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

Turin, M.

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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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op gezag van de Rector Magnificus Dr. D.D. Breimer,
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Mark Turin
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in 1973

Promotiecommissie:

Promotores: Prof. Dr. G.L. van Driem
Prof. Dr. F.H.H. Kortlandt

Referent: Dr. B. Michailovsky (LACITO/CNRS, Parijs)

Overige leden: Prof. Dr. W.F.H. Adelaar
Prof. Dr. A. Griffiths
Prof. Dr. A.M. Lubotsky

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

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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	individuating 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
∅	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

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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 Kālopānī 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/Kṣamāvātī 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 Kāli-Gaṇḍaki-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 through 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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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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