

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE VERB IN THE MUNDA LANGUAGES\*

*by*

HEINZ-JÜRGEN PINNOW

## 0. INTRODUCTION

**0.1** Studies on the comparative morphology of the Munda languages have hitherto been lacking. Because of the still very imperfect knowledge of these languages, and the lack of comparative phonological studies they would have been premature. Despite many keen observations, J. Hoffmann's attempt (H. 03) to gain insight into the historical development of Mundari morphology from Mundari data alone must be considered a failure. Although S. Konow's (L. 06) comments on the comparative morphology of the Munda languages are often valuable, they contain fundamental errors which were inevitable, considering the material available at the time of his research. Furthermore, Konow's work contains extensive lacunae and can thus be considered only a first pioneering attempt. In comparison with Konow's work the studies of H. Maspero (M. 48; M. 52) represent considerable progress; however Maspero hardly went beyond a general morphological description of the Munda languages giving special consideration to Santali and, secondarily, to Sora. Only occasionally did he attempt to penetrate into earlier linguistic periods (e.g., M. 48; 182 f.). The road was opened for comparative investigations in the field of historical morphology only by

\* This article – translated from the German manuscript “Sprachvergleichende Studien zum Verbum in den Mundasprachen”, Berlin, 1960 – is based largely on information gathered in the course of fieldwork among the Adivasi peoples of India, especially the Juangs and the Kharias. This fieldwork was made possible by the generous support of the Free University of Berlin and of the Ernst-Reuter-Gesellschaft der Förderer und Freunde der Freien Universität Berlin, e.V. I am particularly grateful to Prof. E. Neumann, the former dean of the philosophical faculty of the Free University, Prof. R. v. Kienle (Berlin), Prof. O. Hansen (Berlin), and Mr. Laubrinus (E.R.G., Berlin). I wish to thank Prof. N. H. Zide (Chicago) for valuable material concerning the Kurku language. I am further obliged to Prof. F. B. J. Kuiper (Leiden) for several important suggestions and comments.

recent research on the individual languages and in diachronically oriented phonology.

**0.2** The material now available on most of the individual languages is not uniformly accurate and complete; however, it can in most instances be used unhesitatingly as source material. For Santali we now have the excellent works of L. O. Skreftsrud, P. O. Bodding and Th. A. Sebeok, for Mundari the studies of A. Nottrott, J. Hoffmann, M. Bh. Bhaduri, N. Soy, J. Gumperz and H. S. Biligiri, and H. J. Pinnow. For Ho there are the works of L. Burrows and Dh. Bakshi, for Asuri F. Hahn's essay. Kurku has been studied by J. Drake, E. W. Ramsay and N. H. Zide. For Kharia we have the works of G. Ch. Banerjee, G. Druart, H. Floor and V. Gheysens, and the author of this study, who also possesses for Juang unpublished materials which will make possible the investigation of this hitherto almost completely unknown language. For Sora there are the excellent studies of G. V. Ramamurti, and for Pareng the valuable article by S. Bhattacharya. For Gutob and Remo data may be found in Ramamurti's work (R. 33), though not concerning the morphology. Gutob, Remo and all other languages or dialects not mentioned above, viz. Karmali, Mahle, Bhumij, Birhor, Koda, Turi, and Korwa are still comparatively unknown. The most important reference work for them is still, at least for morphology, Vol. 4 of the *Linguistic Survey of India* (ed. G. E. Grierson, Calcutta, 1906). Since Karmali etc., are more or less closely related to Santali or Mundari the only serious gap in our knowledge – unfortunately a wide one – is the insufficiency of material on Gutob and Remo. However it is improbable that a closer examination of the structure of these languages will bring any special surprises which could materially change, or even place in doubt, the results so far achieved. Text collections, so indispensable for a thorough understanding of any language, unfortunately exist only for the most important languages, viz. Santali, Mundari, Ho, Kurku, Kharia, and Sora. Detailed information concerning the available literature is to be found in the bibliography.

**0.3** The importance of historical research in the field of morphology is generally recognized. The investigation of the parent language in the distant past, viz. the common or Proto-Munda, can contribute to the better understanding of its individual descendants, provide valuable information about the relationship of the present-day languages to each other and, at the same time, lead to a scientific grouping of the particular language family. Above and beyond this, only thorough and detailed investigation of linguistic periods of the past could give proof of genetic

connection between a given language group and other languages or language groups. We are here concerned with two problems, which can be solved or at least brought nearer a solution through the methods of historical linguistic research suggested.

**0.3.1** The first problem concerns the interrelationships of the Munda languages. Since the structure of the languages of the Southern group (Sora, Pareng, Gutob, and Remo) is – in part – quite divergent from those of the Northern group (Kherwari, viz. Santali, Mundari, etc.), the Western group (Kurku), and the Central group (Kharia and Juang) the question arises whether we are dealing with an old family of languages, one which goes back to a common original language, or with two clearly distinct groups, which are not derived from a Proto-Munda – or whatever else one may choose to call it – but are, at best, related far more distantly, for example at the level of Proto-Austroasian. Even though phonological investigations have indicated an original unity of the Munda languages (P. 59), this conclusion remains to be confirmed through morphological investigation. This unity can be established only by demonstrating that all the Munda languages exhibit the same main morphological characteristics. Similarly, in determining the relationship of the individual languages to each other, e.g. that of Kurku to Kherwari, historical data from the field of morphology is essential since purely phonetic or phonemic peculiarities do not suffice to establish a definitive grouping.

**0.3.2** The second problem concerns the genetic relationship of the Munda languages with the Khmer-Nicobarese languages of Southeast Asia, i.e., the Austroasian stock. Although the results of recent investigations leave no doubt of such a connection, there nevertheless remains a striking divergence between the morphological structure of the Khmer-Nicobarese<sup>1</sup> languages and that of the Munda languages. This divergence cannot be used to prove that the two groups are genetically completely distinct (cf. P. 60); however, positive proof that the Khmer-Nicobarese and Munda languages are morphologically related would be desirable. Such proof, which could only be obtained from an extensive historical study of the morphology of both groups is not now available. It is very doubtful that this can ever be obtained in the case of the Khmer-Nicobarese languages. The extreme “isolating” character of these languages at present, and the absence of documents older than the existing Mon and Khmer inscriptions would make this task especially difficult. Yet even here, with the help of the Nicobarese languages and the great mass of other languages which are known only from very recent times some

<sup>1</sup> Formerly called Mon-Khmer (cf. P. 60).

progress in this problem may be made. It is fortunate that historical research on the Munda languages, all of which have fully developed morphological systems, is comparatively easy. Knowledge of the Proto-Munda morphology puts us a step forward in the exploration of the Austroasian languages. At the same time we are now closer to solving the problem of whether or not Nahali, the position of which is disputed (Sh. 40; Sh. 54; Bh. 57), is a member of the Austroasian family, and thus distantly related to the Munda languages.

**0.4** Within the scope of this paper it is impossible to discuss, or even to outline, all aspects of the extensive morphology of the Munda languages. Since limits must be set, this paper will deal only with a small though very important part of the morphology of these languages, namely the conjugation of the verb. A wealth of highly differentiated formations is characteristic of all the Munda languages. Innumerable affixes, compounds, incorporated pronouns, numerous periphrastic constructions, and reduplication of roots and affixes all serve to express fine shades of meaning; the extensive differences among the various groups make comparative investigation seem extremely rewarding. Historical research should therefore start with a consideration of the verb conjugation – to use the conventional term – this being the most important part of the morphology of the Munda languages.

## 1. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE VERB IN THE MUNDA LANGUAGES

**1.1** In considering the verb in the Munda languages, we generally have to deal with the following factors:

A) The *base* or *root* and its modifications, of which there are the following: Secondary internal transformations (SIT), reduplication of part or all of it, morphophonemic changes in composition or addition of affixes (*sandhi*). Furthermore, two or – less frequently – more than two roots can be combined (composition).

B) The *affix complex*, i.e., the loose or tight addition of prefixes, infixes or suffixes (bound morphemes) in any number to the root, or to another affix, with or without *sandhi*. The affix complex can be analyzed into

a) *primary affixes*, modifying the meaning of the root (causative, reflexive and reciprocal formations, etc.) and corresponding to Konow's 'conjugational bases' (L. 06; 46),