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# Notes on the Structure of the Sunwari Transitive Verb

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## 0.0 Introduction

Sunwari is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the area of the Likhu and Tamba Kosi rivers in the Okhaldhunga district of eastern Nepal.[1] It is a member of Benedict's (1972) Bahing-Vayu subgroup, which is also known as Kiranti. Benedict divides Kiranti into two units, one of which includes Bahing, Sunwari, Dumi, Khaling and Rai, and the other unit containing Limbu, Rodong, Yakha and others. Benedict also puts Vayu and Chepang into this branch; while Vayu is clearly part of the Kiranti group (Michailovsky 1975), the grouping of Chepang here is questionable.

The original data for this analysis consisted of fifty-two transitive verb paradigms. These were all written out by my informant, Mr. Tanka Raj Sunuwar, of the Khiitsi village in the Okhaldhunga district, whom I began working with in Kathmandu in the spring of 1987. Mr. Sunuwar shows a remarkable talent for linguistic analysis, and studied his native language independently prior to meeting me or any other linguist. He transcribed the verb paradigms using a phonemically based orthography. Since the Sunwari verb has complex conjugation patterns with the person and number of both the agent and patient determining the verb forms, the paradigms were transcribed onto a form with a nine by nine matrix. For each person/number/role combination Mr. Sunuwar transcribed the past, negative past and non-past verb forms. This data has now been suplemented by further field work which I have conducted with Mr. Sunuwar who has come to the USA. This has allowed me to obtain more paradigms and check idiosyncracies in the written data. This paper is a revised and shortened version of an earlier version which I circulated.[2] Although this paper represents a further stage of analysis than the earlier draft, the analysis is by no means complete. This paper is intended to be a summary of my current understanding of the data, and leaves much unsaid.

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[2]That paper, entitled 'Preliminary observations on fifty-two Sunwari verbs' differs from the present primarily in the discussion of verb classes, and in the analysis of tone.

Structure of the Sunwari Verb. The Sunwari verb can be divided into two parts, the stem and the suffix. While it is possible to augment the stem with certain morphemes (such as the reflexive, reciprocal and passive), augments of this type have been excluded from this study. The structure and classification of Sunwari verb stems is discussed in section 1.0. The structure of the suffixal complex is discussed in 2.0, while section 3.0 examines the Sunwari data in a Tibeto-Burman perspective.

Tone. There are four tones in Sunwari, which are divided by two independent binary parameters: a high/low contrast and a level versus falling contour distinction. These distinctions can be seen in the following minimal set:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (1) | daatsa | HF[3] | 'to like' |
| | daatsa | LF | 'to swallow' |
| | daatsa | HL | 'to wait for a chance to do something' |
| | daatsa | LL | 'to light a lamp or candle' |

The facts of tone are actually more complicated than this in Sunwari. For one thing, the above set is arguably not a true minimal set, since examples are taken from different inflectional verb classes. While the Sunwari verbs for 'to like' and 'to swallow' are from the class of verbs with /k/ finals, the other two, 'to wait for a chance' and 'to light a lamp or candle' are members of the class of verbs with /ɳ/ finals. /k/ finals consistently have falling contour and /ɳ/ finals consistently have level contour. However, as far as I can tell at this stage of the analysis, there are verbs which follow inflectional patterns such that the final never surfaces in the inflectional paradigm. In such cases it is the evidence of the tone contour, along with other morphophonemic behavior, that allows us to establish the class of the verb. And, in the majority of forms, such as the infinitives above, tone contour is the most salient clue that differentiates the countless minimal pairs. Therefore I have decided to consistently mark tone contour as well as the high/low distinction throughout this paper.[4]

Inflection. Sunwari is a 'complex pronominalized

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[3]Tone marks will follow the cited forms in this paper. HF indicates high tone with falling contour, LF low falling, HL high and level contour, and LL low level.

The segmental analysis used follows Bieri and Schulze (1971) in most respects.

[4]There are apparently alternations in contour and, to a lesser extent, in pitch, throughout paradigms of certain verb classes. Full exposition of these changes must await further analysis.

language', meaning that information about the person (1st, 2nd,3rd) and number (singular, dual, plural) of both the subject and the object can be coded by the verb. Not all person/number combinations take unique marking, and the amount of information coded is dependent on the tense of the verb. The details of the inflectional paradigms will be the topic of section 2.0 below. However it is necessary to introduce some information about the inflectional system prior to our discussion of stem classes.

Sunwari verbs inflect with one of two conjugation patterns, which I have labelled Conjugation 1 and Conjugation 2. The two patterns are only differentiated in the past and negative past tenses; they are identical in the non-past. Conjugation 1 is characterized by the long vowel /aa/ in the past tense morpheme; in Conjugation 2 the vowel is a neutral vowel (/V/) which undergoes a harmony process and takes on the quality of the vowel in the following syllable (see below), i.e. Conj. 1 taasi, Conj. 2 tisi 2d/1d past. In the negative past, tense is marked only in the Conjugation 1 forms; in Conjugation 2 the tense marker is excluded: Conj. 1 -ti < -tVyi, Conj. 2 -yi 2s/1s neg.past. This last fact allows for certain morphophonemic alternations to arise in the verb stems, which provide us with crucial information for the analysis of stem classes.

## 1.0 Sunwari Verb Stems

### 1.1 Structure of the Verb Stems

Sunwari verb stems have the canonical pattern C(C)V(V)(C). The second consonant in initial clusters must be a member of the set /y w r dl[5]/. Stem class is determined by the structure of the rhyme and the patterns of inflection.

### 1.2 Stem Classes

Sunwari verb stems can be classified by the phonological structure of the rhyme. The following classes can be identified:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| (2) | p-stems | m-stems |
| | t-stems | n-stems |
| | k-stems | ŋ-stems |
| | l-stems | r-stems |
| | N/m/p-stems | C-stems |

p-stems. The stem final consonant of the p-stem verbs is consistently present throughout the paradigm. However, the final undergoes some morphophonemic alternations. When a p-stem verb is followed by a suffix beginning with a voiced

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[5]Mr. Sunuwar clearly pronounces the lateral phoneme as a laterally released affricate following stops.

stop, vowel or glide, the stem consonant will be voiced:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (3) | thab-ba | HF | 'pay, 3s/3s, non-past' |
| | ma-gub-i | LL | 'pick up, 2s/3s, neg.past' |
| | ma-lob-yi | HL | 'boil, 2s/1s, neg.past' |

The following rule accounts for this regressive voicing assimilation:[6]

<u>Regressive Voicing Assimilation</u>
A stop will assimilate in voicing to a following oral segment.

Note that in the examples in (3) the contour of the verb preceding a consonant initial suffix is falling, whereas when the suffix begins with a vowel or glide the contour is level. In the latter case, the final of the verb is functioning as a syllable onset (with or without a following glide), leaving the syllable structure of the verb to be simply CV. In this case, the contour is level.

Another process which affects p-stems is the nasalization of the final to /m/ before some nasal-initial suffixes:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (4) | ma-gum-n | LF | 'pick up, 1s/2s, neg.past' |
| | ma-gum-ni | LF | 'pick up, 2p/1d, neg.past' |

Note that such assimilation does not occur when the stems precede the non-past suffix <u>nV</u>. Thus nasal assimilation is restricted to the negative past verb forms. The conditioning environment for this rule is only present in the second conjugation, since in the second conjugation of the negative past stems are followed directly by the person/number marker without an intervening tense marker. The following rule accounts for regressive nasal assimilation:

<u>Regressive Nasal Assimilation</u>
In negative past tense forms, a stop becomes nasalized when it precedes a nasal consonant.

<u>M-stems</u>, <u>l-stems</u> and <u>r-stems</u>. These three stem classes will be treated together since they evidence the same morphophonemic behavior. The only morphophonemic change that involves stems of these classes is again restricted to the negative past tense. In the first conjugation of the negative past, the /t/ initial of the suffix is voiced

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[6] For expository purposes I have decided to write out all phonological rules in prose, rather than formalize them within the constructs of a phonological theory. My impression is that all of the rules are best accounted for within the framework of autosegmental phonology, but that analysis will not be presented here.