Synchrony: description

Anju Saxena and Lars Borin

1 Introduction: Kanashi, its speakers, its linguistic and extralinguistic context

Abstract: Kanashi is an indigenous language of India spoken by some 2,000 individuals in one single village in the Indian Himalayas. It is a Sino-Tibetan language, separated from the other Sino-Tibetan speaking communities in the region by a girdle of Indo-Aryan speaking villages. In the present volume we contribute to the documentation of Kanashi with a phonological and a grammatical description, as well as a basic vocabulary. We also address questions of genealogical classification of the Sino-Tibetan languages of the Himalayas, as well as their history of contact with other language families.

Keywords: Kanashi, Sino-Tibetan, South Asia, areal linguistics, comparative linguistics, Himalayan region

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1 Kanashi and Malana

Kanashi (xns; <Sino-Tibetan [ST]) is also known in the literature as Malani and Kanasi, and in the speech of our oldest Kanashi language consultant as Kunashi. It is spoken by some 2,000 individuals in one single village, Malana (coordinates: 32°03'46"N 77°15'38"E) which is situated in the upper regions of the Malana river valley in the northern part of the Kullu district in the state of Himachal Pradesh in India (Figure 1).¹ The Malana village stands alone. Primarily due to its geographical location (at an altitude of 2,652 metres and with access only on foot), until recently Malana was more or less isolated from the rest of the world. Even today, getting there requires a two-hour mountain hike after a long, winding and difficult car ride from Jari, the nearest town. It is also linguistically isolated: the

¹ The number of Kanashi speakers given by the Ethnologue (Eberhard et al. 2021) is 1,400, but the source for this information is dated 2001. The population of Malana village as given in the 2011 Indian census was 1,722.

inhabitants of all the closest surrounding villages speak Indo-Aryan (IA; <Indo-Iranian<Indo-European) varieties.

Figure 1: Map of Himachal Pradesh with location of Malana. Map created by Plane-Mad/Wikimedia, reproduced from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Himachal_Pradesh_locator_map.svg under a CC-BY-SA license.

Kanashi is an endangered language,² for which we, unfortunately, still have very little information available. Like many other languages of this region (and like most of the world's languages), Kanashi is an oral language with no established writing system. The only textual data available in Kanashi come from the few linguistic descriptions made of the language: some short word-lists (Harcourt 1871; Diack 1896; Konow 1909; Tobdan 2011), a short grammatical sketch (6 pages) and 2 short texts in Konow (1909), and linguistic sketches based on secondary data presented by D. D. Sharma (1992: 303–399) and Duttamajumdar (2013; 2015). Sax-

² Kanashi is “definitely endangered” according to the *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (<http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>) and “threatened” according to the *Ethnologue* (Eberhard et al. 2021).

ena & Borin (2013) present a comparative Tibeto-Kinnauri study, which includes some Kanashi data.

While Kanashi undisputably is a Sino-Tibetan language, its exact position within ST remains undetermined. Based on a short wordlist, Diack (1896) concluded that Kanashi shows close affiliations to Kinnauri (kfk; Saxena 2017; 2022). Similar suggestions are also made by Bailey (1908), Konow (1909), Glottolog (Hammarström et al. 2018), and in a comparative investigation of a number of ST languages spoken in the Indian Himalayas by Saxena & Borin (2013). Based primarily on basic vocabulary data, Widmer (2017: 44) categorizes Kanashi as a West Himalayish language, closely related to Kinnauri. Figure 2 shows a classification of Kanashi within ST based on the account of Widmer (2017). It also shows the classifications of Kinnauri and Bunan (bfu), which will be used as closely related ST points of comparison in the description of the Kanashi numeral systems in Chapter 5, together with Zhangzhung (xzh), an extinct West Himalayish language.

Figure 2: Genealogical classification of Kanashi (Widmer 2017)

One very characteristic feature of the Kanashi community is that both their language *and* their village are important identity markers, and they have a reputation as forming an extremely secluded community.³ The physical isolation of Malana finds a parallel in that socioculturally, too, Kanashi speakers make a clear distinc-

³ And this has been the situation for a long time: “[The village of Malauna] is perhaps one of the greatest curiosities in Kooloo, as the inhabitants keep entirely to themselves, neither eating nor

tion between themselves (“the Kanashi community in Malana”) and others. There are guidelines as to what a non-Kanashi person can or cannot do. For example, which path in the village the non-Kanashi person should use. Non-Kanashis are prohibited from any type of physical contact with a Kanashi person. Those breaking these rules are liable to punishment in the form of fines. When the Kanashi speakers visit other places in Himachal or elsewhere, they maintain their system of not touching and/or eating with non-Kanashis. Literacy is low and very few Kanashi speakers work outside the village.

P. C. Sharma et al. (1985) investigated the prevalence of endogamy vs. exogamy in Malana. They collected information about all the 141 families residing in Malana at that time, and through personal interviews with the head (or the oldest member) of the family, they recorded their genealogies for up to 3–4 generations back. Their results show that 93.13% of all marriages took place between locals – i.e. exogamy is minimal.

The physical seclusion of the village and the social aloofness of the Kanashi community have contributed to the maintenance of its traditional culture and language, but recent developments are threatening the traditional lifestyle, including the language, where especially contact with Hindi⁴ is becoming an integral part of the villagers’ daily lives. This is the latest episode in a long history of continuous IA influence on Kanashi, which probably started before the Kanashi speakers settled in Malana, and which is continually reinforced by the circumstance that in all the villages closest to Malana local IA varieties are spoken, collectively referred to as Kullu Pahari.⁵

There are striking differences between the most recent influences and older contacts with IA languages, however. Earlier contacts with non-Kanashi were ritualized and periodical, but now the contacts are more pervasive, also inside the village. In the recent past there have been dramatic socio-economic changes in and around Malana, which have intensified the exposure to and the need to learn Hindi and Kullu Pahari for the Kanashi speakers as never before.

The Malana hydro-electric plant, which was commissioned in July 2001, is being built on the Kanashi people’s traditional land. This is destabilizing their traditional lifestyle, including their farming, animal husbandry, and their tradi-

intermarrying with the people of any other village, and speak a language which no one but they themselves can comprehend.” (Harcourt 1871: 312).

⁴ Hindi (hin) is both one of the two national languages of India (together with English) and the official state language of Himachal Pradesh.

⁵ ISO 639-3 kfx. Also referred to as Kullui/Kulluvi and Inner Siraji.

tional stewardship of the local biodiversity.⁶ Suddenly the villagers are finding themselves at the losing end on many fronts at once. The Indian judiciary system relies on written documents, but Kanashi people do not have written documents to prove their traditional ownership of land. During our fieldtrips, many episodes were told where the villagers lost their land to the hydro-electric dam construction company as they lacked written documents to support their claims. This also means that they are losing their traditional livelihood, forcing them to look outside their village to support themselves, where some other language is the *lingua franca*.

These developments are accompanied by the growing presence and dominance of Hindi. Hindi is the medium of instruction in schools, the language of communication in employment-related situations outside Malana village, and also the language of modern broadcast-media entertainment, which have become an integral part of village life, thanks to the introduction of satellite television, internet and mobile phones in the village, so that even locals who never leave Malana are exposed to Hindi, Kullu Pahari and English on a regular basis. Today we also find many temporary daily wage workers in Malana, many of whom come from Bihar (east India) and Nepal. The *lingua franca* in such communications is colloquial Hindi. Adding to this, there is a recent influx of younger (Western and Indian) tourists (drawn by trekking, mountain climbing and marijuana) to Malana, introducing the villagers to modern social habits, and bringing with them the need to interact in Hindi and English.

Most Kanashi speakers understand Kullu Pahari and Hindi, and many younger villagers and children speak a mixture of Hindi, Kullu Pahari and Kanashi. Kanashi is not the language of media, education or employment, but it is, at present, the medium of communication among its native speakers in the “in-village” spheres. However, there are already signs of language shift, as will be seen in Chapter 5 in the differences observed in the use of numerals among older and younger Kanashi speakers.

⁶ Villagers depend on the forest for traditional medicine and food, and on the other hand, their local traditions have contributed to the maintenance of the biodiversity in the region. According to their traditional belief, the village god prohibits excessive felling of trees, but this is, unfortunately, changing drastically, as large areas of land are being cleared off to build the dam and the roads needed to bring in heavy construction machinery.

2 Synchronic and diachronic aspects of Kanashi: this volume

In the present volume we present some results of an ongoing long-term substantial research and documentation effort targeting Sino-Tibetan languages spoken in the western and central Himalayas. In this volume the focus will be on Kanashi and its linguistic relatives and neighbors.

As noted above, Kanashi has been underdescribed. For this reason, this volume provides a basic descriptive part: a chapter on the phonology of Kanashi (Chapter 2), a substantial grammar sketch (Chapter 3), and as the last chapter of the volume, a basic vocabulary of Kanashi based on the IDS/LWT list (Borin et al. 2013; Haspelmath & Tadmor 2009), together with Kanashi–English and English–Kanashi versions of the vocabulary (Chapter 9).

Most languages in the world are like Kanashi: small, indigenous languages; about half of the world’s languages have less than 10,000 speakers, and only a little over 5% of all living languages have more than one million native speakers (Whalen & Simons 2012: 163). The number of speakers per language follows a power law-like distribution, with a few extremely large language communities at one end and a long tail of very small languages at the other. Many of the approximately 7,000 currently spoken languages have not been described at all by linguists; Seifart et al. (2018: e332f) estimate that about 40% – or about 2,750 – of the languages do not have even a grammar sketch.

At the same time, there is now a fair amount of evidence indicating that the size of a language community correlates inversely with the grammatical – notably morphological – complexity of its language, and investigations are ongoing into the possible causal mechanisms involved (Wray & Grace 2007; Lupyan & Dale 2010; Nettle 2012; Atkinson et al. 2015; Reali et al. 2018; Raviv et al. 2019).

From this follows that we can expect that “almost every new language description still guarantees substantial surprises” (Evans & Levinson 2009: 432), and “there are few signs of our discoveries flatlining” (Seifart et al. 2018: e328). This as-yet far from fully described linguistic diversity – which flies in the face of too categorical a view of what constitutes language and how language universals should be construed (Dryer 1998; Evans & Levinson 2009; Whalen & Simons 2012) – resides mainly in indigenous languages spoken by small, close-knit, often multilingual communities.

There are at least two slightly different consequences for indigenous language description emerging from the above facts. First, we should expect gen-

uinely new,⁷ previously unencountered linguistic phenomena to appear as a matter of course. Secondly, because of the sociolinguistic context in which modern (descriptive) linguistics has been developed and is taught, we may also come across linguistic phenomena which actually occur also in more well-described languages, but which have been neglected because of a descriptive bias towards written standard language of speakers similar to the linguists themselves, rather than, e.g., everyday spoken – perhaps multilingual – interaction (Linell 2005; Wray & Grace 2007).

Consequently, in the present volume we also discuss some surprising – to us – phenomena (in particular unexpected variation) encountered in our work on documenting Kanashi. Chapter 4 is devoted to a discussion of the considerable variation exhibited in the phonology of Kanashi and its consequences for the phonological description presented in Chapter 2. In Chapter 5 we turn to a description of the remarkable diversity observed in the Kanashi numerals, and discuss possible reasons for this state of affairs, in particular sociolinguistic factors.

After this, we turn to questions of language diachrony and genealogy. In the course of our work we have come across a number of linguistic features in Kanashi and its ST relatives with potential high relevance for the subclassification of the ST languages of the Himalayas and for uncovering the prehistory of Kanashi. In Chapter 6 we focus on nominal morphology and borrowed nouns and adjectives, while relevant verbal features (verb morphology and stratification of borrowed vocabulary) are investigated and discussed in Chapter 7.

Finally, in Chapter 8, we synthesize and summarize the findings from the diachronic part, attempt to place Kanashi in the ST family tree and draw inferences about the prehistory – including the contact history – of this language community on the basis of the features presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

Note that some information from the descriptive part of the volume may be repeated in the introductory and background sections of individual chapters. This is deliberate and has been done in the hope that this will make each chapter reasonably self-contained.

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