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THE FALL AND RISE OF THE PHONEME /r/ IN EASTERN KIRANTI: SOUND CHANGE IN TIBETO-BURMAN

BY GEORGE VAN DRIEM

The Kiranti languages are spoken in eastern Nepal and western Sikkim. What I call Eastern Kiranti in this article includes the languages Limbu, Yakkha, Yamphe, Yamphu, Lohorung and Mewahang. Further study will probably demonstrate that other languages spoken to the east of the Sālpā watershed, such as Sam, underwent the same developments described here and must also be included in Eastern Kiranti. The autonyms used by the Limbus, Yakkha, Yamphu, Yamphe and Lohorung are indicative of a close historical relationship between them. The Limbu call themselves Yakthulba; the Yakkha call themselves Yakkha; and the Yamphe, Yamphu and Lohorung refer to their language as Yakkhaba.

In the historical evolution of the Limbu, Yakkha, Mewahang and Yakkhaba languages, word-initial Tibeto-Burman */r/* went to /j/, e.g. Limbu and Lohorung2 yam 'body' vs. Dumi ram 'body' and Khaling rwaam 'body'; Limbu, Mewahang, Yakkha and Lohorung yum 'salt' vs. Dumi rim 'salt', Khaling ram 'salt' and Naching ram 'salt'; Limbu -ye-r/-ye-t/-ye-?l 'laugh', Lohorung yi-3 'laugh' vs. Dumi re:ri:jri: 'laugh', Khaling ren-nā 'laugh' and Naching rēsa 'laugh'; Limbu -ye-b/-yep- 'stand' and Lohorung -yeb/-yep- 'stand' vs. Dumi riph/ri:p- 'stand', Khaling rem-nā 'stand' and Naching rēpa 'stand'. In Thulung, this sound change seems to have been partial, conditioned by as yet unexplained factors, e.g. Thulung reom 'body', yem-/yep- 'stand up, shoot up' and yo: 'salt', unless some of these words in Thulung can be established as loans from neighbouring Kiranti languages. In Dumi, the phoneme /r/ has a palatal realization [?] virtually identical to Czech ř. This palatal pronunciation in Dumi might be similar to the first stage in the process of the sound change which took place in Eastern Kiranti, if it is not just, as Benedict's reconstructions *g-ryum 'salt', *rya-t 'laugh' and *g-ryap 'stand' would suggest, a product of Tibeto-Burman *ry-.

There does not appear to be any Kiranti evidence, however, justifying a treatment of Benedict's Tibeto-Burman initial *r-* and initial *ry-* as distinct entities at the Proto-Kiranti stage. The development of initial r- to y- in Eastern Kiranti was first mentioned by Shafer (1974: 149) when he stated that 'r- is generally retained in the Western Branch and in Rodong [i.e. Chamling], that it may have become r- grassy in the Khambu Unit, and that it tends to become y- in the other dialects of the Eastern Branch.' It is not surprising that this development was to have consequences for Eastern Kiranti phonology.

As a result of the merger of Tibeto-Burman *r- and *y- in initial position in Eastern Kiranti, word-initial *r- disappeared, leaving Tibeto-Burman */l/* and *r* in complementary distribution so that they were re-analysed as two allophones of a single liquid phoneme // with the following distribution: The allophone [f]

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1 In addition to the sources listed in the bibliography, my contentions and data are based on my own Lohorung and Yamphu data, collected in late 1988 and early 1989, and Martin Giunszle's data on Mewahang, collected during numerous long visits in the past few years to the Mewahang, of Bādā, whose language is identical to Hodgson's Bālāh (Hodgson, 1857: 351–72; 1880: 194–215; Gänzl, personal communication, December 1988).

2 In modern Lohorung, yam 'body' occurs only as a bound morph in the verb yamnuma 'to be strong, to be healthy'. Shafer (1953: 361) also appears to list Lohorung 'yam-' as a bound morph.

3 In Lohorung, yi- is the bound root 'laugh' in the verb yi-cama 'to laugh'. The inflected portion of the verb -cama is historically an accretion, known in Kiranti as an aspectivizer.
occurred (1) word-initially, e.g. Limbu la·p ‘wing’, and (2) syllable-initially after a consonant except for glottal stop, e.g. Limbu wa’anlummetchin ‘we didn’t bathed yet’. The allophone [r] occurred word-internally (1) in intervocalic position or after glottal stop, e.g. Limbu murik ‘body hair’, menda’re kuhok’rikk ‘the hide of a goat’, and (2) syllable-internally as the second member of a consonant cluster, e.g. Limbu pokkròkma ‘uvula’. The phoneme /l/ does not occur in syllable-final position in native Eastern Kiranti words, although it does occur elsewhere in Kiranti, e.g. Dumi wa’l ‘rectum’, Khaling nöl ‘afternoon’. Clusters with a syllable-internal, post-consonantal [r] occur in Eastern Kiranti only in word-internal position.

After the Gorkha conquest in the second half of the eighteenth century, the influence of the Indo-Aryan language Nepali, or Khas Kurii, became increasingly felt in Pallo Kirât ‘Far Kirant’, the homeland of the Limbu, Yakkha, Yakkhaba and Mewahang. Even before this time, speakers of Kiranti languages sporadically came into contact with speakers of Maithili and perhaps Bengali. Early loans were transphonologized so as not to violate native phonological laws of allophonic distribution, e.g. harundi ‘turmeric, curcuma’ < Maithili hardî. Later Nepali loans, however, did violate native phonological laws of allophonic distribution and so introduced an alien phoneme /r/, e.g. Limbu pîr ‘pain, anguish’ < Nepali pîr; Limbu parne ‘ought’ < Nepali parne; Limbu dartà ‘registration’ < Nepali dartâ; Limbu ruma’l /rumat/ ‘handkerchief’ < Nepali rumâl.

The introduction of the phoneme /r/ enabled a redistribution and re-analysis of native liquid allophones in Eastern Kiranti. In Limbu, compounds arose such as ha’lui ‘fireplace stone’, derived from ha ‘tooth’ and lu ‘stone’ with an unexplained linking glottal stop, not uncommon in compounds. The regular allophonic alternation between [l] and [r] began to break down for initial /l/ in nouns and verbs. For example, the phoneme /l/ in Limbu la·p ‘wing’ is realized as [l] in the phrase pu-re ku-la·p ‘the bird’s wing’, whereas in early Limbu before the Gorkha conquest, I suggest that the phrase would have been realized as *pu-re ku-ra·p ‘the bird’s wing’, as in the old compound mikwara·p ‘bat’ < mikwa ‘tear’ and la·p ‘wing’. In modern Limbu, initial /l/ in verbs such as lakma’l ‘to lick’ is realized as [l] not only in word-initial position, e.g. pi’l-ille yum lagu ‘the bull licked the salt’, but also inter-vocalically, e.g. pi’lha’-re yum melagu ‘the bulls licked the salt’. In modern Limbu particles and stem-internally in verbs, however, the regular alternation between the allophones [l] and [r] remains without exception, e.g. pha rök ‘only bamboo’ vs. sin sbk ‘only wood’, wageraksan ‘you(sg.) made me wet’ vs. wagenlaksanen ‘you(sg.) didn’t make me wet’.

The original allophonic distribution of the Eastern Kiranti liquid phoneme /l/ is best reflected in Limbu and least preserved in the Yakkhaba languages where /l/ and /r/ appear to have re-surfaced as independent phonemes much earlier than in Limbu. This fact and the local history suggest that the re-introduction of a phoneme /r/ in Eastern Kiranti is due to Indo-Aryan influence.

The Limbus constitute a populous group which remained virtually autonomous until the 1780s. Although, as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century, portions of Limbuviin came to fall under suzerainty of the Sen kingdoms of Makvânpur (in the present-day Nárâyâni zone) and Vijaypur (3 km. east of present-day Dhârân) or owed allegiance to the maharajas of Sikkim, Limbuviin before the Gorkhâ conquest in fact consisted of many local, independent Limbu kingdoms which were fiercely defended against intruders.

By contrast, the numerous Rai tribes were small, linguistically hetero-
geneous groups situated within the sphere of influence of minor Indo-Aryan dynasties to the south and the west. As small and scattered groups, the Rai may have been more easily subject to Indo-Aryan linguistic influence than a large and populous group like the Limbus. Furthermore, the influx of large numbers of Indo-Aryan colonists in Valo ‘Near’ and Mājh Kirā ‘Middle Kirant’ began soon after the Gorkhā conquest and has led to a situation whereby several indigenous Rai groups have become a minority in their own tribal homelands.

Whereas the liquid phoneme in the Limbu optative suffix -ɾj/-l and the Limbu continuous suffix -ɾj/-l exhibit regular allophonic alternation, the Lohorung optative suffix -ɾj and Lohorung continuous suffix -ɾj have been phonologized as /-ɾj/. The only trace of the original allophonic distribution of the Eastern Kiranti liquid phoneme in Lohorung is in the allomorphy of the discontinuous morpheme of the negative gerund me-. . .-re ~ me-. . .-le, e.g. (1)-(2). Sentence (1) is a command issued when the speaker realized that it had begun to rain.

1. Ce· me-ho·p-le khim-pi lhett-ε! clothes NG-wash-NG house-LOC take-IMP ‘Take the clothes back home without having washed them!’ (Nepali: Lugā nadoī gharma jāunuhs!)


Since the restructuring of the Limbu phonological system, perhaps around the time of the Gorkha conquest, changes have occurred in word-internal clusters containing the liquid phoneme. For example, Limbu samrippa ‘silhouette’ consists of sam ‘spirit’ and *rippa. On the basis of Tibetan hgrīb-pa ‘grow dark’, grib ‘shade’ and sgrīb-pa ‘darken, darkened’, we are led to believe that the /r/ in samrippa is old. Therefore, I suggest that *rippa derives from early Eastern Kiranti *krip-pa. If the [ɾ] in *sam-krippa had not formed part of a cluster, one would expect to have *samlippa in modern Limbu. By the same token, I suggest that there must have been a cluster-initial morpheme in early Limbu such as *-kre-?, *-pre-? or *-dre-?, meaning ‘small tree’ and corresponding to the element -re-? in Limbu kho-mre-? ‘peach tree’ and tiyre-? ‘Crataegus crenulata’. Elsewhere, the distribution of /l/ and [ɾ] in modern Limbu reflects the early Eastern Kiranti allophonic pattern.

The different histories of liquid phonemes to the east and the west of the Sālpā watershed probably represent the most important sound change defining Eastern Kiranti as a subgrouping. Similarities in Limbu, Yakkha, Yakkhaba and Mewahang verbal morphology as well as shared lexical items unique to the cis-Sālp-ine languages support the Eastern Kiranti subgrouping thus defined, topics which will have to be pursued elsewhere.

REFERENCES


