

A Grammar of Wambule: Grammar, lexicon, texts and cultural survey of a Kiranti tribe of Eastern Nepal.

By Jean Robert Opgenort.

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The second volume in the series ‘Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region’ (Brill) is a description of Wambule, a Western Kiranti language of the Tibeto-Burman language family, spoken in Eastern Nepal. Impressive in its sheer size as well as in its level of detail, this work testifies to great dedication and a brilliant analytical mind.

An introductory chapter deals with the speakers of Wambule, and describes dialect groups, clans, religious sects and rituals, in great detail. Other areas of cultural and social background, however, are conspicuously missing, and we are told next to nothing about the kinship system, food production, living arrangements, or structures of power, to name a few important ones. Several key issues which should have been dealt with at the outset of the book have been likewise neglected, such as describing the theoretical foundations of the work, or how the fieldwork was carried out, now restricted to a single sentence. Some of these points are briefly touched upon later in the work, but many questions remain unanswered, such as how long was actually spent in the field.

The next section deals with phonology and morphophonology (in separate chapters). Notable is the presence of a series of implosives, and the distribution of post-alveolar stops, which seem to function more as a stylistic tool than as true phonemes. In syllable-final position, there is considerable allophony in the realization of stops.

The rest of the grammar falls out around two focal points, nouns and verbs. The chapters ‘Nominal categories’ and ‘Nominals and adverbials’ are of the former category, but the greater part of the description deals with the complex verbal system and issues related to this, with the chapters ‘Conjugations and morphology of simplicia’, ‘Finite verb forms’, ‘Non-finite deverbatives’, ‘Gerunds and complex sentences’, and ‘Verbal constructions and complex verbs’.

Both these parts read somewhat like a long list, where words and morphemes are exemplified and their use explained, building the analysis along the way. This reflects a commendable reliance on the language data, but sometimes makes it difficult to find and comprehend more overarching points. In many areas, such as the alternating verb roots, the analysis is incredibly thorough, but elements of the grammar that are not closely tied to any particular group of constituents, such as word order and other elements of syntax, are treated rather cursorily. Considering the size of this work, a searchable index would also have been very helpful.

This work is more than just a grammar, however. Half of its bulk of 900 pages is taken up by appendices, among them a 100-page section of texts and an extensive bidirectional lexicon. In ‘The Chouras’ya materials’ the only prior research on the

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language, two wordlists and a brief description, are reproduced, and the words compared with the present analysis. A description of the closely related Jero dialect is the subject of a separate work by the same author.

This work should be of considerable interest to anyone with an interest in Tibeto-Burman languages or the languages of the Himalayas, as one of the most detailed descriptions of one of these languages so far.

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