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Peer reviewed

Yohlmo - Nepali - English Dictionary

Compiled by Anna Maria Hari and Chhegu Lama

Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University: 2004

ISBN 99946-31-30-6

xi + 848 pages

Review by Dr. Mark Turin

It is a daunting task to review a monograph so substantial that it appears to be the life's work of a distinguished scholar. To suggest that the Yohlmo - Nepali - English Dictionary, carefully compiled by Anna Maria Hari and Chhegu Lama, is a life's work is both true and untrue. True, because the dictionary is a monumental undertaking based on almost a quarter century of fieldwork conducted from 1980 to 2004. Untrue, however, because prior to her work on Yohlmo, Dr. Hari made a series of important contributions to our understanding of Thakali and Tamang phonology and tone (1969, 1970 and 1971a,b).

The reader will at once notice the unusual, if effective, configuration of the dictionary. The authors have opted for two editions of their book, a 'shorter' version and a 'longer' one. The longer version, reviewed here, includes four additional appendices which address some of the most salient phonological and grammatical features of Yohlmo. As such, then, the longer version—with an extra 122 pages—is best thought of as a grammatical sketch of this interesting Tibeto-Burman language. While the rationale for having two versions was at first not clear to me (after all, wouldn't everyone obviously want the longer one?), as I delved deeper into Hari and Lama's work, their reasoning made more sense.

The compilers have two distinct audiences and readerships in mind for this text: the scholarly community of linguists and the Yohlmo speech community. The needs of these two communities are not the same, and while there is a considerable overlap of interest, why should Yohlmo speakers be required to pay extra for a heavier book containing linguistic analysis which only specialists can understand? As Hari and Lama put it, "the buyer who is interested in linguistic details should definitely get this full version" (page vi).

The structure of both versions is as follows: after a modest Preface and a few carefully-chosen Acknowledgements, the author's bilingual Introduction (in both Yohlmo and English) addresses the use of Devanagāri orthography for representing Yohlmo. Chosen conventions and various amendments to standard Devanagāri are discussed in detail, as is alphabetisation. The lexical entries forming the Yohlmo - Nepali - English dictionary make up the bulk of the book, over 500 pages in fact. Each entry consists of at least five parts: the Yohlmo headword in Devanagāri script, the Yohlmo headword in a phonemic Roman transcription, the part-of-speech designation, the Nepali gloss or definition, and the English gloss or definition. Many entries also identify a source language for the headword (such as loans from Nepal, Hindi or Tibetan), information about the register or honorific level of an entry, its semantic domain, a cross-reference to a related headword, various notes, and, for many of the semantically more complex headwords, one or more sentences to illustrate the entry in context. The

dictionary is a treasure trove of lexically rich and culturally contextualised information on Yohlmo, and entries are interesting from a synchronic as well as a comparative perspective.

Then follows a 165-page English - Yohlmo index which lists all of the glosses and definitions included in the main body of the dictionary alongside corresponding Yohlmo equivalents in Devanagāri and Roman transcription. The index is quite pared down, with only the headwords of the main entries and subentries of the dictionary reproduced. All other information about a given headword must be looked up in the preceding section. It would have been helpful to have had the Nepali translations included in the English - Yohlmo index, particularly since locating a main entry in the 500-page dictionary is no easy task.

Within the English - Yohlmo index, the compilers have provided lexical lists organised by semantic domain. While slightly repetitive, the lists make for interesting reading since the lexical breadth and depth of a given domain are well illustrated. Clustering entries together is no easy task, however, and confusion may arise from the fact that apples and figs are grouped under “fruits”, while maize and soybeans are found under “foods”. I was surprised by the paucity of entries under “plants” and “trees”, a botanically questionable distinction to begin with, and disappointed by the lack of nomenclatural precision, such as “big leafy plant” (page 695). Any number of excellent books on the flora and fauna of Nepal, many with helpful diagrams or photographs, may have helped Hari and Lama label entries such as “tree with edible fruit (big)” (page 697) more precisely.

The first three appendices, common to both the shorter and longer versions of the publication, deal with the position of Yohlmo in the Tibeto-Burman language family. These sections detail speaker numbers and the geographical reach of the speech area, and tables of numerals, measurements and temporal divisions as well as a helpful bibliography of sources in all languages are also included. The time depth of this project since its inception 25 years ago is apparent from the units of measurement offered in Section 1.5 of Appendix 2. According to the authors, the counting unit in financial transactions is the ‘half-rupee’, or *mohar* in Nepali, while under Section 1.8 on ‘Coins and Notes’, the first example given is ‘The coin of four *paisās* is called *ana*.’ While Yohlmo communities north of Kathmandu may have been partially insulated from the effects of rampant inflation and the devaluation of the Nepali rupee, the *ana* is most likely as remote a concept for a Helambu youth as the shilling is for a young Englishman.

Despite a wealth of detail on the adjustments and conventions required to render Yohlmo in Devanagāri orthography, there is no discussion on the respective merits and challenges of using this writing system for a Tibeto-Burman language. As Noonan (2005) and Turin (2006) discuss, the decision to use modified Devanagāri to represent unwritten Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal, however well-informed from a linguistic viewpoint, is often politically charged and rarely uncomplicated. An explicit and comprehensive discussion of the pros and cons of Devanagāri versus Tibetan orthography for representing Yohlmo would have been a helpful addition for other linguists involved in documentation projects, as well as for minority language communities of Nepal struggling with the standardisation of their own endangered mother tongues. On this and other issues, Hari and Lama are strangely silent, and the background to their work is left implicit: we learn virtually nothing of the field context or methodology by which the data

were collected (were recordings made, were ‘informants’ paid, did Hari live in the area for long periods of time, who financed the research and publication?), nor of the socio-economic status of the speakers of Yohlmo (do they trade, are they engaged in tourism, how much of what they consume do they produce themselves?). Although we must not expect linguists to be anthropologists, given the linguistic depth and detail of their work, a little more cultural and religious background to contextualise the deities, personal names and rituals referred to in the lexical entries would have been welcome.

While not wanting to detract from this book’s value and the achievements of its compilers, a few other minor quibbles are worth noting. While perfectly readable, if not altogether aesthetically pleasing, the Devanagāri font used to represent both the Yohlmo and the Nepali is prone to orthographic slips in which vowels dissect consonants (I counted four such instances on page 10). I was also intrigued by the suggestion that there are loanwords from Hindi, marked as (H) in the text. Given the northern position of the Yohlmo speech community, and the relative absence of Hindi speakers anywhere near them, I wondered by what process Hari and Lama believe the non-Nepali Indo-Aryan loans to be borrowed from Hindi rather than from geographically closer languages such as Maithili or Bhojpuri.

The dictionary is extremely competitively priced (Nrs. 200 for the short version, Nrs. 300 for the longer one) and well printed by Jagadamba Press, making it affordable to all but the most destitute.

Given that the data which form the main corpus of the dictionary are already in computerised form, and assuming from the price that the authors are not hoping to retire on their royalties, making the data freely available in the form of an online database, perhaps through the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library (THDL) <www.thdl.org>, would be an excellent next step.

In conclusion, the Yohlmo - Nepali - English Dictionary is an impressive resource of great utility to both the people whose language it describes and to the scholarly community. Given my earlier comments on the topic of partnership with the speech community (Turin 2004), I was particularly pleased to note that the inherently collaborative nature of such an enormous undertaking has been fully acknowledged in Hari’s co-authorship with Chhegu Lama, and in a charming footnote on page 699 which is worth citing in full:

In this phonological description, I (Anna Maria Hari) have mainly used ‘we’ when referring to the author, because without my various assistants I could not have gained the knowledge expounded in this description. But for some more personal discoveries ‘I’ seems to be more appropriate.

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