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Byangsi Grammar and Vocabulary
by Suhnu Ram Sharma
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Reviewed by Christina M. Willis

Byangsi is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in the Pithoragarh District of Uttarakhand, India. [1] Like many of the languages of the Indian Himalayas, Byangsi has not been definitively classified. This is due largely to the fact that Byangsi, like many languages of this region, is under-described. Suhnu Ram Sharma's recent publication contributes valuable data to the efforts linguists are making to document and describe the languages of the Himalayas. This is the fourth sketch of Byangsi published to date (see also Sharma 1989; Sharma 2001a; Trivedi 1991). In this grammar, Sharma builds upon his previous descriptions of Byangsi (Sharma 2001a; Sharma 2001b); it is a welcome addition to the literature. The grammar includes six chapters (Introduction; Phonology; Nominal Morphology; Verbal Morphology; Syntax and Sample Text; and Byangsi Dialects) and an appendix (Byangsi Lexicon). It is clear to this reviewer that Sharma was constrained by the length of the grammar in terms of the amount of data and the level of detail that he could include. The grammar was published by Sharma's home institution Deccan College in Pune, India in a small printing (500 copies). Sharma's grammar is a brief and affordable (just Rs 150) description of Byangsi with an emphasis on its phonology and morphology. Like most descriptive linguists, Sharma acknowledges that his work is not exhaustive and that more work on Byangsi could, and should be done.

Sharma begins the grammar with an introduction to the linguistic scenario of Uttarakhand, India. Chapter 1 opens with an overview of Byangsi and where it falls within the Tibeto-Burman language family. This includes a summary of the various ways that Byangsi has been classified. After the historical overview, Sharma provides a brief description of each of the seven Tibeto-Burman languages spoken throughout the region, including Byangsi. Each summary includes autonyms and exonyms, information about the speakers, and references to the existing literature on each language. These summaries are quite useful because they paint a portrait of the linguistic scenario of this rugged region where Byangsi is spoken. While the descriptions are vivid, it would be helpful to have a map to illustrate the linguistic landscape. Additionally, a more in-depth description of the Byangsi people in terms of their social practices, livelihood, and social standing would provide valuable insight into their way of life.

Also included in the introduction is a brief description of the methodology for data collection and the names and ages of speakers consulted. It is this aspect of the grammar that draws my sharpest criticism. First, the methodology for data collection is not clearly

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[1] The state Uttarakhand was called Uttaranchal from 2001-2007. Prior to the formation of the state Uttaranchal, this region was part of Uttar Pradesh.

defined, which leaves the reader to guess the source of the examples provided in the grammar (i.e. are the examples from elicitation sessions or natural discourse?). Moreover, the examples that are included are presented devoid of context. This poses problems when discussing certain aspects of the grammar such as the TAM system. Second, it is unclear from his description where Sharma conducted his fieldwork and the exact length of time he spent collecting data. The Dharchula area is home to many Byangsi speakers, but many others have moved to larger towns and cities far from Dharchula. Furthermore, the Byangsi traditionally migrate in the summer to higher elevations. Currently, not all families are able to participate in this migratory practice due to the constraints of their daily lives such as providing an education for their children and maintaining full-time employment. Considering these factors, it would be useful to know where the people Sharma consulted live and how often they return to their traditional villages. While Sharma identifies the village of heritage for each of his consultants, he does not clarify where they currently reside. Third, Sharma does not explicitly state the contact language he used during his fieldwork. This is especially important if Sharma relied heavily on elicited data for his analysis (and it appears that he did). I found in my own work on Darma (a language that is closely related to Byangsi) that using Hindi as the contact language to elicit relative constructions provided different results than using English as the contact language (Willis 2007a; Willis 2007b). It is also important to note that neither relative structure that I obtained during elicitation is found with regularity in the natural discourse texts that I analyzed. The structure used most commonly in Darma was identified only after analyzing texts from natural discourse.

The sound system of Byangsi is presented in Chapter 2, Phonology. The twelve vowel phonemes are introduced with evidence for the proposed contrasts (i.e. minimal pairs). Byangsi distinguishes vowel length for the high front unround vowels (/i/ and /i:/), the high back round vowels (/u/ and /u:/), and the low vowels (/a/ and /a:/), which Sharma classifies as central. It would be interesting to see an acoustic analysis of the vowels to see how great the difference is between a long vowel and a short vowel, and the formant values for the twelve vowel phonemes identified. Sharma describes a three-way tone contrast (high falling, level, and rising) and nasalization of vowels. The latter is described as phonemic, but the nasalized vowels are not included in the phonemic inventory. The remainder of the chapter includes a summary of the syllable canon, the consonant phonemes with corresponding minimal pair contrasts, and attested consonant clusters. Sharma does not mention the stress pattern found in Byangsi. The consonant chart is modified from a standard IPA chart (i.e. with the place of articulation on a horizontal axis and the manner of articulation on a vertical axis), which proved a disservice to this reader. The reorganization of the chart leaves nasals fricatives, laterals, trills, and approximants in rows and columns without clearly identifying the place of articulation. Sharma does include a description of the sounds, which allows the reader to clarify what the symbols in the chart represent.

The title of Chapter 3, Nominal Morphology, is a bit misleading. This chapter does include a description of nominal morphology, but it also includes a description of categories commonly found in noun phrases (e.g. adjectives, demonstratives, and numerals) and the morphemes used to mark the roles of nouns and noun phrases (e.g.

case markers and postpositions). In the first section of this chapter, Sharma identifies two types of noun stem. The first is a simple stem, which is monosyllabic and monomorphemic. The second type is called a complex noun stem, which comprises two monosyllabic bound stems: the root plus a formative suffix. Sharma identifies seven formative suffixes, two of which have a discernable semantic meaning. It is unclear what motivates Sharma to divide the remaining bisyllabic nouns into two morphemes when the meaning of each is no longer transparent, but he is not the only scholar to analyze Byangsi nouns in this manner (see also Trivedi 1991). Similarly, Sharma describes compound nouns where "one of the nouns in no longer found to occur as an independent noun" (2007: 33). While the opaque element in complex noun stems appears to be the second syllable, in compound forms it appears that the meaning of the first syllable cannot be determined. This is not stated explicitly, however, and it is not clear why Sharma has decided to make a distinction between complex noun stems and compound nouns. Both forms are free-standing nouns that appear to combine two monosyllabic morphemes to form a bisyllabic, bimorphemic noun. Perhaps a discussion of the stress pattern of Byangsi would help elucidate the classification of these nominals into two distinct categories. Next, Sharma describes the limited set of nouns that have analyzable gender morphemes, which is followed by a discussion of number. The plural suffix is generally found modifying animate nouns; human referents also have a dual form. Next Sharma describes the pronominal forms, including personal, demonstrative, interrogative, indefinite, and reflexive pronouns. The demonstrative pronouns exhibit a five-way contrast (i.e. proximal, distal, invisible, high elevation, and low elevation). The next two sections describe case markers (ergative, genitive, and oblique) and postpositions. This is followed by a description of adjectives, which are not inflected for number or gender. The adjectives in Byangsi are derived from noun stems and verb stems; there do not appear to be any basic forms. The final section of this chapter is a description of Byangsi numerals, which appear to include remnants of a vigesimal system.

Verbal morphology and adverbs are discussed in Chapter 4. The bulk of the morphemes presented in this chapter are provided in paradigms. While there are examples for some of the forms described (e.g. the infinitive), other forms lack exemplification. Teasing apart the system of tense, aspect, and mood for any language can be a challenge. The presentation is always easier for the reader to understand if there plenty of examples to explicate the pattern described. The discussion presented here left this reader a bit confused, in part because examples are lacking. One point of confusion surrounds the discussion of tense and the use of the term "formative". Sharma identifies a "present tense formative suffix" (2007: 55) that follows the verb stem in the present, present progressive and past progressive forms, all of which are classified as tenses (as is future). Later in his discussion, Sharma states that when the negative morpheme is present, "the present tense stem formative suffix /-g/ ~ /-k/ is dropped" (2007: 58). Without example sentences it is difficult to understand the full function of this so-called formative suffix. It appears that it may be related to mood rather than tense. Sometimes the key to understanding the TAM system of a language is having access to context-based examples (cf Dahl 1985 for a sample questionnaire that includes suggestions for obtaining contextual information). Other verb forms discussed in this chapter include

aspectivizers, mediopassives, the imperative, the subjunctive, gerunds, present active participles, and adverbs.[2]

A very cursory analysis of Byangsi syntax is presented in Chapter 5, which also includes a sample text. Sharma states in the introductory section to this chapter that he did not originally intend to include syntactic analysis in the grammar, and that his syntactic analysis is based on limited data. Indeed, the description presented here will benefit from additional texts and further analysis.[3] As it stands, Sharma describes the basic constituent order and relative clause constructions. The sample text appears to be a traditional story, but it is presented without explanation or ethnographic information. Furthermore, while Sharma credits both the speaker who narrated the story and the consultant who helped translate it, he does not clarify whether the story was transcribed while it was being told or if it was recorded electronically and transcribed later.

In Chapter 6, Sharma provides data to support the claim that Byangsi has multiple dialects. Here he compares two varieties that he refers to as "Byangsi proper" and "Kuṭi dialect" (2007: 89). The data include words that are entirely different in the two varieties and words that demonstrate regular sound correspondences between the two varieties. While there are only one hundred or so words included in this chapter, Sharma rightly states that the words "ought to be recorded here" (2007: 89).

The final section of Sharma's grammar is the lexicon, which is arranged according to the phonology of Byangsi following the order of the Roman alphabet (so the lexicon begins with *a*, which is followed by *b*, which is followed by *bh*). The lexicon is presented in a Byangsi-English format; it would be useful to have an English-Byangsi lexicon also.

Sharma makes it clear in his introduction and in the opening remarks of the syntax chapter that this grammar is not exhaustive. This reviewer looks forward to future publications on Byangsi and encourages Sharma and others who work on this Himalayish language to record and analyze natural speech. Recording the Byangsi language as it is used in day to day life, during rites of passage, and to narrate historical events, we can gain a better understanding of the language by documenting and analyzing structures that are used in day-to-day speech. Furthermore, a discourse-centered approach to data collection provides contextualized data from which we can glean information about the culture and practices of the group being studied. Until this approach is adopted, we will be thrilled that we have Sharma's latest account of this Tibeto-Burman language.

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[2] Some of the terminology used in the analysis is not defined. For example, Sharma discusses mediopassive forms as "redirecting the action back to the subject" (2007: 61-62), which is similar to how some scholars define middle voice. Likewise, the forms that Sharma identifies as gerunds might also be termed converbs.

[3] Sharma does not state explicitly how much data his analysis is based on (i.e. How many texts did he record? Approximately how many utterances did he elicit?).

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