-depth grammatical and lexical documentation of endangered languages of the greater Himalayan region. He is the author of the two-volume ethnolinguistic handbook *Languages of the Himalayas* (2001, Brill).

George van Driem at Lake Phewa in Nepal





A two-volume ethnolinguistic handbook of the greater Himalayan region

About the Author