

## Preface

The discovery of the Kham group of languages in Nepal in 1969 is one of the remarkable finds in Tibeto-Burman linguistics this century—it happened against the backdrop of nearly two centuries of fairly intense linguistic activity in the whole of the Indian subcontinent. It was in this setting, for example, that Sir William Jones, in 1786, made his now-famous pronouncement before the Royal Asiatic Society in Calcutta that Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit had all 'sprung from some common source'; a source, which, 'perhaps, no longer exists.' His pronouncement profoundly changed the face of linguistics; language origins and language evolution became the new challenge of linguistic inquiry in the nineteenth century.

Sparked by the imagination of a new-found science, the British in India expanded their range of inquiry and began amassing a wealth of linguistic materials from numerous Himalayan languages and dialects—some, like Kusunda, with as few as a dozen speakers. Because the British had no direct access to Nepal, most of the early samples were collected by British military officers from Nepalese tribesmen serving as mercenaries in the British Gurkha army. Colonel Kirkpatrick, for example, collected a short vocabulary of the **Magar** language, spoken by one of the 'military tribes' of Nepal, as early as 1793, and Francis Hamilton, a British historian and philologist, deposited a more complete specimen of the same language in the Company's library sometime before 1814. A few years later, Brian Hodgson, the British Minister at the Court of Nepal, beginning as early as 1828, published notes, observations, and essays on the languages and customs of several tribes of Nepal. Grierson's monumental 'Linguistic Survey of India,' published between 1903 and 1909, contains in one of its volumes (contributed by Sten Konow) a broad sampling of Himalayan languages with comprehensive notes on their vocabularies and grammars. Shafer, in an unpublished work of fifteen volumes on Sino-Tibetan linguistics between 1937 and 1941, and later in an edited version of the same work, published between 1966 and 1973, includes works on all the major Himalayan languages from every recognized branch of Tibeto-Burman.

Against this backdrop of linguistic activity, the failure to document Kham in any of its varieties is indeed a curious oversight. Kham, after all, is no small language—it is mother tongue to no less than forty or fifty thousand people living in the remote, upper valleys of mid-western Nepal. I first became aware of the possible existence of such a language from an American anthropologist, John Hitchcock, who had approached the edges of their tribal territory on a month's trek sometime in 1960–1962. He cordially apprised me of their general whereabouts in 1969. It was upon his advice and the encouragement of Dr. Dor Bahadur Bista and University Vice-Chancellor Dr. T. N. Upraity that I began work on the language the same year under the auspices of The Summer Institute of Linguistics and Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu. It was not until 1971, when I produced my first paper on a mimeograph machine, that the language finally emerged from its long years of obscurity.

A sad fact of our times is the loss of the world's languages at an unprecedented rate. Michael Krauss, in an address at a symposium on language loss (1992), made the startling prediction that 90 percent of the world's languages will be extinct by the end of the twenty-first century. Even if his estimates are off by half, the loss to humankind

is staggering. For millennia, the study of language has been viewed as an integral part of scientific inquiry into an adequate understanding of the human mind. The personal loss of the unique cultural nourishment afforded by a particular language to members of a community is even greater. Many have noted that a language, in many respects, is akin to a biological species. It is a uniquely human evolutionary achievement—'as divine and endless a mystery as a living organism' (Kenneth Hale 1992). The loss of a single language, then, diminishes our world as surely as the loss of a biological species. Language loss is quite naturally a legitimate and critical concern to linguists. But it should be more; it is surely a human concern, one that should be shared by all people. Reasons for language loss and extinction are not, in most cases, the result of deliberate attempts at 'glottocide,' the destruction of a people's language. The reasons are more subtle and nameless. In fact, there seems to be precious little that most of us can do to stop it. It is no longer economically viable for members of most small linguistic communities to remain isolated from the larger and more powerful majority cultures that surround them. To give them false enticements to continue in their native languages at the expense of economic well-being, however, would be justifiably looked upon as an act of linguistic imperialism and paternalism. Where a minority language does continue to survive in the face of economic and political pressure, it is because its speakers have learned to participate in the majority culture while at the same time receiving benefit, often more communal or spiritual than economic, from the minority culture. One thing linguists can do, then, to help preserve minority languages at the local level is to help promote community pride in the minority language. Where the subtle pressure of an economically dominate culture encourages people to believe that their future depends on giving up their native language, steps need to be taken to level the playing field. They must be able to view their own language as a valuable heritage worth maintaining. Providing written forms of the language in practical orthographies, along with modest amounts of literature, both from the tribe's oral traditions and other works of high moral value, has proven in many cases to be a good, first step. A generation ago, Kham began to lose some of its former efficacy. For generations they had lived efficiently in a kind of cultural backwater. In the 1960s, trade links to the north were severed and Kham speakers began to grow more dependent on their Nepali neighbors to the south. It became increasingly impracticable for them to live in isolation from the mainstream of society. Nowadays, the language is at a crossroads. On the one hand, speakers of Kham have gained a great deal of linguistic and ethnic pride through country-wide nationalistic movements in the wake of a democratic revolution in 1990. On the other hand, some of the nationalistic movements, notably the Maoist movement with its beginnings among Kham speaking peoples, have political ambitions well beyond their traditional tribal territories, and Nepali is the only suitable vehicle. How the situation will play out remains to be seen. It is no longer possible for foreigners to gain safe access to Kham speaking areas, and it is only hoped that Kham speakers, in the midst of their new socio-political situation, will recognize the value of maintaining their language.

It has been a matter of great importance to document Kham in its entirety while it is still a healthy and vigorous language. Language death, where an issue, only makes the need more urgent; its absence does not obviate the still fundamental need for

grammatical descriptions of little known languages. Languages need to be documented because they are 'supreme achievements of a uniquely human collective genius' (Kenneth Hale 1992). Language reveals the human mind. Sadly, few grammars, global in coverage, exist for Tibeto-Burman languages; most are short sketches of varying detail. A pressing need for further descriptions is obvious. Bernard Comrie (1991), in an appeal to field linguists everywhere, urged—'Provide good descriptive grammars and dictionaries: theories come and go; the best descriptive grammars and dictionaries remain as lasting testimonials.'

Clearly, Takale Kham and its relationship to the Kham group of languages is a linguistic phenomenon of important status and deserving of extensive documentation. Because it provides historical links and new insights into a number of intriguing questions relating to the whole of Tibeto-Burman, it is of special interest to Tibeto-Burmanists. But it is more. Since the great diversity of languages in the Tibeto-Burman area is a commentary on the creative genius and diversity of the human mind, the description of another major language with a particular view to its diachronic pathways of creation is of interest to anyone interested in language and mind. Finally, we owe a debt of gratitude to a community of speakers whose language embodies a tradition of intellectual wealth found nowhere else.

### **Acknowledgments**

Studying the grammar of an undescribed language cannot be carried out in the comforts of a study or a library. It must be done in the field, living with the 'keepers' of the language—the people who speak it and pass it on to successive generations. For an outsider to succeed, however dimly, to learn such a language is a testament to the patience and hospitality of the people themselves. The best days of my life have been spent around the fires of the Takales, the Nishels, the Gamales, and the Sheshis—in their villages, in their tents, and in their sheep camps at the foot of the glaciers. It was there that we shared food, swapped stories, laughed, wept, and dreamed. I will always be indebted to them for cheerfully sharing their language and giving me a glimpse of a way of life that is fast disappearing from the face of the earth.

I have many Nepalis to thank too, both in and out of government, without whose help I could never have reached the Kham territories. They provided permits, letters, and study visas. Many became personal friends. They are too numerous to mention. It would be impossible, however, not to mention the special friendship of many at the Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University: C. M. Bandhu, T. R. Kansakar, B. M. Dahal, Y. P. Yadav, N. M. Tuladhar, K. P. Malla, and M. P. Pokharel. Numerous foreign scholars in Nepal, too, from many nations and a wide variety of institutions, have through the years provided invaluable insights into complex linguistic issues: Austin Hale, Ross Caughley, Warren Glover, Maria Hari, Sueyoshi Toba, Olavi Vesalainen, Marlene Schultze, Dora Bieri, Esther Strahm, Anita Maibaum, Boyd Michailovsky, Martine Mazaudon, Carol Genetti, George van Driem, Stephen Watters, Erik Andvik, and Balthasar Bickel, just to name a few. The Sino-Tibetan conferences, too, have always been a breeding ground of stimulation and encouragement. Much of my early interest in Tibeto-Burman issues came through Jim Matisoff, Paul Benedict, Graham Thurgood, and Jim Bauman. My work would have gone nowhere had it not been for the instruction and encouragement of my professors

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A Grammar of Kham  
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