Notes on the Kiranti Verb ⟨East Nepal⟩

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Introduction:

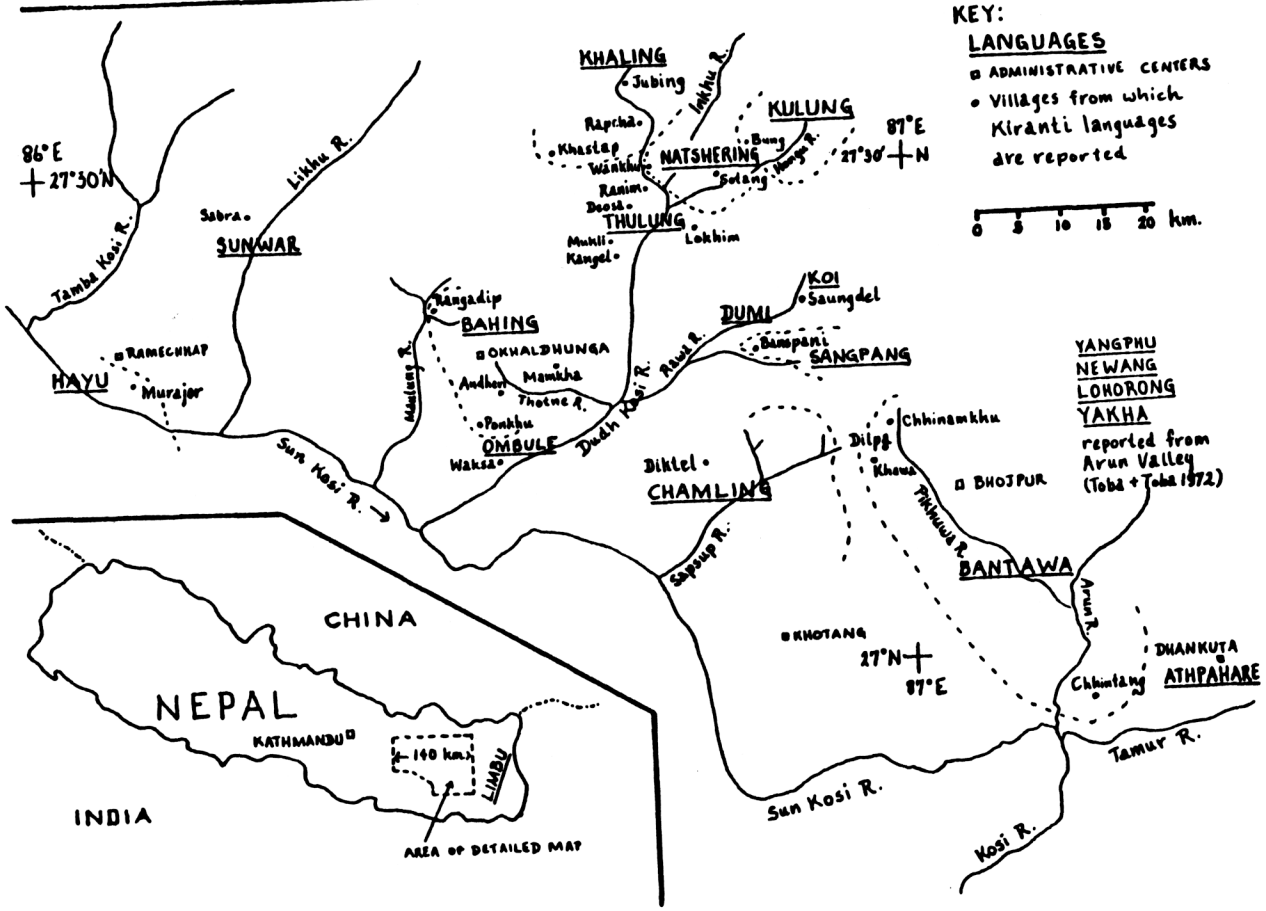
The languages of the Kiranti group in East Nepal ⟨see map⟩, which I take to include Hayu, Sunwar, the languages called 'Rai', and Limbu, are noted for their complex verbal morphology, which was first described by the great pioneer of all Himalayan studies, B. H. Hodgson, in the last century. The present article includes two papers in which the method of internal reconstruction is used to study the structure of verbal roots in two of the Rai languages. A similar study of Limbu verbal roots has been made by R. K. Sprigg ⟨1966⟩.

A Tibeto-Burmanist instinctively recoils from verbs in historical studies, especially of the Tibetan side of the family, because of the many ancient and poorly understood morphological processes that have played havoc with initials, vowels, and finals. However, the Kiranti group, where much of the verbal morphology is more transparent and perhaps more recent, illustrates the value of the verb in historical studies. The abundance of verbal forms in the paradigm gives an opportunity for the internal reconstruction of phonological processes which in fact have probably affected both verbs and nouns alike.

Part I of the present article is a fairly complete treatment of the Bahing verb. The emphasis is on the vocalism of the verbal root, which presents some interesting complexities due both to harmonic effects and to the influence of following consonants. The system of morphological suffixes, which has been well known since the work of Hodgson ⟨1858⟩, is not commented upon here, although a few rather complete paradigms are given.[1]

In Part II, some recently published data on Khaling is analysed briefly. The main result here is that the two-tone system of Khaling, at least on verbal roots, is shown to be a secondary development from the root finals. Stop-finals have given rise to high tone and other finals to low tone. The phonetic motivation for such a split is discussed ⟨§3⟩.

MAP: SOME KIRANTI LANGUAGES OF EAST NEPAL



I. The Bahing Verb

Introduction:

Bahing or Rumdali Rai is spoken in villages around Okhaldhunga Bazaar in Okhaldhunga District of Nepal. The present study is based on field work carried out by Martine Mazaudon and myself in Rangadip, Bigutar Village Panchayat, Okhaldhunga District, during the months of January and February 1973, under the auspices of the Institute for Nepal and Asian Studies of Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal. Rangadip, about 8 miles NW of Okhaldhunga Bazaar, is the westernmost Rumdali village. The same dialect appears to be spoken in Andheri, a few miles SE of Okhaldhunga Bazaar, and in villages in between. In Ponkhu, to the south, a slightly different dialect, lacking the central series of vowels, is found.

1. Outline of Bahing Phonology

Bahing forms in the text will be given in phonemic transcription, set off between slashes. The reconstructed form of verb roots is a hypothetical construct, to be justified throughout this paper, with a reduced set of vowels. These reconstructed roots are transcribed in capital letters to obviate confusion with the phonological transcription introduced in this section.

1.1 Initial Consonants ⟨C_i⟩

The initial consonants of Bahing are given in Table 1.

1.2 Initial Consonant Clusters ⟨C_iC⟩

The initial stops of the velar and bilabial series ⟨Table 1⟩ may be followed by /r/ or /l/ to form initial consonant clusters.

1.3 Final Consonants ⟨C_f⟩

The system of syllable-final consonants in Bahing will be familiar to students of Tibeto-Burman:

/p/, /t/, /k/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, /r/, /l/, /s/, zero.

1.4 Vowels ⟨V⟩

There are ten vowels, as shown in Table 2. In addition, length and nasality are distinctive, but in verbal forms both can be shown to be of secondary origin.

1.5 Syllable and Word Structure

Each syllable contains one vowel. The diphthongs /Vi/ transcribed in reflexive forms of some verbs are clearly secondary in origin. Thus the canonical syllable is ⟨$C_i(C))V(C_f$⟩. The word is made up of one or more syllables. Final stops do not occur before nasal initials within the word, or in word-final position. Triconsonantal clusters of the form C_fsC_i arise in some reflexive verb forms, where the reflexive marker /s/ is found between root-final and suffix-initial consonants.

2. The Finals of Bahing Verb Roots

Since Bahing verb roots are monosyllabic, it is reasonable to expect to find roots with all of the finals generally observed in the language. This is the working hypothesis of the present study.

Table 1: Bahing Initial Consonants

Stops and Nasals:					
Velar	k	kh	g	gh	ŋ
Alveolar affricated	ts	tsh	dz	dzh	
Dental	t	th	d	dh	n
Bilabial	p	ph	b	bh	m
Imploded[4]	ɓ				
Continuants and Fricatives					
Palatal approximant	j				
Alveolar tap	r				
Lateral	l				
Labiovelar approximant	w				
Alveolar fricative	s				
Glottal	h				

Notes:

Syllables may also begin with a vowel ⟨zero consonant initial⟩.

In word-initial position, /j/- occurs only before non-front vowels, and /w/- only before /a/.

Some speakers are inconsistent in distinguishing the plain voiced and breathy-voiced series of initial stops.

Table 2: Bahing Vowels

	front	central/rounded[2]	back
high	i	y	u
high mid	e	ø	o
low mid	ɛ	oe	ɔ
low		a	