

Themes in Himalayan Languages and Linguistics

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This publication is financed by the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg, Germany, and Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal.

First published 2003

ISBN 99933-54-16-3

Printed and bound at Nepal Lithographing Company, Balaju, Nepal.

Layout: Mark Turin

Cover design: Arthur Pazo

Mahakiranti revisited: Mahakiranti or Newaric?

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The topic about which I was most often questioned during the 5th Himalayan Languages Symposium was the Mahakiranti hypothesis. While my actual presentation at the symposium dealt with Zhangzhung, that paper has since been published elsewhere (van Driem 2001a). In keeping with the widespread but unacknowledged awareness that the most important matters at conferences are often discussed in the informal exchanges between, before and after the formal sessions, I should like to make a statement here on my current thinking about the Mahakiranti hypothesis.

The Mahakiranti idea first occurred to me in Bhutan in 1989, when I set out to chart the language communities of the country in the hope of finding relatives of the Kiranti languages of eastern Nepal or perhaps some language which might be a missing link between Lepcha and Kiranti. Instead, I ended up conducting a linguistic survey of the country at the behest of the Royal Government of Bhutan, during which I discovered two Tibeto-Burman languages previously unknown to scholarship, i.e. Black Mountain and Gongduk. However, I discovered no stray Kiranti language community in Bhutan. Meanwhile, in 1990, a new description had appeared of the verbal morphology of Dolakhā Newar by Carol Genetti. So by 1991 the Mahakiranti hypothesis was formulated in my mind as a hypothetical Tibeto-Burman subgroup encompassing Kiranti and Newar, but ultimately excluding the newly discovered languages and subgroups in Bhutan (van Driem 1992, 1993, 1997a).

Later, research by Mark Turin on Thangmi and by myself on Barām led to the identification of these two languages as the closest linguistic relatives of Newar, with which they collectively formed a subgroup within Tibeto-Burman (van Driem 1997b, 2001b, Turin 1998, 1999). In keeping with the Mahakiranti hypothesis, I first referred to this subgroup comprising Newar, Barām and Thangmi as ‘para-Kiranti’, but now I simply call this subgroup Newaric, which is more neutral and non-committal with respect to the Mahakiranti hypothesis. In scholarly parlour conversation conducted in Nepali I have referred to ‘Newaric’ as Mahānevārī.

As fate would have it, I first formulated the Mahakiranti hypothesis in eastern Bhutan in 1991, and I also happen to have ceased entertaining the Mahakiranti hypothesis in eastern Bhutan a decade later in the Spring of 2001. At the 7th Himalayan Languages Symposium at Uppsala in August 2001, I told Mark Turin, one of the editors of the present volume, that I had ceased to believe in Mahakiranti.

In fact, because of my own scepticism with regard to this hypothetical subgroup, already no Mahakiranti taxon had been included in the diagram of Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups, reproduced here from my handbook (van Driem 2001b). Yet the fact that I currently no longer entertain the Mahakiranti hypothesis myself does not, of course, mean that the Mahakiranti hypothesis is necessarily untrue. Therefore I retain the name ‘Mahakiranti’ solely for the sake of argument to designate the proposition that Newaric and Kiranti together form a coherent subgroup within the Tibeto-Burman family. Here I shall recapitulate in brief the arguments in favour of the hypothesis and explain why they are no longer valid.

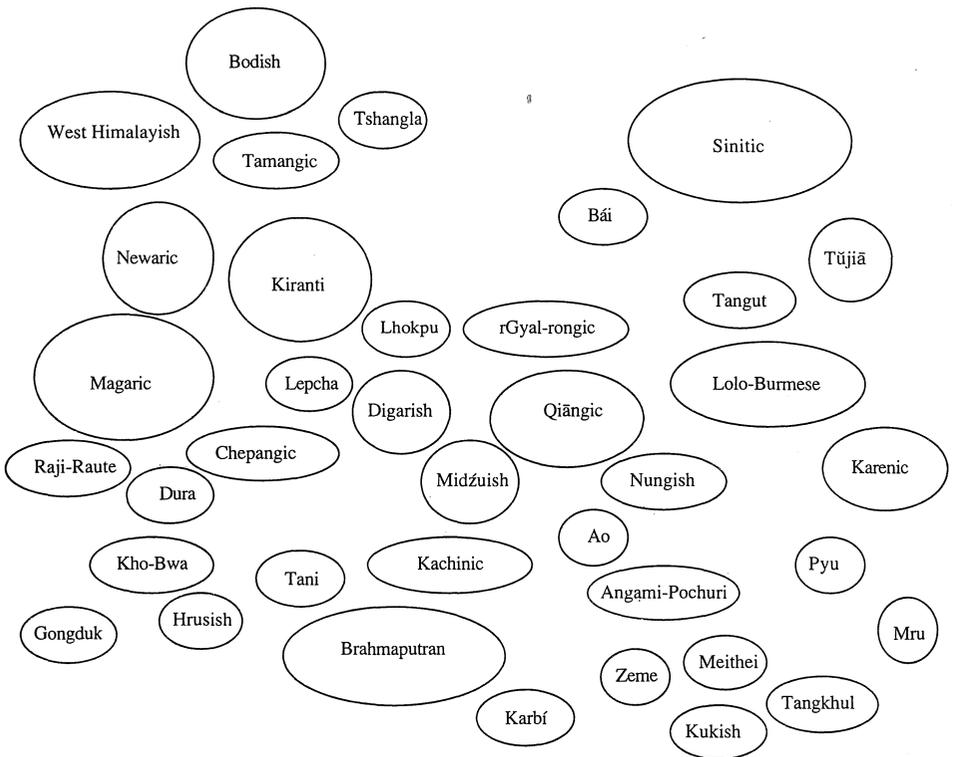


DIAGRAM: This patch of leaves on the forest floor has fallen from a single tree, which we know as Tibeto-Burman. We cannot see the branches of the tree, but we are beginning to see the shadows they cast between the leaves on the forest floor. This schematic geographical representation provides an informed but agnostic picture of Tibeto-Burman subgroups. The extended version of the Brahmaputran hypothesis includes Kachinic, but for the sake of argument this diagram depicts the short variant of Brahmaputran, viz. excluding Kachinic. Kachinic comprises the Sak languages and the Jinghpaw dialects. Likewise, Tangut is separately depicted, although Tangut is likely to be part of Qiāngic. Digarish is Northern Mishmi, and Midzuish is Southern Mishmi, i.e. the Kaman cluster. Bái is listed as a distinct

group, whereas it may form a constituent of Sinitic, albeit one heavily influenced by Lolo-Burmese. Tüjjā is a heavily sinicised Tibeto-Burman language of indeterminate phylogenetic propinquity spoken by about three million people in an area which straddles the provinces of Sichuān, Húběi, Húnán and Guìzhōu. The Sino-Bodic hypothesis encompasses at least the groups called Sinitic, Kiranti, Bodish, West Himalayish, rGyal-rongic, Tamangic, Tshangla and Lhokpu and possibly Lepcha. Other hypotheses, such as the inclusion of Chepang and perhaps Dura and Raji-Raute within Magaric, are discussed in (van Driem 2001b).

The comparison of lexical roots between Newar and Kiranti led Paul Benedict (1972: 5) to acknowledge that the ‘many points of divergence’ did not allow Newar to ‘be directly grouped with Bahing and Vayu’. Benedict considered ‘Kiranti’, which he also referred to as ‘Bahing-Vayu’, to be one of several ‘relatively compact units’ within Tibeto-Burman, which he also called ‘nuclei’, within which the member languages were characterised by ‘immediate genetic relationship’. On the other hand, on the basis of correspondences between lexical roots he also inferred that the closest relative of Kiranti was Newar, albeit that their genetic proximity was a ‘somewhat less immediate relationship’ than that which obtained between the individual Kiranti languages themselves. Benedict even drew a ‘Bahing-Vayu-Newari’ branch in his schematic chart of Tibeto-Burman subgroups (1972: 6). Robert Shafer had not posited any immediate genetic proximity between Newar and Kiranti (1955, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1974). At present I continue to view the lexical evidence as merely suggestive, for the lexical material has not been subject to an adequately systematic comparison to yield decisive evidence.

The evidence which was crucial to the formulation of the Mahakiranti hypothesis a decade ago, in 1991, was therefore morphological. Newar shares two specific morphological traits with the Kiranti languages: (1) The conjugation of the Dolakhā Newar verb reflects the Tibeto-Burman proto-morpheme *<-u> as a suffix, and (2) this suffix specifically indexes third person patient involvement. Meanwhile, in the past three years I have collected data on the three most endangered languages of Bhutan, viz. Black Mountain, Gongduk and Lhokpu. During my stay in a Gongduk village in the Spring of 2001, I collected data on the Gongduk language, particularly on the conjugational morphology and the biactantial agreement system of the language. Whilst still in the village I completed a tentative morphological analysis of the biactantial agreement flexion of the Gongduk simplex verb. In mulling over the historical comparative implications of the Gongduk conjugational system, it struck me that the Proto-Tibeto-Burman third person patient morpheme *<-u> is reflected in the Gongduk 1→3 *portemanteau* <-uŋi ~ -oŋe> when compared with the first person subject morphemes <-yŋi> and <-yŋi>, and in the Gongduk 2p→3 *portemanteau* <-uri ~ -ore> when compared with the second plural subject morpheme <-iri>. In other words, the two specific morphological traits shared

between Newar and Kiranti are not unique to Newar and Kiranti, but would appear to be the shared retention of a far older trait of the Proto-Tibeto-Burman verbal agreement system. Nothing else about Gongduk suggests any immediate affinity with either Newar or Kiranti within Tibeto-Burman. Therefore, the narrow but morphologically highly specific empirical basis for entertaining the Mahakiranti hypothesis no longer exists.

Meanwhile, John Timothy King discovered vestiges in Dhimial conjugational morphology of the older biactantial Tibeto-Burman agreement system in the form of the Dhimial 1s→2 *portemanteau* suffix <-niŋ> and the Dhimial 3s→2 morpheme <-nau>. In a draft of his forthcoming Dhimial grammar, King has demonstrated that these morphemes are cognate with corresponding morphemes in the verbal agreement systems of other Tibeto-Burman languages. At the same time, features of one of the three most endangered languages of Bhutan would appear to have implications relevant to the topic of the present discussion. I have already mentioned in print that the Black Mountain data suggest the hypothesis that the grammatical heart of the language might be Kiranti-like or para-Kiranti and that the language may have been largely relexified by East Bodish. However, this is no more than an early impression at this stage of analysis, and a discussion of the findings and their possible ramifications will have to await the completion of the grammatical study.

Recapitulating, therefore, a tentative morphological analysis of biactantial agreement in the Gongduk conjugation leads to the conclusion that the occurrence of reflexes of the Tibeto-Burman proto-morpheme *<-u> as a suffix indexing third person patient involvement is not a morphological trait exclusively shared by Newar and Kiranti. Notably, the fact that I no longer entertain the Mahakiranti hypothesis does not, of course, mean that Mahakiranti hypothesis is necessarily untrue. I shall retain the name 'Mahakiranti' for the sake of argument to designate the proposition that Newaric and Kiranti together form a coherent subgroup within the Tibeto-Burman family. Moreover, the lack of compelling support for the Mahakiranti hypothesis does not mean that the Kirantis of the chronicles might not have been ancestral to the modern Newars. The question of the ethnic identity of the Kiranti kings of the Kathmandu Valley is a complex and in part nomenclatural issue, which I have discussed at length in the handbook (2001b). Furthermore, the lack of evidence for the Mahakiranti hypothesis does not mean that the people ancestral to modern Newaric language communities did not partake of the same wave of migration across the southern flank of the Himalayas from the east as those population groups which were linguistically ancestral to modern Kiranti language communities.

Whilst the evidence for Mahakiranti has waned, the evidence for Newaric or Mahānevārī. has grown. Barām and Thangmi are languages on the verge of extinction spoken by economically disadvantaged rural groups. Newar on the other hand is the tongue of a highly advanced and flourishing urban civilisation. Yet Newar too is an endangered language. Previously I have drawn parallels between the language situation of Flemish in Brussels and the position of Newar in greater Kathmandu. At a Tibeto-Burman workshop held at the University of California at Santa Barbara on 28 July 2001, the Newar scholar Dayā Ratna Śākya went as far as to proclaim that ‘the more educated the Newar, the less likely he is able to speak Newar’. This is a damning observation to have to make about the language that has been the daily means of communication for a society that yielded one of the most advanced pre-modern societies and has produced sublime art and a refined culture and acted as the midwife in the birth of numerous schools of philosophy. The drastic sociolinguistic changes which have overwhelmed the culturally and technologically advanced Newar language community since the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley by Pṛthvī Nārāyaṇ Śāh in 1768 may serve as a metaphor for the convulsive changes which are now overwhelming language communities all over the world as they increasingly come under siege by expansive languages such as English.

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