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A grammar of the Thangmi language with an ethnolinguistic introduction to the speakers and their culture

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A Grammar of the Thangmi Language

*with an ethnolinguistic introduction
to the speakers and their culture*

A Grammar of
the Thangmi Language
*with an ethnolinguistic introduction to the
speakers and their culture*

Proefschrift

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in 1973

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to my dear grandmother
Lydia Oorthuys-Krienen
who taught me to speak Dutch

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of contents	ix
Abbreviations	xviii
List of figures and tables	xx
Transliteration and transcription	xxiii
Preface	xxiv
Acknowledgements	xxviii
Part 1 Grammar	1
Chapter 1 The linguistic classification of Thangmi	3
1. Early classifications of Thangmi within Tibeto-Burman	3
2. Thangmi in light of the Proto-Kiranti verb	6
3. Before and after Mahākirāntī	10
4. Thangmi-Newar lexical correspondences and the case for Newaric	13
4.1 Shared numeral classifiers	13
4.2 Research on the Classical Newar language	15
4.3 Three classes of Thangmi and Classical Newar correspondences	17
4.3.1 Shared common reflexes of Tibeto-Burman	18
4.3.2 Shared Indo-Aryan loans	21
4.3.3 Lexical correspondences specific to Thangmi and Newar	23
5. Concluding thoughts on the genetic affinity of Thangmi	25
Chapter 2 The Thangmi ethnolinguistic context	29
1. Previous research on the Thangmi and their language	29
1.1 Writings in European languages	29
1.2 Religious writings	40
1.2.1 Christian writings	41
1.2.2 Evangelical writings	44
1.3 Journalistic writings	46
1.4 Nepali language writings	48
1.4.1 Nepali language scholarship	48
1.4.2 Nepali language literature and journalism	53

1.4.3 Nepali language political writings	55
2. Ethnonyms and toponyms	56
2.1 Thangmi ethnonyms	56
2.2 Thangmi terms for the Tamang, the Newar and the <i>Se</i> connection	60
2.3 Thangmi terms for caste Hindus and the importance of beef	62
2.4 Thangmi toponyms	65
3. The distribution of ethnic Thangmi and speakers of the language	66
3.1 The geographical distribution of Thangmi speakers	66
3.2 Population statistics for ethnic Thangmi and speakers of the language	69
3.2.1 Thangmi population statistics prior to 1991	75
3.2.2 Consensus for the census and modern identity politics	76
4. The status of the Thangmi language and its dialects	78
4.1 The Thangmi dialect continuum: Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok	78
4.2 Multilingualism and the retention of the Thangmi language	89
4.3 Historically documented stages of the Thangmi language	91
5. The Thangmi mythological world	94
5.1 Genesis	95
5.2 Thangmi ethnogenesis	96
5.2.1 Narrative	96
5.2.2 Analysis	100
6. An ethnolinguistic analysis of Thangmi clan names and structure	101
6.1 Parents of the clans	101
6.2 Male clans	103
6.3 Female clans	105
6.4 Later arrivals	108
6.5 Earlier writings on Thangmi clans	111
7. Thangmi kinship terminology and its social structure	113
7.1 The context of Thangmi kinship	113
7.2 Representing kinship	114
7.3 Thangmi kinship terminology	115
7.4 The sex of speaker distinction	124
7.5 The morphology of Thangmi kinship terms	127
7.6 Thangmi kinship terms and their Tibeto-Burman cognates	128
8. Thangmi religious and cultural practice	130
8.1 The central role of the Thangmi <i>guru</i>	130
8.2 The ritual world	132

8.3 Marriage	133
8.4 Death	133
9. Notes on the history of Dolakhā	134
9.1 The Simraungadh connection	137
9.2 Cultural connections between the Thangmi and Newar of Dolakhā	139
Chapter 3 Phonology	141
1. Vowels	142
1.1 Overview of vowel phonemes	142
1.2 Monophthongs and their allophones	142
1.3 Diphthongs and their allophones	144
1.4 Nasality	147
1.5 Vowel minimal pairs	148
2. Consonants	150
2.1 Overview of consonant phonemes	150
2.2 Obstruents and their allophones	151
2.2.1 Velar stops	151
2.2.2 Retroflex stops	153
2.2.3 Palatal stops	155
2.2.4 Dental stops	156
2.2.5 Bilabial stops	158
2.3 Nasals	160
2.4 Glottal stop	162
2.5 Fricatives, trills and laterals	165
2.6 Approximants	167
2.7 Consonant minimal pairs	170
2.7.1 Distinctiveness of voicing	170
2.7.2 Distinctiveness of aspiration and breathy articulation	171
2.7.3 Distinctiveness of nasals	172
2.7.4 Distinctiveness of other consonants	172
3. Phonotactics, syllables and the Thangmi word	173
3.1 Stress	173
3.2 Syllable structure	174
3.3 Consonant clusters and geminate consonants	178
4. Prosodic lengthening	180
5. The phonology of loans from Nepali	180

6. The orthography	181
Chapter 4 Morphophonology	183
1. Remnants of a liquid-nasal alternation	183
2. Assimilation	184
3. The morphophonology of intervocalic approximants	185
4. Syncope	198
Chapter 5 Nominal morphology	199
1. Gender	199
2. Number	204
2.1 Plural	205
2.2 Pronominal plural for third person	209
3. Case	211
3.1 Unmarked	211
3.2 Ergative	212
3.3 Instrumental	215
3.4 Genitive	221
4. Postpositions	228
4.1 Locative	228
4.2 Comitative	235
4.3 Patient marking for direct and indirect objects	240
4.4 Ablative	248
4.5 The postpositions <i>priŋ</i> ‘outside, without’ and <i>duŋ</i> ‘within’	252
4.6 The postposition <i>dǎi</i> ‘towards’	253
4.7 The postposition <i>ka</i> ‘throughout’	255
4.8 The postposition <i>habi</i> ‘before, in front of’	256
4.9 The postposition <i>uniŋ</i> ‘like, as, than’	258
5. Compounding and miscellaneous nominal suffixes	260
5.1 Diminutive	261
5.2 The topic marker <i>be</i>	262
5.3 The individuating suffix <i>guri</i>	265
6. Pronouns	268
6.1 Personal pronouns	268
6.2 Morphemic analysis of personal pronouns	271

6.3 Interrogative pronouns	271
6.4 The affable suffix <i>che</i>	278
7. Adjectives	279
7.1 Colour adjectives	282
8. Intensifiers and quantifiers	288
9. Numerals	290
9.1 Simple numerals and their classifiers	290
9.2 Numeral decades	300
10. Adverbs of time and the adverbs <i>woi</i> ‘also’ and <i>jukun</i> ‘only’	303
10.1 Periods of a day	303
10.2 Past and future days	306
10.3 Past and future years	310
10.4 Telling the time	311
10.5 The adverb <i>libi</i> ‘after, behind’	313
10.6 The adverb <i>woi</i> ‘also’	315
10.7 The adverb <i>jukun</i> ‘only’	316
11. Some bound nominal elements	316
11.1 The ‘person’ morph	317
11.2 The ‘grain or usable plant matter’ morph	317
11.3 The ‘round and fairly hard internal body organ’ morph	317
11.4 The ‘tree or wood’ morph	318
Chapter 6 Morphology of simplicia	319
1. Affixal slots	320
2. Morphophonology of the verb root in simplicia	323
3. The verb stem	323
3.1 The irregular verb <i>hen-sa</i>	323
3.2 The irregular verb <i>cya-sa</i>	325
4. Simplex person and number agreement morphemes	327
5. Prefixes	332
5.1 The negative morpheme	332
6. Suffixes	335
6.1 The reflexive morpheme	335
6.2 The non-first person singular agent or subject morpheme	339
6.3 The plural agent or plural subject morpheme	341

6.4 The second person plural actant morpheme	345
6.5 The first person plural patient or first person plural subject morpheme	347
6.6 The first person plural to second or third person <i>portemanteau</i> morpheme	349
6.7 The third person patient morpheme	350
6.8 The second person singular actant morpheme	353
6.9 The first person singular actant morpheme	356
6.10 The first person singular to third person <i>portemanteau</i> morpheme	359
6.11 Tense morphemes	360
6.12 The preterite tense third person subject <i>portemanteau</i> morpheme	363
6.13 The preterite tense third person to third person <i>portemanteau</i> morpheme	364
6.14 The preterite tense first person to third person <i>portemanteau</i> morpheme	365
Chapter 7 Other verbal constructions and morphosyntax	367
1. Verbs ‘to be’	367
1.1 The verb <i>tha-sa</i>	367
1.2 The verb <i>hok-sa</i>	373
2. The verb ‘to be okay’	377
3. The verb ‘to appear’	378
4. The infinitive	380
5. The supine	386
6. The imperative	388
6.1 The singular to first person singular imperative morpheme	388
6.2 The plural to first person singular imperative morpheme	390
6.3 The singular to first person plural imperative morpheme	391
6.4 The plural to first person plural imperative morpheme	392
6.5 The singular to third person imperative morpheme	392
6.6 The plural to third person imperative morpheme	393
6.7 The singular intransitive imperative morpheme	394
6.8 The plural intransitive imperative morpheme	396
6.9 The reflexive imperative morpheme	397
6.10 Negative imperatives	398
6.11 The singular intransitive negative imperative morpheme	400
7. Speech particles	403
7.1 Reported speech	403
7.2 Direct speech	404
7.3 Indirect speech	405

8. The optative	406
9. The adhortative	408
10. The causative	413
11. The permissive	416
12. Compound verbs of motion	417
13. Gerunds	420
13.1 The present gerund	420
13.2 The perfect gerund	422
14. Participles	424
14.1 The participial ending <-le>	424
14.2 The transitive preterite participle	425
14.3 The intransitive preterite participle	428
15. The negative participial suffix <-ki>	431
16. The connector suffix <-ŋa>	433
17. The third person singular conditional ending <-thyo>	434
18. The continuous background activity suffix <-ăi>	437
Part 2 Texts	439
Introduction to the texts	441
Getting married to a young girl	443
The father who sold his daughter	447
Chat between friends	450
Lile's life story	453
Smoking	464
Youngest son	469
Your fate	472
Shaman	479
Kathmandu	485
New name	489
Mushrooms	492
Elder brother	496
The god of the Thangmi	499
Kabita	502
Thangmi history	505

Dog-resting place	514
The story of the jackal	516
Sixteen sacred stones	519
Running away to Kathmandu	521
Poor man's burden	525
Hen-pecked husband	529
Round face	538
Blackie	549
The missing bread	559
Greedy sister	564
Feeding the animals	573
Mother-daughter	578
Brother-sister	587
Own people	597
Appearance	603
Thief	610
Tamang	613
Friend	617
Uncle	623
Old woman and chicken	630
The way it used to be	636
Co-wife	639
Mouse	648
Women nowadays	655
Cucumber	661
Going to the wedding	670
Girls these days	674
Boys these days	677
Daughter-in-law	683
Son is killed	688

Part 3 Lexicon	695
Introduction to the lexicon	697
Lexicon	699
Appendices	833
Kinship charts	835
Bibliography	851

ABBREVIATIONS

A	agent (of a transitive verb)
ABL	ablative
ADH	adhortative
adj.	adjective
adv.	adverb
AFF	affable suffix
(B)	Benedict's <i>Sino-Tibetan</i>
(C)	consonant
CAUS	causative
CLF	non-human numeral classifier
CNS	connector suffix
CON	continuous background activity suffix
conj.	conjunction
(D)	Dolakhā dialect
DIM	diminutive
ERG	ergative
excl.	exclamation
f	final consonant (subscript)
FEM	feminine, female gender
(G)	glide
GEN	genitive
HMG	His Majesty's Government of Nepal
HNC	human numeral classifier
i	initial consonant (subscript)
IMP	imperative
IND	individuative suffix
INF	infinitive
INS	instrumental
interj.	interjection
IPP	intransitive preterite participle
(J)	Jørgensen's <i>Dictionary of the Classical Newārī</i>
lit.	literally
LOC	locative
MALE	masculine, male gender
n.	noun
(NB)	Nepal Bhasa Committee's <i>Dictionary of Classical Newari</i>
NEG	negative
neol.	neologism
Nep.	Nepali
NPS	negative participial suffix

NPT	non-preterite
num.	numeral
OPT	optative
p	plural
P	patient (of a transitive verb)
PCL	participial
PERM	permissive
pf.	prefix, prefixal slot
PFG	perfect gerund
PM	patient marker
Pp	pronominal plural
pron.	pronoun
PRT	particle
PSG	present gerund
PT	preterite
REF	reflexive
REP	reported speech particle, i.e. hearsay evidential
s	singular
S	subject (of an intransitive or reflexive verb)
(S)	Sindhupālcok dialect
sf.	suffix, suffixal slot
TOP	topic marker
TPP	transitive preterite participle
v.	verb
VDC	Village Development Committee
vi.	<i>verbum intransitivum</i> , intransitive verb
vr.	<i>verbum reflexivum</i> , reflexive verb
VS	<i>Vikram Saṃvat</i> era
vs.	versus
vt.	<i>verbum transitivum</i> , transitive verb
*	reconstructed or unattested form
Ø	zero-marker
[...]	phonetic transcription/etymological note
/.../	phonemic transcription
<...>	morpheme/allomorph
<	derives from
→	direction of a transitive relationship
~	alternates with
1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
Σ	stem

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

Figure 1. Répartition des groupes ethniques du Népal central	35
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Tables

Table 1. Shafer's proposed lexical similarities	4
Table 2. Thangmi population in the eastern districts	70
Table 3. Population data from three villages in Dolakhā	72
Table 4. Unofficial estimate of the total Thangmi population	74
Table 5. Glottalisation of final [-k] in the Sindhupālcok dialect	81
Table 6. Glottalised cognates in the two dialects	82
Table 7. Glottalisation of medial [-k-] in the Sindhupālcok dialect	82
Table 8. Deletion of final [-k] in the Sindhupālcok dialect	82
Table 9. Dentalisation of final sibilant [-s] in the Sindhupālcok dialect	83
Table 10. Glottalisation and the addition of a staccato echo vowel in place of medial [-k-] in verbs of the Sindhupālcok dialect	83
Table 11. Glottalisation and the addition of a staccato echo vowel in verbs of the Sindhupālcok dialect	84
Table 12. Glottalisation of final vowels in the Sindhupālcok dialect	85
Table 13. Retroflex-palatal correspondences in the two dialects	86
Table 14. Sibilant-palatal correspondences in the two dialects	87
Table 15. Vowel opening in the Sindhupālcok dialect	87
Table 16. Dialectal divergences in the lexicon for flora and fauna	88
Table 17. Historically documented stages of the Thangmi language over the period of a century	92
Table 18. Abbreviations used for kinship relations	115
Table 19. Sibling kinship terms from the Dolakhā dialect	116
Table 20. Younger sibling kinship terms from the Sindhupālcok dialect	116
Table 21. Father's siblings kinship terms from the Dolakhā dialect	116
Table 22. Father's siblings kinship terms from the Sindhupālcok dialect	117
Table 23. Mother's siblings kinship terms from the Dolakhā dialect	117
Table 24. Mother's siblings kinship terms from the Sindhupālcok dialect	118

Table 25. Kinship terms for the spouses of father's siblings from the Dolakhā dialect	118
Table 26. Kinship terms for the spouses of father's siblings from the Sindhupālcok dialect	118
Table 27. Kinship terms for the spouses of mother's siblings from the Dolakhā dialect	119
Table 28. Kinship terms for the spouses of mother's siblings from the Sindhupālcok dialect	119
Table 29. Kinship terms for cousins in both dialects	120
Table 30. Kinship terms for male ego's children and children of ego's same sex siblings in both dialects	120
Table 31. Kinship terms for grandchildren in the Dolakhā dialect	121
Table 32. Kinship terms for four generations of grandchildren in the Sindhupālcok dialect (Cokaṭī village)	121
Table 33. Kinship terms for siblings-in-law in both dialects	122
Table 34. The range of meaning for <i>wari</i> in both dialects	122
Table 35. The range of meaning for <i>ḍamari</i> in the Dolakhā dialect	123
Table 36. The range of meaning for <i>jyamari</i> in the Sindhupālcok dialect	123
Table 37. The two meanings of <i>ḍamarni</i> in the Dolakhā dialect	124
Table 38. Kinship terms distinctive for sex of speaker in the Dolakhā dialect	125
Table 39. Kinship terms distinctive for sex of speaker in the Sindhupālcok dialect	125
Table 40. Thangmi phonemes	141
Table 41. Thangmi consonant phonemes	151
Table 42. Contrastive male / female noun pairs in Thangmi	200
Table 43. Gender specific ethnonyms and animal terms in Thangmi	200
Table 44. Possible prefixes and suffixes for the Thangmi noun <i>sya</i>	201
Table 45. Nominal plural marking in Thangmi	205
Table 46. Thangmi personal pronouns	269
Table 47. Thangmi personal pronouns and their suffixes	270
Table 48. Thangmi interrogative pronouns	271
Table 49. Thangmi adjectives derived from verb stems	279
Table 50. Reduplicative and near-reduplicative Thangmi adjectives	280
Table 51. Thangmi colour adjectives	282
Table 52. Thangmi numerals from the Dolakhā dialect	290
Table 53. Thangmi numerals and numeral classifiers from the Dolakhā dialect	291
Table 54. Thangmi numerals from the Sindhupālcok dialect	294
Table 55. Thangmi numeral classifiers from the Sindhupālcok dialect	295

Table 56. Thangmi ordinals from the Darjeeling calendar	299
Table 57. Three contrastive sets of Thangmi numerals	300
Table 58. Decades from the Dolakhā dialect of Thangmi	300
Table 59. Decades from the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi and the Darjeeling wall calendar	301
Table 60. Periods of a Thangmi day from the Dolakhā dialect	303
Table 61. Thangmi adverbs for past and future days in the Dolakhā dialect	307
Table 62. Thangmi adverbs for past and future years in the Dolakhā dialect	310
Table 63. Affixal slots and agreement morphemes for Thangmi simplex verbs	322
Table 64. Transitive and intransitive non-preterite conjugations of the Thangmi verb <i>hen-sa</i>	324
Table 65. Transitive and intransitive non-preterite conjugations of the Thangmi verb <i>cya-sa</i>	327
Table 66. Intransitive morpheme strings for Thangmi simplex verbs	328
Table 67. Reflexive morpheme strings for Thangmi simplex verbs	329
Table 68. Transitive morpheme strings for Thangmi simplex verbs	331
Table 69. Related transitive and reflexive Thangmi verbs	338
Table 70. Affirmative transitive imperative morphemes	388
Table 71. Affirmative intransitive imperative morphemes	394
Table 72. Affirmative reflexive imperative morphemes	397
Table 73. Transitive morpheme strings for Thangmi imperatives	401
Table 74. Intransitive morpheme strings for Thangmi imperatives	402

TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSCRIPTION

When referring to a date in the Nepalese Vikram Saṃvat era (VS), the corresponding years in the Gregorian calendar (AD) are provided between parentheses. A year in Vikram Saṃvat overlaps two Gregorian calendar years, e.g. VS 2058 (i.e. AD 2001-02). The Newar Nepāl Saṃvat era (NS) commences in November, with an overlap of only one month with the Gregorian cycle, so the likely year is provided between parentheses, e.g. Nepāl Saṃvat 688 (AD 1568).

Nepali words are transliterated from the Devanāgarī script using the following standard symbols:

<i>a</i>		<i>ā</i>		
<i>i</i>		<i>ī</i>		
<i>u</i>		<i>ū</i>		
		<i>ṛ</i>		
<i>e</i>		<i>ai</i>		
<i>o</i>		<i>au</i>		
<i>ṁ</i>		<i>ḥ</i>		
<i>k</i>	<i>kh</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>gh</i>	<i>ṅ</i>
<i>c</i>	<i>ch</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>jh</i>	<i>ñ</i>
<i>ṭ</i>	<i>ṭh</i>	<i>ḍ</i>	<i>ḍh</i>	<i>ṇ</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>th</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dh</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>p</i>	<i>ph</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>bh</i>	<i>m</i>
	<i>y</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>v</i>
	<i>ś</i>	<i>ṣ</i>	<i>s</i>	
		<i>h</i>		

The silent *a* is not rendered in the transliteration, even though it is not generally deleted with a *virām* in the Devanāgarī script. The *anusvāra* written above a vowel is transcribed as the homorganic nasal it represents: *ṅ*, *ñ*, *ṇ* or *m*. The *candrabindu* which indicates vowel nasality in Devanāgarī is transliterated by the symbol *~* placed above the vowel. The distinctions between ‘short’ and ‘long’ *i* and *ī*, and *u* and *ū*, as well as those between *b* and *v*, *ś* and *ṣ* and *s* are all preserved in the orthography and transliteration, even though they no longer represent any phonemic distinctions in modern spoken Nepali.

While an official and accepted spelling system for Nepali is yet to be established, Bāl Kṛṣṇa Pokhrel *et al.* (VS 2040) is taken as the spelling standard.

PREFACE

My involvement with the Thangmi language dates back to September 1996, when I moved to the Netherlands from the United Kingdom in order to join the Himalayan Languages Project at Leiden University. I had previously worked, lived and travelled in Nepal for a total of twelve months on two separate trips, in the course of which I had learnt some conversational Nepali.

Prior to 1996, my experience of Nepal was limited to the cities of Kathmandu and Pokhara, and more specifically to the lower reaches of Mustāñ district in Dhaulāgīrī zone of west Nepal. In 1991, I lived for nine months in the village of Kālopāñī where I worked as an assistant volunteer English teacher at a government-run secondary school. For this whole period, I had the good fortune to live with a family of the Thakali ethnic group, the socially and economically dominant community in the area. On this trip, I developed an interest in the Thakali language and succeeded in learning enough to hold my own in a basic conversation. Thakali language and culture sparked my interest in anthropology, and I returned to the United Kingdom to study archaeology and anthropology at the University of Cambridge. In the course of my study I had the opportunity to revisit Nepal for the summer months of 1994, during which time I returned to the Thakali villages of lower Mustāñ and researched issues of language and identity. On this visit, I had the good fortune to meet the linguist Ralf Stefan Georg, who was himself working on a grammar of the Thakali language. Sitting in a smoky Thakali inn, Stefan taught me the difference between phones and phonemes and convinced me of the importance of minimal pairs. I returned to Cambridge with a renewed desire to work on a Tibeto-Burman language.

Upon graduation, I found employment as a Research Assistant to Professor Alan Macfarlane in the Department of Social Anthropology in Cambridge, and helped to create a catalogue of the 16mm films taken by the late Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. In early 1996, Dr. Roger Blench contacted Professor Macfarlane with an announcement of a PhD studentship offered by Leiden University for thesis research on hitherto undescribed languages of the Himalayan region. It was thus that I became a member of the Himalayan Languages Project under the tutelage of Doctor, now Professor, George van Driem.

When I accepted the studentship I was still unsure which language would be the focus of my study, but was reconciled to abandoning the idea of further researching

Thakali since an excellent grammar of the language had already been published.¹ On my first day in the office in Leiden, Professor van Driem asked me to accompany him to a room where a large-scale map of Nepal hung on the wall. Coloured pins and hand-written stickers adorned the map and indicated the location of the undocumented and endangered languages of Nepal. When Professor van Driem asked where I wanted to work, being more partial to mountains than plains, I chose a sticker closer to the Tibetan border than the Indian one, which read (in Devanāgarī) थामी, or Thāmī. Professor van Driem endorsed my selection, and advised me that little was known about the language, including whether it was still spoken, and if so, where. The account of how I actually reached the Thangmi-speaking area and how I chose to make my home in the village of Dāmārāñ is a longer story than would fit in this *Preface*. Suffice it to say that by the spring of 1997 I was installed in a Thangmi household and learning the language.

Since 1997, I have spent a total of twenty-five months in the Thangmi-speaking areas of Nepal, as well as six months among the Thangmi communities of Darjeeling and Sikkim in India. During my time in Thangmi-speaking villages, I primarily lived in two localities. The first was Dāmārāñ, a southern hamlet of Suspā/Kṣamāvatī Village Development Committee (VDC) in Dolakhā district, Janakpur zone, in central east Nepal. It is here that I eventually constructed a house and came to feel at home. The second field site was Cokaṭī village in the neighbouring district of Sindhupālcok, of Bāgmatī zone. The dialects of Thangmi spoken in these two areas are noticeably different, and I was eager to analyse both and thus be able to compare and contrast them in my thesis. Although I eventually opted to focus on the Dolakhā dialect, for reasons which are explained in Chapter Two, I maintained an interest as well as some conversational fluency in the Sindhupālcok dialect of Thangmi, and examples of both spoken forms feature in this monograph.

In terms of fieldwork methodology, I pursued a range of strategies which I hoped would furnish me with a variety of different styles of spoken Thangmi. In this, I received guidance from Professor van Driem and other senior linguists at Leiden, as well as encouragement and helpful pointers from colleagues in the Himalayan Languages Project. During the first months of fieldwork, I collected basic word lists from two Thangmi men and two Thangmi women, cross-checking the lexical forms that I elicited and so preparing a preliminary phonological inventory. Thereafter, as my comfort in the language gradually grew, I started experimenting with Thangmi sentences and grammatical constructions, much to the amusement of local friends.

¹ Georg, Ralf Stefan. 1996. *Marphatan Thakali: Untersuchungen zur Sprache des Dorfes Marpha in Oberen Kālī-Gaṇḍakī-Tal* (Lincom Studies in Asian Linguistics, 2). München: Lincom Europa.

While I could comfortably manage simple, structured conversations about known topics after about nine months of residence in the Thangmi-speaking area, I still found it very difficult to follow unelicited conversations between two Thangmi speakers not directed towards me.

Only after a total of twelve months cumulative residence in the area can I say that I could make sense of fluid and vernacular Thangmi, at which point I asked villagers with whom I had become friendly to stop speaking to me in Nepali, and rather treat me as a monolingual Thangmi speaker. Weaning myself from a dependence on Nepali as a contact language, although somewhat artificial as a technique, helped to improve my spoken Thangmi considerably. Soon after, I told my first joke in the language, which although not particularly amusing was nevertheless a breakthrough. After this point, I worked closely with Bīr Bahādur Thāmī, a speaker of the Dolakhā dialect, and Mān Bahādur Thāmī, a speaker of the Sindhupālcok dialect, to record stories, origin tales, conversations and also work on grammatical constructions. As the Maoist insurgency spread to eastern Nepal, and it became difficult to spend long periods of time in Thangmi-speaking villages, I decamped to Kathmandu and later to Pokhara where my language teachers joined me and assisted with the analysis of the collected material.

The analysis and transcription of spoken Thangmi which I had collected in the field was facilitated by various items of software and hardware. Using the Macromedia application Fontographer (version 4.1.5) and with considerable help from my friend and colleague Dr. Roland Rutgers, it was possible to generate a set of fonts which accurately represented the phonology of Thangmi. Based on Times, I named this font Dolkha, and have used it throughout the grammar as the standard transcription face for Thangmi. Roland further advised me to store my data in a FileMaker database for easy search and retrieval functionality. While I was initially sceptical, when my Thangmi textual corpus grew to close to three thousand discrete sentences I was relieved to have followed his good counsel. A set of software utilities by the name of TomTools™, designed and maintained by Roland Rutgers, made the process of working with my FileMaker database a great deal easier. TomTools™ is an integrated package of Visual Basic macros for Microsoft Word which provide add-on functionality for certain tasks common to linguistic writing. The typographical formatting and alignment of all interlinear glosses in this grammar was automated though Interlinear Gloss Aligner™, one of the most helpful of the tools. I am indebted to Roland for his extreme patience in helping me install and reinstall these applications each time that I switched computers, and also to his wonderful family for allowing me to barge in every now and then with a new computer crisis requiring immediate attention.

This monograph is structured in three parts. Part One, the bulk of the text, is a description and analysis of the Thangmi language. After addressing the genetic affinity and linguistic classification of Thangmi in Chapter One, the second chapter of the book focuses on a range of ethnolinguistic issues such as previous scholarship on the speech community, indigenous ethnonyms and toponyms, the distribution of Thangmi speakers, the status of the language and details of the Thangmi clan and kinship systems. In Chapter Three I present the phonology of Thangmi, while in the following chapter I draw the reader's attention to regular morphophonological features of the language. Chapters Five and Six address nominal and verbal morphology respectively, while the final chapter focuses on all remaining verbal constructions and features of Thangmi.

Part Two of this monograph is devoted to a set of transcribed oral texts in which segmented Thangmi speech is augmented with interlinear glosses and a free running translation at the bottom of the page. The texts represent a range of speech styles, from unelicited conversations between Thangmi speakers to more controlled recordings of Thangmi shamans explaining the origin of their ethnic community.

Part Three of this study is a lexicon of both dialects of the Thangmi language. Example sentences are used to illustrate and contextualise lexical items, and Nepali translations are provided where possible.

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xxx

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Needless to say, I take full and final responsibility for any errors which may have crept in and for any important elements which may have crept out.

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