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BOLD Documentation of the Langtang Language (Rasuwa)

Radka Kvicalova, Rebekah Slade, Lauren Gawne
l.gawne@latrobe.edu.au

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of documentation work on the language spoken in Langtang region, Rasuwa, Nepal. This understudied Tibeto-Burman variety has been the focus of a documentation project using Basic Oral Language Documentation (BOLD) methods. We provide an overview of the project, the materials documented and the archiving process.

Keywords: documentation, Tibeto-Burman, BOLD, archiving, data management, Langtang

1 Introduction

The Langtangpa dialect of Tibetan is spoken in five villages of the Langtang Valley in Nepal. Very little linguistic research has been carried out in this region. This project had addressed the lack of documentation of Langtang, through the creation of an open access corpus of audio recordings in the language that have been translated using the BOLD method (Reiman 2010). In this paper we provide an overview of Langtang history (§2), a brief introduction to the Langtang language and its speakers (§3) and a description of the documentation work we have done (§4). The first two authors are responsible for the documentation work, and the third author has been assisting with technical support and has archived the documentation with Paradisec.

2 History of Langtang

The Langtang community is situated in a ‘beyul’ (hidden valley) recognized in the Tibetan literature. The beyul were concealed by Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) so that they could be used as sanctuaries during times of need (Ehrhard 1997, Childs 2012).

Domar Mingyur Dorje (born 1675) is traditionally credited with opening the hidden land Dagam Namgo, or ‘Heavenly Gate of Half-Moon Form’, which lies in today’s Langtang Valley. This discovery is described in the bibliography of Renzen Nyida Longse (1680). Ehrhard (1997) notes that Renzen Nyida Longse met a Domari clansman and his son as he was starting his journey to search for the beyul. The son,

Mingyur Dorje, later became a prolific writer, authoring several important texts concerning Dagam Namgo. Based on comparison with the geographical evidence presented in various texts, Mingyur Dorje concludes Dagam Namgo must be located in the valley of Langtang. To strengthen this argument, he recounts a legend relating to the discovery of Langtang, which was interpreted as the 'opening of the gate to the sacred place':

“Now for the origin of what is called *gLang-'phrang* [Langtang] a bull is said to have been killed once in '*Bri-bstim* [...Briddim] ... In the evening the bull fled to that secret land by reason of his supernatural knowledge. The valley was discovered by virtue of the fact that the owner followed its trail; for this reason [the valley] is known under the name Bull Passage—so it is said in the tales of the people of old.” (Quoted in Erhard 1997: 345)

Until this day, people present the bull's story when asked about the meaning of the name Langtang. In the rocks of the upper valley, foot and handprints can be seen that are said to be connected to the legend of Mingyu Dorje of the Domar clan reaching the hidden valley, and overcoming the Drukpa lama called Chorangri (originally from Bhutan), as there were already people in Langtang upon his arrival. After getting rid of his rival, Mingyu Dorje embarked on a number of tasks to stamp his authority over Langtang, the first being to build a temple following Padmasambhava's instructions. This temple was built next to the Langtang village, however, it was destroyed by fire, and a new one was built on top of a hill that looks like an elephant trunk (today's temple in Gumba village). For more on the Domar clan in Langtang see Lim (2004). Not much is known about Domaris in Langtang after Mingyur Dorje and his sons.

The inhabitants of Langtang village usually place the founding of the village about four hundred years ago. This coincides with the period of turmoil in southern Tibet in the 17th to 18th centuries. Members of four clans are believed to have arrived from Kyirong after hearing the news of the discovery of a beyul in Langtang Valley. The earliest settlers subsequently devised a system of rotating the village headmen-ship amongst the four founding clans every four years.

The ancestors of the Domaris currently residing in Langtang are said to have arrived only around the closing quarter of the 19th century. As there was no Domari lama in the village at that time, some members of the founding clans went across the border to Kyirong to search for a suitable lama to take over the Langtang temple. In the literature, there is a consensus that the legitimate ruler of a 'hidden valley' must be a member of the royal lineage associated with King Trisong Detsen. Eventually they found a Domari who agreed to move to Langtang under a condition of exercising both religious and temporal power, and thus becoming the King of Langtang. The modern Domari estate, called Labrang, was still situated next to the temple in Gumba village prior to the 2015 earthquake and consequent avalanche, and his grandson is the

informal King of Langtang today. The Domari clan stayed the wealthiest and only ruling power in Langtang until tourism arrived in the late 1970's and the restoration of multiparty democracy in Nepal in 1990.

According to the Langtang Management and Reconstruction Committee chairman Temba Lama, the Langtang Village Development Committee contains five villages; Gumba, Langtang, Mundu, Shindum and Kyanjin Gumpa. There are at least sixteen patrilineal exogamous clans.

During a survey trip through 23 villages of northern Rasuwa in the spring of 2013 we identified 5 additional villages to those in Langtang, whose mother tongue is similar: Thuman; Timure; Bridhim; Khanjim and Thulo Syabru.

The community that inhabits the Langtang Valley has been subjected to Langtang National Park regulations since 1976. The valley is located in the north-eastern part of Rasuwa District, Bagmati Zone, Nepal, and is at the border with Tibet. The valley stretches out in an east-west orientation for about 35 km, carved out by the westward flow of the Langtang Khola that originates from the glaciers of Langshisa and flows through Shyapru Besi village into the Bhote Kosi River coming from Tibet. The valley is encircled by the monumental Langtang Lirung (7245 m) on the north, the Yala Peak and Kang Chenpo in the East and the Gosainkund holy lakes in the South. The Langtang region encompasses an area of about 520 square kilometers, and is permanently inhabited in the central area at the elevation of about 3500 m.

Geologically, this region falls within the Inner Himalayas, while climatically it is in the transitional zone between the southern monsoon region and the arid deserts of the Tibetan plateau. The bottom of the valley intersects with an important trade route that has, for centuries, linked southern Tibet with central Nepal and the Indian subcontinent. Recently, a road connecting Kathmandu with the border town of Rasuwagadi has been built.

The first western 'tourist' to visit Langtang Valley is believed to be explorer H. W. Tilman in 1949. Since the 1980s, trekking lodges and teashops have mushroomed in the area, with approximately 100 operating in 2015. Lim (2008) provides an overview of Langtang history and the trekking industry that grew in the valley.

The 2015 earthquakes in Nepal were devastating for the Langtang community. Prior to the quakes, the Langtangpa population was 673 people in 156 households. Tragically, the population of Langtang was reduced to 486 people and 116 households, after the earthquake on April 25 triggered a major avalanche that killed 187 Langtangpa. All of Langtang, Gumba and Shindum villages were wiped out by the avalanche. Most houses and hotels in Mundu and Kyanjin Gumpa were also damaged.

3 Langtang Language and People

The people of the Langtang community refer to themselves as *Langtangpa* or *Langtangnga*. Their closest neighbors, by geography, culture and family, are the Kyirong (1-2 days walk north-west), Western Tamang (2 days walk, west of Bhote Kosi) and Yolmo (2 days walk south-east via mountain pass). They occasionally gather for seasonal and religious festivals and to arrange marriages. Most of the Langtang population is fluent in Nepali for communication with people from outside the region.

While the Langtang region is well-known as a trekking destination in Nepal, very little is known about the language spoken there, and its relationship to other Tibeto-Burman languages. Ethnologue (Simons & Fennig 2017) lists ‘LangDang’ as a variety of Yolmo (ISO 639-3: scp),¹ however provides no motivation for this analysis. Tournadre (2014) includes Langtang in the Southwestern group of Tibetic languages, along with Yolmo and Kyirong, but also gives no evidence for this. Hari (2010) notes that Langtang (which she refers to as *Tārkeghyāng*) is closely related to the varieties of Yolmo she studied, suggesting they are mutually intelligible, however she also concedes that the variety is ‘quite different’ based on brief interaction with a number of speakers (see also Hari & Lama 2004: 703).

Geographically, Langtang is situated between Yolmo and the related, but distinct, Kyirong variety. Hedlin’s (2011) analysis of Kyirong and Yolmo indicates that there are key differences, including the structure of the lexical tone system, pronoun system and evidential system.

On one of our later trips to Langtang, we took with us some stories recorded in the Yolmo language and played these to see how compatible the dialects were. We were surprised to discover that the adults we played them to said that they could understand all the words used. They said the only difference is that if the words had been pronounced in their own language they would be pronounced ‘slower’ with ‘longer sounds’. However, the same recordings were not understood by the younger generation, who have less traditional contact with Yolmo speakers due to study in Kathmandu.

Initial observations indicate that Langtang has some features that make it distinct from Yolmo. Most notable are the phonetic features, including front rounded vowels in words *tü* ‘see’. This feature is found in Kyirong, but not Yolmo (Huber 2005, Hedlin 2011). Langtang has at least two tones. More will need to be done to figure out the relationship between Langtang, Kyirong and Yolmo.

The Langtang dialect is no longer being used by all children as their language at home. During our time spent within the community we found that most children still speak the basic everyday language when around other speakers, however, for most of the year they reside at various English boarding schools in Kathmandu, using Nepali

¹ also known as Helambu Sherpa.

and English for everyday interactions. As a result of this intergenerational change in language use, and the effect of the earthquakes, the language, cultural heritage, and intergenerational knowledge of the Langtang language are increasingly at risk. While there are still over 300 speakers today, this language is on a trajectory towards being highly endangered within a generation.

In our documentation work, we aimed to help educate Langtangpa to see that their language is endangered, to show its value and to encourage the youth to keep it alive. Some of the fathers and grandfathers in the community told us that they purposefully only speak to their children and grandchildren in the Langtang dialect, even though many of the children speak more Nepali and English amongst themselves and at school. They explained that the reason they do this is because of their concern that their children may not continue communicating in their mother tongue.

4 Documentation of Langtang Language

The Langtang area is undergoing massive developmental change in many areas (economic, educational, medical, social). This has led to a massive shift towards use of Nepali and English. This language change motivated us to document the Langtangpa variety. Our aim was to make a positive contribution to the development efforts in the Langtang area while also documenting the language and culture. Neither of the first two authors on this paper are trained in linguistics, but we have extensive experience managing community projects in Nepal and other places. This project demonstrates that it is possible to successfully undertake a language documentation project without extensive training in linguistics.

Our prior work with this community made us confident that this project could serve the Langtangpa by promoting the value of preserving the language and rich oral traditions. Documentation of the language could also provide more recognition for the community, making the language accessible to a broader audience. We also wanted to document the language to help provide basic, quality information for further linguistic analysis.

The aims of the documentation were:

1. Learn the Langtang language spoken to ensure that we could communicate with people who do not speak English or Nepali.
2. Collect audio records covering diverse genres of oral traditions, including cultural narratives, dialogues and songs.
3. Incorporate oral annotations including careful speech, phrasal translation and analytical comments.
4. Elicit and record wordlist including oral translation.
5. Digitally archive the materials so that they can be used by current and future generations of speakers, scholars, and teachers.

Both authors who performed the documentation speak Nepali, and the first author had some familiarity with Standard Tibetan, but the first aim of the project was for each author to be able to speak the language to engage all members of the community, even those who didn't speak English or Nepali. This was done through structured lessons with a Langtangpa in Kathmandu, and ongoing observation and interaction in the villages.

In the spring of 2013 we conducted a survey trek through the northern parts of Rasuwa district in order to get a geographical understanding of the places where the Langtang language is spoken. We were looking to identify any surrounding villages whose mother tongue was the same or similar to the language spoken in Langtang. In three weeks, we visited 23 villages asking about their mother tongue, and the languages that are used in daily life in the area.

The first year of our project was devoted to the historical and linguistic survey and language learning. After this we launched primary data collection of oral traditions covering a variety of genres. Recordings were made in people's everyday environment using a Zoom H4n audio recorder.

Between March 2014 and December 2016 we made 127 original recordings, totaling 10 hours. These included old folk stories about the Langtang area, personal stories and memories, descriptions about families, instructions on how to make a variety of local produce, songs, and religious teachings and descriptions about the area.

Recordings include the following genres. The total is more than 127 as some recordings include multiple genres:

- Report, 29 sessions
- Singing, 26 sessions
- Interactive Discourse, 24 sessions
- Narrative, 19 sessions
- Oratory, 7 sessions
- Formulaic Discourse, 6 sessions
- Procedural Discourse, 6 sessions
- Language Play, 3 sessions
- Elicitation, 3 sessions

There are also 29 recordings of oral consent. An oral consent model was used because not everyone in the area is literate, and because it fits better with interactional styles in the area that are more conversational than bureaucratic.

During recording sessions it was apparent that the people love to sing and they have many songs in their language. They were always keen to share these songs with us, much more readily than to talk about something. In other recordings participants

took the opportunity to talk about things of importance to them. These recordings reveal the values and worldview of this culture.

There are 61 speakers represented in these recordings. Each person's consent and photo file are archived as part of the collection. Information was also collected about each participant's age, place of residence, educational background and other metadata. These files are on restricted access as they contain personal information.

Each recording was named consistently using the date and recording sequence number. For example, 141115-000 is a recording of Phurpa Pasang discussing the opening of the Langtang beyul (see §2). It was the first recording on the 15th of November 2014. 141115-003 is a recording made later the same day of Norchnung leaving a message for her children. For each recording metadata was collected including the participants information, recording title, genre and other information.

We used SayMore (Hatton 2013) to manage our recordings. SayMore allows participant metadata to be linked to each recording. For the transcription and translation of the recordings we decided to use the Basic Oral Language Documentation (BOLD) method (Reiman 2010). This involved creating records of the speech repeated slowly, as well as spoken Nepali translations that are aligned to the timecodes in the original recordings. This means the recordings can be more useful for community members and researchers in the future. We were thus able to create translations for more recordings in a shorter time than if we had chosen a written method. We also chose an oral transcription method because there is no established orthography for the Langtang language. SayMore includes an easy to use BOLD workflow that can be completed using an ordinary computer.

The BOLD translation and transcription were performed by Langtang-speaking language helpers. We used the Zoom H4n audio recorder as a microphone, directly recording and compiling audio files onto the SayMore database on the computer. Texts to be annotated were prioritised based on cultural and linguistic value, diversity of participants, and the quality of the audio recordings. We also had to take into consideration the ability of our language helpers to understand the original recordings, especially with regards to the traditional songs and folk stories told by older-generation speakers. Two Langtangpa contributed the most to these transcriptions. The first was Karchung Garca, a 36-year-old mother of two sons who lives as a yak herder with her husband. She did most of the careful speech transcription. The second was Nima Lopchen, a 20-year-old student, finishing her bachelor degree in hotel management in Kathmandu, who did most of the oral translations into Nepali. Karchung assisted Nima with some of the translations when Nima was unsure of the more traditional vocabulary.

All recordings were segmented using SayMore. At the time of this article, 107 recordings have been orally transcribed through careful speech and 64 have been orally translated into Nepali.

In the spring 2016 we produced a DVD, consisting of historical and traditional stories, poetry and songs, jokes and riddles, proverbs and sayings, religious and ritual discourses, as well as descriptions and explanations of local culture and customs. This was our token of appreciation to the community, on the occasion of a memorial day, conducted in Langtang on April 25 2016, one year after the earthquake and avalanche. This DVD was also made available to those individuals and organizations who have been involved in the Langtang Valley reestablishment process. Nima Lopchen also helped us with this DVD project, creating recordings that were the basis for subtitles.

The source recordings along with metadata have been archived in the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC).² The third author of this paper has been responsible for archiving the documentation. Paradisec has a secure storage structure, as well as an interface that is accessible on the internet. Anyone interested in accessing the data can do so by registering for an account and agreeing to fair use of the materials.

It is not possible to archive the whole SayMore project in an archive like Paradisec. The original WAV files are archive quality, and the segmentation in SayMore creates ELAN³ (Sloetjes & Wittenburg 2008) transcription files, which are XML structured and suitable for archiving. The greatest challenge in archiving SayMore projects is that each segment of time-aligned respoken or translation is saved as an individual WAV file, generating thousands of files that need to be archived. The original recordings were archived in 2016. Subsequent recordings and annotations were archived in 2017. Any future oral or written transcription will be archived as part of the collection.

In the future some of the data will also become part of the larger Langtang Memory Project.⁴ This project aims to create an archive for the Langtang people that is also publicly accessible, drawing on historical materials and creating new records. The project is built on a community-focused model, that seeks to help younger Langtangpa connect with their linguistic identity and cultural heritage.

5 Conclusion

Our project has created the first documentation of the Langtang language. This documentation has been archived as an Open Access collection, and returned to community members. The genres we have recorded have created a record of the language and associated culture for community members. We hope that it has helped

²<http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/LAN1>

³ <http://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>

⁴ www.langtangmemoryproject.com

the Langtangpa value their linguistic heritage. The recordings also prove linguists and other researchers with a basis to better understand the relationship between the Langtang language and related Tibetan varieties.

There is still more work to be done completing oral annotation of the collection. Future work may also include written transcriptions and translations of the recordings. We have encouraged our language helpers to continue working on the language documentation on their own.

Most importantly this project is being very well received by the speech community as it captures many of the folk stories and songs that would otherwise disappear with the older generation. The language and cultural heritage has become even more endangered after the devastating earthquakes in April 2015. Some of the speakers we had recorded who died in the consequent avalanche were the only ones who knew a certain story or song.

This is part of a greater cultural loss in the Langtang valley. Because of the devastating aftermath of the earthquakes, the Langtang valley and its life will never be the same. The traditional architecture has been lost, one third of the community perished in one single day, the traditional ways of life such as yak herding, farming and weaving—already in decline—have now very little chance of being passed on to the generations to come.

The disaster may have also speed up the loss of transmission of the language to younger speakers. As a result of the earthquake, all of the Langtang children have been allocated to boarding schools in Kathmandu where they will have less contact with their mother tongue.

This project was challenging in many ways, but it was particularly emotionally difficult after the earthquakes. Out of our 20 contributors up until April 2015, 8 participants died in the earthquake and avalanche. This required us to reconsider what materials would be suitable for archiving, and to work closely with community members to ensure they were willing for the project to continue.

All this being said, we feel extremely privileged to be able to contribute our time, energy and love for the Langtang people, and provide a considerable volume of language documentation in Langtang.

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