

# Publications on Wambule Rai

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Wambule (Rai) is the name of a Kiranti language spoken in the hill tracts of eastern Nepal. The Kiranti languages are members of the northwestern subbranch of the eastern branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Examples of Kiranti languages are Limbu, Yakkha, and the so-called 'Rai' languages. The term 'Rai' is an ethnonym which is used to denote different groups speaking closely related Kiranti languages. According to Gurung (1994), the different Rai groups form a majority in six districts: (i) Solu-Khumbu: 30.5% of the total population (= 29,618 individuals); (ii) Saṅkuvā-Sabhā: 23.7% (= 33,600 individuals); (iii) Khoṭāñ: 38.8% (= 83,725 individuals); (iv) Bhojpur: 33.1% (= 65,874 individuals); (v) Dhankuṭā: 23.5% (= 34,366 individuals); and (vi) Ilām: 24.6% (= 56,326 individuals). Rai groups form the second largest ethnic body in the Udaypur district: 17.1% (= 38,804 individuals). In addition, substantial Rai groups are found in two districts: (i) Okhalḍhungā: 12.0% (= 16,679 individuals); and (ii) Pāñcthar: 13.7% (= 24,020 individuals).

## Overview

The aim of the present contribution is to provide an overview of publications on the Wambule Rai language as well as to make some data accessible to Nepali readers. The author himself has been working on the Wambule language since 1996. The aim of his research is to produce a grammar of this language. This grammar is due to appear in the year 2000.

## Hodgson

Before the author began his work on Wambule, very little was known about the language. The few data available were given in Hodgson (1857), Grierson (1909), Hale, Hari & Schoetteln-dreyer (1972), Hanßon (1991) and Toba (1991, VS 2052). The comparative vocabulary of several Kiranti languages compiled by Hodgson (1857) supplies the first lexical data on the Wambule language, which is referred to as 'Chouras'ya'. Hodgson (1857) is cited by Grierson (1909) as the authority on 'Chouras'ya', which is considered a minor 'Khambu' (i.e. Rai) dialect and which is classified as a member of the so-called 'eastern pronominalized languages'. Grierson (1909; 369) states:

*'The Chouras'ya Khambus live in what Hodgson calls Pallo, or Further Kirant, i.e. the hills from the Arun to the Mechi and the Singilela Range.'*

He adds:

*'Our information about the Chouras'ya dialect is even more unsatisfactory than is the case with other forms of Khambu. It seems to occupy a somewhat independent position, and often differs from connected forms of speech in grammar and vocabulary.'* (p. 369).

In less than fifty lines, several aspects of Wambule nominal morphology, such as gender, genitive case, postpositions, personal pronouns, interrogative pronouns and indefinite pronouns, as well as scanty data on verbal morphology are discussed. In addition, Grierson (1909: 341-349) provides a small vocabulary which consists of less than four scores of lexical entries. This small word list is, however, quite interesting from a chronological point of view. The data show, for instance, that more than a hundred years ago the Wambule numeral system included at least the original items <kolo> 'one', <nik'si> 'two', <sum'makha> 'three' and <phibakha> 'four'. In modern speech, by contrast, only <kolo> 'one' has been retained. The other numerals have been replaced by Nepali forms, i.e. <dui> 'two', <tin> 'three' and <cār> 'four'. I hypothesise that the reason for the retention of <kolo> 'one' is related to the fact that this item also serves as a kind of indefinite article, equivalent of English 'a'; thus <kwal muyo> can mean either 'one person' or 'a person'. In the word

list provided by Grierson (1909: 341-349), the bilabial and retroflex implosive stops /b, d/ are left unmarked (i.e. unnoticed?). Thus, he writes <bisi> 'eye' and <di> 'name' instead of <bisi> 'eye' and <di> 'name'.

### **Toba**

Toba (1991) cites Hodgson (1857) and Grierson (1909) as the only publications on the Wambule language, which is referred to as 'Chourasya (Rai)'. The same tongue, but this time called 'Umbule', is listed separately. Toba (1991) refers to Hale, Hari & Schoettelndreyer (1972) as the only source on 'Umbule'. Hale, Hari & Schoettelndreyer (1972) provide a small vocabulary which is based on the so-called 'Swadesh' 100 word list, a list which is quite often used to establish genetic affiliation between languages.

### **Hanßon**

More general information on Wambule can be found in Hanßon (1991), who refers to the language as either 'Chourase', 'Chaurasya', 'Tsaurasya', 'Chourasia' ('Couras er', 'Courase yor'), or 'Umbule', 'Ambule', 'Ombule' ('Ombule er', 'Ombule yor', 'Umbule er', 'Umbule yor'). The information given concerns issues such as: (a) main area, which is situated in Udaypur and Okhaldhungā; (b) scattered minorities, which can be found in several villages in Bhojpur, Khoṭāñ, Pāñcthar (i.e. 'Bonu' dialect) and in one village each in Dhankuṭā and Tehratum; (c) language retention, of which it is said:

*'The degree of language retention among the Chourase groups appears to be rather high, especially among those of Okhaldhunga district ...'* (p. 27);

(d) dialects, of which it is said:

*'The dialect of Ubu (also: Ubhu, Ubu) seems to be considered a kind of standard among the 'Umbule' speakers of the main area, and the label of 'Umbule' itself may be derived from the place name as well. The most conservative patterns of verb grammar appear to exist in the dialect of Hilepani, whereas the isolated community of Chourase speakers in Maintappa, Simle panchayat, shows the highest degree of Tibeto-Burman retentions in the lexicon.'* (p. 28)

(e) number of speakers, estimated at 5,000 or more, (f) affiliation, especially with Jero; (g) classification, viz. as

*'... a southern member of the Sunwar-Thulung nucleus of Western Kiranti.'* (p. 28);

and (h) a commentary on wrong findings published by Grimes (1984). Hanßon (1991) also points out that the language described by Hale, Hari & Schoettelndreyer (1972) is not pure Wambule but rather a mix of Bahing and Wambule, and that the existence of mixes can be explained by the fact that there are many tribal connections between both groups.

### **Jero**

Hanßon (1991) also discusses the Jero Rai language, alternatively called 'Jerung', 'Jero', 'Jerum', 'Zero', 'Zerum', 'Jerunge' or 'Jero mala'. Jero is said to be spoken by an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 people and to be most closely related to Wambule. Hanßon (1991) states:

*'The language called Jerung is one of those that have been newly found during the field research of the LSN [Linguistic Survey of Nepal].'* (p. 42).

He adds:

'... *Jerung* was grouped together with 'Ombule' and 'Chourase' ... into one language. But there are several distinct features in phonology and grammar - and to some extent in the lexicon as well - indicating a break between the dialects of *Jerunge* and the dialects of *Chourase* = *Umbule*. No dialect has been found that could be interpreted as a group intermediate between *Chourase* and *Jerunge*. Therefore a definition of *Jerung* as a language of its own should be preferred.' (p. 42).

### Libju-Bhumju

In the last decade, the number of publications on Wambule have increased significantly, mainly thanks to own Wambule initiative, through the establishment of *Libju-Bhumju* magazine. A number of important trilingual thematic word lists have been published in different instalments of the *Libju-Bhumju* series, such as kinship terminology by Rāī (VS 2051), body parts by Rāī (VS 2052a) and Rāī (VS 2052b), and 'adverbs' by Rāī (VS 2053), Rāī (VS 2054a) and Rāī (VS 2054b). In addition, Toba (VS 2052) discusses some phonetic aspects of the implosive stop phonemes of Wambule Rai. Opgenort (VS 2055a) presents the aim of his ongoing research on the Wambule language and underlines the importance of the study for Tibeto-Burman typology. Finally, Opgenort (VS 2055b) deals with the strong linguistic and ethnic affiliations between Wambule and Jero Rai and proposes an 'Ombule-Jéro' linguistic unit.

### Forthcoming

Additional publications will embody the 5,000 words long Wambule-Nepali Dictionary by Rāī (forthcoming) and the descriptive grammar of Wambule Rai by Opgenort (forthcoming). These publications will hopefully help to preserve the Wambule language for future generations and future linguistic research.

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