

‘Ombule’ and ‘Jéro’: Linguistic and Ethnic Dimensions

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In the beginning of March 1998, the author set out to investigate the degree to which the language known from the literature as ‘Jerung’ or ‘Jero’ (I will employ the term *Jéro* here) differs from the *Ombule* language varieties spoken in the villages of Hilepānī and Uṃbu in Okhalḍhuṅgā district. The research was conducted in the small *Jéro* speaking village of Dalse Mohanṭār in Sindhulī district. The people I stayed with were close relatives of my main Ombule consultant Candra Bahādur Rāī. I soon discovered that *Ombule Yôr* (i.e. ‘Ombule Language’ in *Ombule*) and *Jéro Māla* (i.e. ‘Jéro Language’ in *Jéro*) are very similar with respect to the lexicon, syntax and morphology.

Separate languages

My findings confirm the information provided by Hanḅon (1991) who states that ‘Jero’ is the language most closely related to ‘Umbule’ (80% cognates). However, in contrast to Hanḅon (1991), I do not see any linguistic grounds to consider both tongues as separate languages. As Hanḅon (1991) mentioned but did not further elaborate on, there are indeed a number of differences between both *Ombule Yôr* and *Jéro Māla*, mainly with respect to the lexicon and phonology. However, the data I gathered in Dalse Mohanṭār show that these differences are very marginal.

Implosive stops

The most striking aspect of *Jéro Māla* is the lack of the implosive stops /b, d/, which, by contrast, are present in both the Hilepānī and Uṃbu varieties of *Ombule Yôr* (own data, but also see Toba 1993):

Ombule Yôr	Jéro Māla	English
bari	marī	‘wound’
bisi	misi	‘eye’
ḍobu	nobu	‘ear’
ḍusum	nusum	‘nose’

These few examples show that *Jéro Māla* offers homorganic nasals instead of implosive stops. In most cases, some straightforward interlanguage rules can be given to formulate the differences between the two tongues, which are moreover mutually intelligible. In all, the similarities between the varieties of *Ombule Yôr* and *Jéro Māla* are so overwhelming, i.e. comparable to the similarities between North Germanic languages such as Norwegian and Danish or West Germanic languages such as Dutch and German, that from a purely synchronic point of view one could easily speak of two varieties of a single language, a language distinct from related neighbouring Rāī languages such as Bahing and Sunuwar.

Clan terminology

By the end of 1998, I obtained additional data with respect to the term *Jéro*. My main consultant listed *Jéro* as one of the minor clans (or *sāno pāchā*) of the *Ombule* clan, amongst for instance *Bhawocaco*, *Naksocaco*, *Dóronca*, *Bironca*, *Róke*, *Laymco* and *Rabraco*. He added that amongst of speakers of *Ombule Yôr*, one can find individuals who ethnically speaking belong to the *Jéro* clan,

and likewise, amongst the speakers of *Jéro Mála* there are ethnic *Bhawocaco*, *Naksocaco*, *Dóronça*, etc. This mixture can be explained as follows: if a *Jéro* clan woman who as a child speaks *Jéro Mála* (i.e. the language of her native village) is 'fetched' by (i.e. married to) a *Dóronça* clan man who speaks *Ombule Yôr* (i.e. the native tongue of his village), their children will become members of the *Dóronça* clan and speak *Ombule Yôr*. Likewise, if a *Jéro* clan man who speaks *Jéro Mála* 'fetches' himself a *Dóronça* clan woman speaking *Ombule Yôr*, their children will become members of the *Jéro* clan and speak *Jéro Mála*. The fact that I have spoken to an ethnic *Jéro* woman who had totally forgotten her native *Jéro* tongue and who was only able to speak the *Ombule* variant of the village of her husband, may serve as an illustration as to how closely related *Jéro Mála* and *Ombule Yôr* are as a matter of fact.

Variants

The speakers of *Ombule Yôr* and *Jéro Mála* acknowledge the close relationship between their tongues, but they do not consider their languages to be one. One of my consultants claimed that although *Jéro* is a *sāno pāchā* of the large *Ombule* clan, it also refers to a 'language' (as he said) which is distinct from *Ombule Yôr* (in all of its variants). This person's perception of the ethnic and linguistic dimensions involved does not fully agree with my earlier statement about two varieties of a single language, but does not necessarily exclude it either. His statement just reflects that there is a limited set of parameters used by speakers of both variants to discriminate and to label a certain local variant (or dialect) as either *Jéro Mála* or *Ombule Yôr*. One of these parameters is the absence or presence of the two implosive stops.

Ethnic interaction

Additional research will have to determine the precise boundaries between the variants of the *Ombule-Jéro* linguistic unit.

More data will be needed to be able to assert whether we are dealing with diachronically two languages which are in a merger process due to ethnic interaction, or with originally only one language which has split (not at least in the minds of the speakers of the two languages) due to yet unknown factors.

Orthographic conventions

Acute accent (´) indicates long vowels, e.g. é in *Jéro* is [e:]. Circumflex accent (^) indicates close mid vowels, e.g. ô in *yôr* is [o]. Orthographic o in *Ombule* is [ɔ].

Bibliographic references

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