

A Grammar of Kham

This is a comprehensive grammatical documentation of Kham, a previously undescribed language from west-central Nepal, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family. The language contains a number of grammatical systems that are of immediate relevance to current work on linguistic theory, including a functionally transparent split ergative system, a well developed system of mirativity, restrictive and non-restrictive noun phrases based on word order, a rich class of derived adjectivals, and extensive transitivity alternations in the verb. Its verb morphology has implications for the understanding of the history of the entire Tibeto-Burman family. The book, based on extensive fieldwork, deals with all major aspects of the language including segmental phonology, tone, word classes, noun phrases, nominalizations, transitivity alterations, tense–aspect–modality, non-declarative speech acts, and complex sentence structure. It provides copious examples throughout the exposition and includes three short native texts and a vocabulary of more than 400 words, many of them reconstructed for Proto-Kham and Proto-Tibeto-Burman. This book will be a valuable resource for typologists and general linguists alike.

DAVID WATTERS has been Director of the Oregon SIL linguistic training program in Eugene for the past four years and is currently collaborating with Nepalese scholars on an *Encyclopedia of Nepal's Languages*. He teaches periodically at the University of Oregon as adjunct faculty, and at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, as a visiting scholar. Whilst working in Nepal as a field linguist in 1969, Dr. Watters discovered the group of Tibeto-Burman languages known as Kham, and continued numerous successive expeditions into the territory until the early 1990s. He provided the people with written forms of their own language, along with modest amounts of literature, both from their own oral traditions and other outside works.

CAMBRIDGE GRAMMATICAL DESCRIPTIONS

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This series is devoted to the publication of comprehensive descriptive grammars of languages that have not previously been documented, and that have interesting and unusual characteristics which will expand our understanding of human language in all its diversity and challenge the limits of current linguistic theory. Some of these languages are spoken by only a small number of people and can be considered endangered.

Each grammar briefly introduces the society in which the language is spoken, and covers the key areas of phonology, morphology and syntax, together with typological and historical considerations. In each case, a sample text or texts in the language are provided, with full gloss and translation. A glossary of basic vocabulary is also included. The series aims to provide theoretical linguists in the various subdisciplines with reliable data and analysis which will provide a permanent and invaluable set of source materials.

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David E. Watters
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To Hasta Ram Budha Kham
my teacher
and lifelong friend
and
to the memory of his son
Sukh Kham
man of faith and vision
whose light was extinguished
in his most promising hour

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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

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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 dismally, 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 at the University of Oregon. While still travelling to and from Nepal, Scott DeLancey encouraged me to ‘Come study with us; write a grammar!’ It was a privilege to have him as my advisor. And where would I be without Talmy Givón? He gave me the broad vision of language I needed, the sensible and sane framework around which my thoughts have been organized. More than that, he has been a friend, always available to discuss linguistics, philosophy, or whatever. And there is Doris Payne, who was unafraid to critique my writing where it was not clear. If what I have written is readable, it is in part due to her gentle prodding.

This book is a revision of my 1998 Ph.D. dissertation done at the University of Oregon. I am very grateful to my editors, Bob Dixon and Keren Rice, for taking it on. They were the best. Their list of suggested improvements were genuine improvements. In no way did they stifle me; they provided broad guidelines and gave me the freedom to express myself as I wished. Any errors in this book are truly my own. I am grateful, too, to the outside referee provided by Cambridge University Press, whose comments were both encouraging and constructive.

My deepest debt of gratitude is to my wife, Nancy. She always encouraged me to follow my dreams. In the early days she accompanied me, deprived of the amenities most modern women have come to expect. She did it with cheerfulness. In later years, she experienced days of loneliness, staying at home to raise our sons, while I tramped the remote corners of the earth. Thank you. I am forever in your debt!

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Abbreviations

1ST	first (person)
1S	first singular (subject, object, or possessive)
1D	first dual (subject, object, or possessive)
1P	first plural (subject, object, or possessive)
2ND	second (person)
2S	second singular (subject, object, or possessive)
2D	second dual (subject, object, or possessive)
2P	second plural (subject, object, or possessive)
3RD	third (person)
3S	third singular (subject, object, or possessive)
3D	third dual (subject, object, or possessive)
3P	third plural (subject, object, or possessive)
A	the 'A' argument of a transitive clause
ABLE	abilitive
ABLT	ablative
ABS	absolutive
Adj	adjective
ADS	adessive
Adv	adverb
AFT	since, after
ALLT	allative
APPRX	approximative
ASC	associative
BEN	benefactive
CAUS	causative
CEP	counter-expectation particle
CIF	contrary information flow
CIS	cisative
CLSF	classifier
CMPR	comparative
COM	comitative
COME	come purposive
COMP	complement
CON	concessive
CONFIRM	confirmative
CONT	continuous aspect
COORD	coordinator
DAT	dative

DECL	declarative
DEL	delative
Dem	demonstrative
DEON	deontic
DETRANS	detransitivizer
DIM	diminutive
DIR	direct
DIS	distal
DL/dl	dual
DS	different subject
DT	detransitive
DUM	dummy (morphological place holder)
ELAT	elative
EMP	emphatic
ERG	ergative
EXPR	expressive adverb
FEM	feminine
FOC	contrastive focus
FUT	potential mode (future)
GEN	genitive
GO	go purposive
H-D	high followed by downstep pitch
H-H	high followed by high pitch
H-L	high followed by low pitch
H-M	high followed by mid pitch
HO	the 'ho' part of a discontinuous 'probability' morpheme
HOR	hortative
IA	Indo-Aryan
IF	conditional
IMP	imperative
IMPFV	imperfective
IN	inessive
INCPT	inceptive
INDEF	indefinite
INF	infinitive
INSTR	instrumental
intr	intransitive
INTRG	interrogative
Kh	Kham
LAT	lative
L-M	low followed by mid pitch

LOC/Loc	locative
MASC	masculine
m/f	male/female
MEL	main event line
MIR	mirative
M-L	mid followed by low pitch
MM	middle marking
M-M	mid followed by mid pitch
Mod	modifier
N	noun
NEG	negative
Nep.	Nepali
NF	non-final marker
NML/Nml	nominalizer
NOM	nominative
NP	noun phrase
NUM/Num	number
O	the 'O' argument of a transitive clause
OBJ	object(ive)
ON	superessive
OPT	optative
ORIENT	orientative
PASS	passive
PFV	perfective
PL/pl	plural
POSS	possessive
PRED	predictive
PRIOR	prior past
PROB	probability
PROG	progressive
PROH	prohibitive
PROS	prospective aspect
PROV	provisional
PROX	proximate
PSB	possibility modal
PTB	Proto-Tibeto-Burman
PURP	purposive
QP	question particle
RECIP	reciprocal
REFL	reflexive
Rel	relative clause

REM	remote
RSP	reported speech particle
S	the ‘S’ argument of an intransitive clause
SA	SA (confirmation particle)
SER	serial/concantenated verb
SG/sg	singular
SIM	similative
SUB	subjunctive
SUBJ	subject
T-1	Tone-1
T-2	Tone-2
TAG	tag question
TAM	tense, aspect, modality
UNTIL	until
VBL	verbalizer
V-T	(placement of) verb root and tense–aspect marking in paradigms
WELL	confirmative
WHEN	subjunctive/when