Picking up where Hodgson left off: Further notes on Dhimal

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dhimal\(^1\) is a Tibeto-Burman (TB) language spoken natively by about 35,000 people of the same name in the lowlands of southeast Nepal (Jhapa & Morang districts). In the areas Dhimals inhabit, they make up about 10% of the population. There are also a few communities in the adjoining areas of West Bengal, India where they go by the name of Malik. The language can be divided into two major dialects separated geographically by the Kankai Mai river system: the eastern and western. The western dialect is primarily spoken in about 44 villages, while the eastern dialect is only spoken in about ten. These two dialects differ primarily in syntax and vocabulary, though variations in pronunciation can be heard even within the same village. Dhimal also has the distinction of being the only TB speech community, with the possible exception of Mech, indigenous to the lowlands of Nepal.

Although there has been much research on the Himalayan languages of Nepal, Dhimal has received scant attention. Languages spoken in the Nepali lowlands have not merited the same focus as those in the hill regions. This academic marginalization can be attributed in part to the allure of the Himalayas and the corresponding lack of interest in the peoples and languages of the lowlands. In addition, researchers, in an attempt at reconstructing Proto-Tibeto-Burman, have been more attracted to the conservative complex pronominalized languages of the hills. Studying the Dhimal language, however, will allow linguists to sort out the historical spread of TB languages in this region and contribute clues to the puzzle of pronominalization. An in-depth investigation will also establish Dhimal's genetic relation to other TB languages and determine paths of interaction and influence among the lowland peoples of Nepal and the adjoining areas of India. The following article, based on three years of living in a Dhimal community, will make a step in that direction.

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\(^1\) The Nepali anthropologist Regmi (1985) postulates, quite fancifully, that the etymology of the ethnonym Dhimal stems from the Sanskrit-based word *himal* meaning 'place of snow'. Dhimal (1992), on firmer ground, cites a mythical ancestor named *Dheko Kopa* who was stranded in the lowlands, thereby founding a new people and lending the first part of his name to his progeny. Dhimal (1992) also ties the Dhimal word *dhe* 'split' into the equation.
2. Linguistic Classification

Brian Hodgson (1847) is the sole Westerner to investigate and publish an account of Dhimal (eastern dialect). Though he didn’t concern himself with classifications, succeeding scholars have used his linguistic sketches to postulate the genetic relationship of Dhimal to other TB languages. Because of the paucity of research on Dhimal and the difficulty of easy classification, linguists have tried lumping it in with a variety of subgroups. Grierson and Konow (1903-28) classify it under the Eastern Subgroup of Complex Pronominalized Himalayan languages. Shafer (1955, 1966) and Egerod (1974) group it in with the unclassified Bodic languages. Benedict (1972) places it without justification in Abor-Miri-Dalla—though distant from the nucleus. Voegelin & Voegelin (1977), on the other hand, classify it eclectically under the Eastern subgroup of Gyarung-Mishmi. Considering the unsettled state of TB studies, Ruhlen’s (1987) classification of Dhimal (along with Toto) as a subgroup under Tibetic appears to be one of the most organic and prudent.

Dhimals have been influenced culturally and linguistically by peoples speaking diverse languages. From having been near the front lines of Hindu expansion, Dhimals have experienced centuries of Indo-Aryan linguistic influence—mostly in the form of word borrowing. It is uncertain, however, to what extent they were historically influenced by the formerly Baric-speaking Koch or the Morangiya Tharus, whose original language is unknown. It is unlikely that the Austroasiatic-speaking Santals have had much effect on Dhimal since they have only lived in southeast Nepal since the 1920s. Linguistically, Dhimal is related, though mutually unintelligible, to the Rai, Limbu, Newar and other Bodic languages spoken in the hills of Nepal. It shows strong lexical links with these languages, while sharing few morphological patterns. Dhimals recognize these ties and consider themselves younger brothers of the Rai and Limbu, though this may be a result of their former subjugation by these groups in the 18th century. Culturally and linguistically, however, Dhimals have been more heavily influenced by and feel more akin to neighboring lowland indigenous groups such as the Bengali-speaking Rajbangshis to the east and the Maithili-speaking Tharus to the west.

3. Linguistic and Cultural Preservation

Historically, Dhimals occupied one of the most fertile, yet dangerous and unhealthy, regions in Nepal. Until malaria was eradicated in the early 1950s, they lived a largely autonomous existence as agriculturists. Since then, massive immigration of people from the hills and felling of the Sal forests have turned Dhimals into a ‘backward’ minority group. In the process, they have lost
much of their original land. In many villages, about 60% of Dhimals are landless or near landless, forcing many to seek work in Kathmandu, India, or even in the Gulf States. These socioeconomic stresses have put great pressure on Dhimal cultural traditions. Since the advent of democracy in 1990, Dhimals have joined the struggle for linguistic and cultural survival along with many other indigenous groups of Nepal. Most Dhimals are bilingual to varying degrees in Nepali (women less than men), which has supplanted Maithili and Bengali as the major source of loan words. In 1993, the Dhimal Development Center in Damak, Jhapa was formed to champion the socioeconomic betterment of Dhimals. This organization, which is the sole representative of Dhimals above the village level, has made efforts to limit this linguistic borrowing and promote the use of 'traditional' Dhimal words where possible. In the last couple years the Dhimal Literature Society, based in Duhubi, Sunsari district, has published several short stories dealing with socioeconomic problems facing Dhimal society and works of poetry using the Devanagari script. Still, not all these publications have been wholeheartedly accepted by the Dhimal community due to the authors' often heavy-handed use of Sanskrit-based loan words, which even an uneducated native Nepali speaker would have difficulty understanding.

4. Syntax, Phonology, and Morphology of Dhimal (Western Dialect)

4.1 Syntax

Dhimal is an atonal, postpositional language with agglutinative morphology. In common with most TB languages, its syntactic structure consists of subject-object-verb. It employs a nominative-accusative topic marking scheme. Verb conjugation follows, with the exception of the honorific, simple subject agreement rather than a split ergative pattern. In addition, there is no trace of the pronominal prefixes such as are found in the neighboring East Himalayan languages. The subject or agent, because it is reflected in the verb, is often ellipted in a process known as 'zero pronominalization'. Likewise, the patient or object, which is often implied or understood from context, may be dropped: capihi 'he ate (it) up'. In Dhimal, the verb and its modifiers come at the end of a clause. The verbal phrase consists of a verb or verbs, verb-like morphemes expressing tense or aspect, a pronominal morpheme, and particles. Demonstratives, genitive phrases, relative clauses, and noun phrases precede the modified. The agent and genitive phrases often come at the end of the sentence as a sort of afterthought, perhaps being related to the phenomenon of pronominalization. The most common order of elements before the verb is agent-beneficiary-patient. The beneficiary marker heng or seheng (used only with pronominals) is suffixed to nominals. The genitive suffix ko is sometimes
omitted when the relation is clear: saqko liqta > saqliqta 'inside [of] the house'; nelaiko dera > nela dera 'your [pl.] village'.

Aside from using the question words (tai 'what', hiso 'whither', hasu 'who', hesa 'how', and so on) or rising intonation, there are several ways to ask a question in Dhimal. The first involves the use of the tag question word ma, which is tacked on to the end of a declarative sentence. The user of this type of construction expects an affirmative response: kasehen ge donha amrika cumpuana, ma? 'you're going to take me to America with you, right?'. Another common method used to construct an interrogative sentence is to place contrasting affirmative and negative statements back to back: cur amana ma-amana 'do you want to smoke a cigarette or don't you?'

4.2 Phonology

Dhimal is rich in consonant phonemes (33) and permits a variety of syllable-final consonants, including m, n, ng, r, l, and a glottal stop (written "q"). That the glottal stop may be an unreleased t is evidenced by future tense verb forms: themli 'to be enough' > themang 'will be enough' vs. dogli 'to say' > dogtang 'will say'. Some verbs, however, which don't end in a glottal stop, exhibit what may be an atrophied syllable final k when followed by a vowel: lolli 'to come' > lowang 'will come', but bholi 'to look for' > bhokang 'will look for'.

All the consonants except for q and ng can appear word-initially. Some retroflex phonemes also exist in words borrowed from Indo-Aryan languages, but are used irregularly. Some older loans, after being adapted to the Dhimal phonological system, are difficult to detect. There is an areal tendency for ch to become s, also occurring in the variety of Nepali spoken in eastern Nepal and in the Bengali spoken in northern West Bengal. Traces of a former aspirated voiceless affricate ch, however, can be found in the pronunciation of some Dhimal speakers. The aspirated voiceless velar plosive kh has a velar fricative allophone [x]. Consonant clusters, although not common, do occur due to compounding, elision, and word borrowing. Except for the aforementioned cases, the only permitted medials are y and w. In the village where I conducted research, there was a good deal of variation in pronunciation among different families: elong 'one' vs. enong,² dopha 'with' vs. dokha and dosa; lekhara 'butt' vs. lesara, jamal 'child' vs. jambal; camindi 'daughter' vs. camdi. While some of these differences were accepted variations, others were considered idiosyncratic peculiarities prevalent among certain groups. The frequency of this occurrence may be due to the fact that founding families were from different dialect areas. Because neighborhoods in Dhimal villages tend to be made up of clusters of

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² The variety of Bengali spoken by Rajbangshis also confuses l and n.