Chhitkul-Rakchham (Himachal Pradesh, India) — Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Chhitkul-Rakchham
Language Family:	Tibeto-Burman/West-Himalayish
ISO 639-3 Code:	CIK
Glottolog Code:	chit1279
Population:	about 1,400
Location:	31.350787, 78.436627
Vitality rating:	EGIDS 6a

Summary

Chhitkul-Rakchham is a Tibeto-Burman (hereafter TB) language of the West-Himalayish subgroup spoken in the Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh, northern India. In the existing literature it is referenced as Chitkuli, a name based on one of the villages (*Chhitkul*, colloquially shortened to *Chhul*) where it is spoken, plus the suffix *-i*, an Indo-Aryan borrowing that has been added to the names of many TB languages of the area. It is also spoken in in *Rakchham* village (from *rak,* 'stone', and *chham*, 'bridge') and hence we name the language Chhitkul-Rakchham. It has no script and is the tongue of the high caste in both villages – the lower castes speak an Indo-Aryan variety. Chhitkul-Rakchham has borrowed heavily from Hindi, and, interestingly, borrows more from English than from the local TB lingua franca, Standard Kinnauri. The language is more endangered than previously reported.

1. Overview

Chhitkul-Rakchham is a Tibeto-Burman (TB) language commonly assigned to the West-Himalayish subgroup which comprises about 15 languages, most of them spoken in northern India. Chhitkul-Rakchham is spoken in two villages in the Kinnaur district (see Map 1) of Himachal Pradesh, northern India, near the border with China (see Map 2), namely Chhitkul (population 700, altitude 3,450 meters) and Rakchham (population 750, altitude 2,900 meters).

Map 1. Kinnaur district, Himachal Pradesh.
http://himachalpradeshtravel.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/ Tourist-Map-Kinnaur.jpg

Map 2. States of India.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-India-States.gif

The available literature on Chhitkul-Rakchham is limited to a few pages by Bailey (1915, 1920), and a sketch grammar by Sharma (1992). These works suggest that Chhitkul-Rakchham is a dialect of the main language spoken in the area, namely Standard Kinnauri, but significantly different from it. Sharma (1992: 201) states:

> The greater portion of the vocabulary of the dialect belongs to various indigenous sources [in addition to Tibetan, Indo-Aryan and Austro-Asiatic sub-strata] about which nothing definite can be said at this stage.

In fact, Chhitkul-Rakchham and Kinnauri are mutually unintelligible. The claim that Chhitkul-Rakchham is a dialect of Standard Kinnauri is therefore based on extra-linguistic considerations.

The State of Himachal has experienced profound social evolution and significant improvements in living standards over the past half century. Kinnaur district in particular has initiated a shift from a subsistence-based economy (pastoralism and crops) to commercial horticulture (apples, potatoes, and dried fruit) against the backdrop of infrastructure development (National Highway 22). Rakchham and Chhitkul villages, which had until recently relied on livestock rearing, crop cultivation, and weaving, are benefiting (or about to benefit in the case of Chhitkul village) from horticulture as well, because climate change is progressively making these two places suitable for apple production (Rahimzadeh 2016: 68). Remarkable progress has also been made in terms of literacy levels, though the rate is somewhat lower in Chhitkul and Rakchham (50-70%) than on average for the whole State of Himachal (82.8% based on the 2011 Census of India).

Economic development has been accompanied by the spread of Hindi, the language used in public administration, in the media, and as the main medium of instruction. The omnipresence of Hindi has weakened Chhitkul-Rakchham's vitality. A clear sign of endangerment is that intergenerational transmission is now disrupted. Virtually all members of the community are fluent in Hindi. Standard Kinnauri is also widely spoken. Women from neighbouring villages, when they marry into Chhitkul and Rakchham, often do not speak the language and use Hindi and Kinnauri in their interactions with community members. Economic development has resulted in a surge of migrant workers from neighbouring Indian States and from Nepal, which makes the settings even more multilingual. Consequently, Chhitkul-Rakchham is mostly used at home and in connection with ritual events. The road which is currently being built for military purposes between Chhitkul village and Dumti – a result of recurring tensions with China – is likely to strengthen the dominance of well-established languages, such as Hindi and Nepali.

Figure 1. Chhitkul – View from the main temple.
Photo © Philippe Antoine Martinez.

Chhitkul-Rakchham is the language of the high caste in both villages. Its members are referred to as 'Rajputs'. There is only one lower caste in Chhitkul ('Chamangs', traditionally weavers), and two in Rakchham ('Chamangs' and 'Domangs', primarily blacksmiths). These lower castes (the so-called Scheduled Castes, SCs) speak a different language that belongs to the Indo-Aryan family. Both the high caste and the lower castes are subdivided into different *khandan* 'clans', which are patrilineal descent groups. Marriage is not permitted within the same *khandan*, and belonging to a *khandan* implies reciprocal social obligations towards all its members.

Chhitkul and Rakchham villages display a syncretism between Hinduism, Buddhism, and pre-Buddhist beliefs. Local deities are the epicentre of religious and ritualistic life, which remains vibrant. Goat sacrifice is very much in practice, and oracles and interpreters still play a key role in the two villages. All village members are welcome to attend rituals, though they are performed by men only.

In many legends and myths, Kinnauri people are described as gifted musicians and dancers (Singh 1989, Zimmer 1992). Many sources also stress the important place taken by tales in the local culture. As argued by Vyathit (1984: 132): 'there is a popular saying in the area: "once the wheat seeds are planted in, the tales come out, once the shoots come out the tales go underground"'. However, during my 10 months of fieldwork in 2018-19 legends about the origins of the local deities were the only type of traditional narratives that could be recorded. It seems all other folklore has been forgotten.

Figure 2. Rakchham – view from the top of the village.
Photo © Philippe Antoine Martinez.

2. Current research

I am presently undertaking a PhD at SOAS, University of London, and have spent ten months (September 2018-June 2019) conducting fieldwork on Chhitkul-Rakchham with the aim of providing an account of the use of morphosyntactically-marked evidentiality in discourse. The evidential system in Kinnauri has been described by Saxena (1995, 2000), but it is uncharted territory in Chhitkul-Rakchham.

The investigation of evidentiality is relevant for many reasons. Despite numerous studies, it remains a controversial issue within linguistics. As argued by McCready (2015: 150), 'the typological literature leaves the nature of evidential meaning quite inexplicit: it is difficult to see, except on a very abstract level, what evidentiality is or does'. The status of evidentiality as a grammatical category (Aikhenvald 2004) is especially contested. In addition, as argued by Hill & Gawne (2017: 2), 'by far the most complex systems of evidentiality are found in the Tibeto-Burman domain […] Tibeto-Burman languages challenge numerous assumptions about evidentials'. The investigation of evidentiality in a language like Chhitkul-Rakchham therefore offers a place for testing the validity of some concepts and for making new hypotheses. Last, but not least, I posit that evidentiality is context and discourse dependent. Consequently, connections between language and culture have far-reaching implications beyond the realm of linguistics, touching on such domains as epistemology, philosophy and ethnography.

Since the language has no script, I have been building a corpus of texts by transcribing and translating (into both English and Hindi) an array of instances of language use in various speech genres ('monologues', picture-based tasks, everyday conversations, etc). These materials cast light, among other things, on how evidentiality is morphosyntactically expressed, how it interacts with other structural categories (tense, aspect, modality, person, negation, volitionality, etc.), how it is used across different kinds of language use (different genres), and, most importantly, how it is used in interaction.

The interactive dimension of evidentiality has been poorly researched so far. Evidentiality is a linguistic feature that reflects social relations par excellence. As such, it requires paying attention to non-linguistic variables such as the relationship between participants, their social status, gender, age, etc., that is, to discourse-pragmatic considerations. The notation of 'thick metadata' (Nathan & Austin 2004) is crucial in this regard. This research is the first attempt to explore interaction and its links to evidentiality in any Kinnauri language.

Part of my PhD project is funded by an ELDP grant (Martinez 2018). The materials collected in this research will be archived in the ELAR digital archive at SOAS (https://elar.soas.ac.uk/collection/MPI1207358).

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