

# A Grammar of Wambule

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*Libju-Bhumju* 23: 39-44 (2003)

Wambule is the language of the Wambule Rai, one of the Kiranti tribes of eastern Nepal. The Wambule speaking area is roughly situated around the confluence of the Sunkosī and Dūdhkosī rivers and comprises the southernmost part of Okhalḍhungā district, the westernmost part of Khoṭāñ district, the northernmost part of Udaypur district, and the northeasternmost part of Sindhuḷī district. The Wambule people form the demographic majority in this area, which is also inhabited by people of Indo-Aryan caste and by Tibeto-Burman settlers from western Nepal. Wambule and its western neighbour Jero form a linguistic unit of mutually intelligible sets of dialects called ‘Chaurasia’ here. The Chaurasia linguistic unit forms part of the Western Kiranti group, which belongs to the northwestern or ‘Bodic’ subbranch of the eastern branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The languages Thulung, Dumi, Khaling, Kohi, Bahing, Sunwar and Hayu are closely related to Wambule and Jero.

## The Wāmbule language

The book *The Wāmbule Language*, which I defended as a doctoral dissertation on 6 June 2002, is the result of more than five years of work on the Wambule language. I assumed the task of documenting the Wambule language in October 1996, when I was employed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and joined the Himalayan Languages Project at Leiden University, the Netherlands. By that time the Wambule was still very poorly understood. The only published source available on the language was the ‘Chouras’ya’ word list of about three hundred words compiled by Brian Houghton Hodgson (1857), on the basis of which Sten Konow compiled a short word list and grammatical note in the Linguistic Survey of India.

## Two kinds of data

The linguistic data presented in *The Wāmbule Language* are of two kinds. The ‘non-literary’ data were collected during four field trips which I undertook personally in the Chaurasia area and during which I recorded several stories and conducted various interviews with my informants. Non-literary data are transcribed in the phonologically based orthography. Non-literary data are supplemented by ‘literary’ data, i.e. published and unpublished material that has been written down by a dozen or more Wambule authors themselves. Nepali and literary Wambule are transliterated from the Devanāgarī script. The grammar on the Wambule language discusses the dialect of the village of Hilepānī.

## Informants

I am most indebted to Candra Bahādur Rāī and his family, who gave me a true home in Hile-pānī during the many months of linguistic field research in eastern Nepal. Heartfelt gratitude and much respect is due to Candra Bahādur Rāī, who at the age of 65 agreed to teach me all he knew about his native tongue and culture with much enthusiasm. Candra Bahādur Rāī has an exemplary command of the local language and from the first day that we worked together until the day I left he proved to be an intelligent, trustworthy, patient, witty and hospitable informant. I consider him my Wambule father. A large part of this book is the result of his enthusiasm. Most of the linguistic data on the Wamdyal dialect were obtained from Kṛṣṇa Kājī Rāī, a young man in his twenties, with whom I had the pleasure of working together during two short weeks in February 1998. I was also very much assisted by Jñān Bahādur Rāī, who is also a speaker of the Wamdyal dialect. The chief editor of the trilingual *Libju-Bhumju* magazine, Gaṇeś Rāī from Hilepānī, is one of the very inspiring people of the *Wambule Rai Society Nepal*. Both he and Avināth Rai were so kind as to provide me with a digital version of the *Wambule Rai Dictionary*, a fine treasure of knowledge. I am also much indebted to Dhan Bahādur Rāī from the Udaipure dialect area, whom I met by accident in a bar in

the Thamel tourist area of Kathmandu in December 1998. This young man in his early twenties gave me excellent insights and very clear and meaningful explanations on grammatical features of Wambule. The Jero data were gathered during a two-week trip to the southern Jero village of Mohanjar in March 1998, where I lived with Candra Bahadur Rai's brother-in-law and his son Jaya Kumar Rai.

### Contents

The book *The Wambule Language* consists of ten chapters and four annexes with twelve analysed texts, a Wambule-English-Nepali lexicon, verbal paradigms and an overview of the first material published on the language.

### The Wambule

Chapter 1 discusses the most important social, geographical, religious and cultural aspects of the Wambule Rai community. Wambule society can be divided into (i) four dialect groups, viz. 'Wamdya', 'Udaipure', 'Hilepane' and 'Jhappali'; (ii) a large number of exogamous kinship groups referred to as 'little clans' by Candra Bahadur Rai, which are based on aggregates of closely related males and unrelated females, who have been brought into the group from other kinship groups, usually of the same community; and (iii) three religious groups with their own customs and ceremonies, viz. the oldest and most important group of people called 'Jagat', who worship the spirits of the ancestors and uphold the traditional shamanist beliefs commonly found among the Rai people of eastern Nepal, the 'Santa Bhes' sect, which is the sect of Wambule people who worship Siva, the most important god of the Nepali Hindu Pantheon, which is also known as Mahadev 'Great god', and the 'Hwam' sect, who worship the Hindu god Visnu. The first chapter also relates the different life cycle ceremonies.

### The sound system

Chapter 2 is devoted to the sound system. The phonological analysis is based on a classical phonemic approach, in which the qualification of the minimal units of the sound system is given in terms of their distribution and identity. The sound system is characterised by a difference between long and short vowel phonemes in the initial open syllable of polysyllabic words (except negated verbs) and by different kinds of neutralisations in the remaining environments. The consonant system is characterised by a difference between elements that are phonologically contrastive in syllable-initial position and a smaller number of elements that appear in syllable-final position. Another important subject constitutes the status of the phonological sequences /ya/ and /wa/. Chapter 2 also discusses the phonology of Nepali loan words.

### Morphophonology

Chapter 3 deals with the phonological factors that affect the formal realisation of morphemes. An overview is given of the morphophonological regularities that are found throughout the Wambule language or within a particular grammatical category. Phonologically and grammatically conditioned alternation between morphemes can be handled in several ways. The way followed in *The Wambule Language* is to set up a basic form that undergoes modification in a certain environment. Systematic alternations between the different phonemic forms of a verb within a single paradigm can be explained by setting up a basic form of the verb root which is monomorphemic and monosyllabic. The retention and loss of phonemic distinctions can be used to determine the phonological status of the boundary between morphemes. Wambule furnishes some evidence that the morphological status of morphemes is not steady, but is subject to some variation. That is to say, a certain number of morphemes seem to function as lexical suffixes in one morphosyntactic context, whereas they appear as phrasal suffixes in another. The morphophonological system is also characterised by structural simplification that manifests itself in the existence of full and abbreviated morphs and of *portemanteau* morphs. The third chapter also deals with the phonotactically conditioned alternations that are closely tied up with the presence of the final and post-final verbal segment <t>. The existence of implosive-initial allomorphs of nasal-initial suffixes

used after <Ɂ> strongly supports the idea that the implosive stops may be partly synchronically analysed as clusters of stop plus nasal consonants.

### **Nominal morphology**

Chapter 4 deals with nominal morphology. It is argued that some groups of nouns incorporate bound elements that have a more or less clear meaning. The noun classifying elements meaning 'person', 'grain', 'water', 'tree', 'fruit', 'small object', 'day', 'flesh, meat', 'masculine gender' and 'feminine gender' represent such former or non-productive nominal suffixes which are attached to bound roots with an unclear meaning. The Wambule number markers are morphologically unbound but syntactically restricted forms in the sense that they cannot be used on their own. The dual and plural number markers always appear after the head and precede the case markers and postpositions. The basic meaning expressed by the nominal number markers relates to the pluriformity of referents. An additional part of the meaning expressed by the number markers involves the concept of manifoldness. Manifoldness indicates various types or varieties of the referent denoted. The source (ergative/instrumental), directive, locative, comitative, ablative, genitive and similaritive case markers constitute a class of bound morphemes which are used to distinguish different grammatical roles from one another. Case markers can not only be associated with nouns and nominals but also with adverbs and verbs. Postpositions such as 'without', 'in front; before', 'behind; after', 'on top of' and 'beside' constitute a class of syntactically bound morphemes in phrase-final position which are also used to distinguish several grammatical roles from each other. The discourse markers 'also, too, even', 'exactly, precisely', 'on the contrary', 'only' and the theme and contrastive markers are morphosyntactically bound elements which fulfil rhetorical functions and mark intersentence relationships or dependencies between elements of different sentences.

### **Nominals and adverbials**

Chapter 5 discusses the grammatical analysis of nominals and adverbials. Nominals are words that have some of the attributes of nouns, but not all. Adverbials are a heterogeneous group of words that mainly serve to specify constituents other than nouns. Adverbials are commonly used as modifiers of verbs and adjectives and as sentence connectors. The group of nominals comprises personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, indefinite and interrogative words, adjectives and numeral and non-numeral quantifiers. Personal pronouns are unbound nominals that are used to refer to the speaker, the addressee and another person or human-like entity whose referents are presumed to be clear from the context. The personal pronouns are only distinguished for person, but neither for number nor inclusivity/exclusivity. Possession is marked by means of a series of syntactically restricted morphemes that show no morpho-phonological interaction with the word they precede and which can be analysed as proclitics. A formal distinction is made between three numbers, three persons and forms including and excluding the person addressed. Demonstratives comprise nominals and adverbials. The demonstrative system is based on five bound morphemes 'near', 'distant', 'distant (at the same level)', 'distant (up)' and 'distant (down)', which indicate a location relative to the point of orientation given by the context. Indefinite and interrogative words are unbound forms which include nominals, e.g. 'who', 'what' and 'which', and adverbials, e.g. 'where', 'from where', 'whereto', 'when', 'how', 'how much' and 'why'. Indefinite and interrogative words are used in statements, questions and exclamative main clauses and in correlative and adverbial subordinate clauses. The majority of indigenous words that denote qualities and attributes are deverbatives. However, not all adjectival meanings are expressed by deverbatives. Wambule possesses a small class of true adjectives. With the general exception of the native word for 'one', the Wambule numerals used in everyday conversation are loans from Nepali. Quantifiers are qualifying nominals that express a contrast in quantity between entities. Intensifiers are qualifying adverbs that have a heightening or lowering effect on the meaning of another element in the sentence, such as a verb, an adverb, or an adnominal modifier such as an adjective or quantifier. Nouns of time are generally loans from Nepali. By contrast, adverbs of time are mostly indigenous forms. Verbs may co-occur with invariable monosyllabic forms that specify the manner or method in which the action is performed. These adverbs of manner are directly placed before the verb they

modify and can therefore be analysed as proclitics. Nouns, adjectives and adverbs can be turned into nominals through suffixation of the Wambule reifying suffix <-me ~ -m>.

### Conjugations and simplicia

The grammatical categories that are typically associated with verbs are that of negation, transitivity, aspect and mood. Chapter 6 deals with the expression of the categories of negation and transitivity. Wambule verbs can be classified into three main types on the basis of formal and semantic criteria that involve the inflectional category of transitivity. The notion of transitivity has bearing on the core arguments that are cross-referenced in the finite verb and involves a conceptualisation of the way in which the arguments initiate the verbal action or are affected by it. A distinction can be made between intransitive, middle and transitive verbs. Wambule verbs may have one or more different roots and can be classified in various conjugations on the basis of paradigmatically conditioned root alternation. Verbs that share a given conjugation can be classified into various subcategories, known as 'verb classes', on the basis of shared allomorphy that affects the verb roots and the morphemes that are bound to them. Verb classes are defined in terms of their root-final elements. A distinction can be made between twenty-eight classes of regular verbs: six classes of verbs which belong to the first intransitive conjugation, one class of verbs which belongs to the second intransitive conjugation, five classes of verbs which belong to the middle conjugation, five classes of verbs which belong to the first transitive conjugation, five classes of verbs which belong to the second transitive conjugation and six classes of verbs which belong to the third transitive conjugation. The post-final segments <↳ and /s/ in certain transitive verbs seem to be reflexes of the Tibeto-Burman suffixes \*<-↳ and \*<-s>. In present-day Wambule verbal forms, these former suffixes appear to have a causative or transitivising sense.

### Finite verb forms

Chapter 7 deals with the morphosyntax of finite verb forms. With the exception of imperatives, the morphology of finite verbs can be resumed as formal elaborations of the simplex scheme presented in Chapter 6. The verb forms discussed are the imperfective, the affirmative, the indefinite, the simplex verb, the optative, the volitional and the imperative.

### Non-finite deverbatives

Bare verb roots serve as a basis for suffixation of several morphemes that turn modified verb roots into deverbative constituents termed 'verbal nouns' and 'verbal adjectives'. From the point of view of external morphosyntax, the deverbative forms discussed in Chapter 8 behave like ordinary nouns and adjectives. The forms distinguished are the infinitive and the *nomen actionis*, the supine, the active verbal adjectives, the passive verbal adjective, the verbal adjective of purpose, the attributive verbal adjective, the stative verbal adjective and the nominaliser of loan verbs.

### Gerunds and complex sentences

Gerunds are deverbative words that basically qualify the action expressed by the main verb. The basic function of gerunds is as predicator of a subordinate clause which marks the syntactic function of an adverbial with respect to the main clause of the complex sentence. One could therefore propose to qualify gerunds as 'verbal adverbs'. Like verbal nouns and verbal adjectives, gerunds function as the predicator of a clause and can be used in several periphrastic constructions with different types of auxiliaries. Chapter 9 is devoted to the morphology of the source gerund, the present gerund, the ablative gerund, the simultaneous gerund, the similaritive gerund, the negative state gerund, the connective gerund, the gerund of manner and the gerund of circumvagant motion. Clauses cannot only be connected by gerunds, or verbal adverbs, but also by underived adverbs and particles. The forms are also discussed in Chapter 9.

### Verbal constructions and complex verbs

Chapter 10 deals with the morphosyntax of verbal constructions and complex verbs. Verbal constructions are periphrastic forms that consist of a main verb or deverbative plus an unbound auxiliary verb, which adds a dimension of some kind to the meaning expressed by the main

constituent. The resultant combination functions like two independent stems. The verbal categories such as negation and transitivity are marked in the auxiliary. By contrast, a complex verb consists of a main verb root and a bound verb root. The two roots function like a single stem to which inflectional and derivational affixes can be added.

**Copies**

Copies of the book will be made available to the Wambule Rai Society of Nepal and also deposited at the Library of Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. Brill will publish a modified 'dethesised' version of the book in 2003.