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*Review*

**Grammar of Kharia: A South Munda Language**

By John Peterson

(Brill's Studies in South and Southwest Asian Languages, Volume I)

Leiden and Boston: Brill 2011

ISBN 978-90-04-18720-7

xxiv + 474 pages

Reviewed by Tista Bagchi

# Review

## **A Grammar of Kharia: A South Munda Language**

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*A Grammar of Kharia*, as the author mentions at the outset of his Acknowledgements, "is a thoroughly revised version of the first volume" of the author's *Habilitationsschrift* or "professorial dissertation" (p. xvii). Published in the series *Brill's Studies in South and Southwest Asian Languages* (as a much-expanded version of a shorter grammar that appeared in *The Munda Languages* (edited by Gregory D. S. Anderson, Routledge, 2008)), this is a comprehensive contemporary reference grammar of the Central-South Munda language Kharia, spoken predominantly in the Indian states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa, with outlying communities of speakers in Assam and (in smaller numbers) in West Bengal (primarily in the district of Bankura) and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

A review of a grammar of what is essentially a language spoken in the hills of East-Central Indian states – rather than the Himalayas – in *Himalayan Linguistics* requires some academic (though, in my view, not ideological) justification. From a sociolinguistic perspective, like most Himalayan languages, Kharia, is a language under some threat, perhaps even endangered given that there are 292,000 speakers of the language as reported by the author from the 2005 Ethnologue record. It is heavily influenced by language contact as are its more remote sister languages of the Austro-Asiatic phylum in Southeast Asia. Minor geographical justification can be found as well: the language is spoken by communities that have moved into areas of Assam and northern West Bengal that could, at a stretch, be included in the greater Himalayan regions of Eastern India. In addition, Khasi, historically Kharia's more remote sister, is after all spoken in the Garo-Khasi-Jaintiya Hill region of Meghalaya, which again can be counted as part of the greater Eastern Himalayan regions, albeit at a stretch. However, I reserve detailed comment on any possible historical justification for Kharia to be counted as a "Himalayan" language.

The necessity for such justificatory remarks notwithstanding, *A Grammar of Kharia* is more than just a welcome contribution to the field of Austro-Asiatic linguistics: it is a truly valuable state-of-the-art account of a major Munda language that is, despite the number of its speakers, under threat owing to a number of factors, not least of them political. It is also of interest that Kharia carries distinctive Austroasiatic grammatical features (such as frequent occurrences of the glottal stop and pre-glottalized consonants in the syllable coda, and "movable" subject/agreement clitics that can alternatively ride on negation as well) and rich intricacies of form and meaning that enable the language to house an entire linguistic microcosm within itself, so to speak.

*A Grammar of Kharia* is, in the author's words, "the result of research conducted by the author during five research trips to the state of Jharkhand over the course of nine years, amounting to approximately eight months altogether" (p. 11). It acknowledges earlier works

on Kharia such as Biligiri's (1965) descriptivist account of Kharia (*Kharia: Phonology, Grammar and Vocabulary*, Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, Pune) and Malhotra's (1982) Jawaharlal Nehru University doctoral dissertation on the structure of Kharia. The book is organized into seven detailed chapters, several of which are individually almost the length of a monograph: I. Introduction: The Kharia language; II. Phonology; III. Syntactic atoms; IV. Parts of Speech and the Lexicon; V. The Case-syntagm ("NPs"); VI. The TAM/PERSON-syntagm ("Verbs"); and VII. Syntax. The textual content of the book is preceded by two maps indicating the states and districts of East-Central India where Kharia is spoken, which are useful for readers new to the linguistic geography of South Asian and/or Austro-Asiatic languages. There is an Appendix consisting of the Kharia text "The Nine Totems", and a detailed Bibliography and Indices.

Although there are two major varieties of Kharia, namely, Dudh Kharia and D(h)elki Kharia, the author's research is based on data from Dudh Kharia, in its two major dialectal variants, namely, the (Dudh) Kharia of Simdega and the (Dudh) Kharia of Gumla, both districts of the state of Jharkhand. As regards a possible third variety of Kharia, spoken by the "Hill Kharia" people mentioned by Roy and Roy's (1937) ethnographic overview of the Kharia people (*The Khāriās; Man in India, Ranchi*), the author mentions Malhotra's (1982) reference to the "Sabbar" people among the Hill Kharias speaking some variety of Kharia, but says he found no more conclusive evidence for this putative third variety (pp.5-6, fn. 4).

As the author also notes, many speakers prefer the term *kheriya*, since they feel it to be the more correct term (and as I know from my own experience, the term is preferred among many speakers of Munda languages in West Bengal). As regards the provenance of the term, the author cites Sten Konow's suggestion (cited in Grierson 1906 [1994] *Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. IV: 190) that the term is connected to the Proto-Munda word for 'person' (p. 5). However, the author notes that "although this is uncontroversial in the case of the North Munda languages and peoples, who refer to themselves and their languages as either *hɔɽ* or *ho* (both of which mean 'man, person' in the respective languages), the cognate form in Kharia is *kaɽ*, and there remain a number of problems with such a derivation, especially the aspiration in the name *kharīya/kheriya*. Among a number of other "folk etymologies", the following suggestion seems promising: the name might be from the Kharia word *khoɽi* 'village section', referring to individual sections of multilingual villages in which Kharia-speaking residents often live together. The suggestion that the name is derived from an Indic word for 'white clay, chalk' is also promising, but inconclusive, as the author notes.

In Chapter 2, on the phonology of the language, the author adopts an old-style descriptivist position, in presenting the vowel and consonant inventories of the language in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, respectively. Section 2.3 focuses on syllable structure in Kharia, which is canonically unremarkable in that it is (C)V(C) for native Kharia phonology (V can on occasion be a nasal as well). The CVC structure is subject to certain constraints, the most remarkable of them being (i) the neutralization of the oppositions [ $\pm$ voiced], [ $\pm$ aspirated], and dental/retroflex in the coda, (ii) the occasional occurrence of the glottal stop only non-phonemically in the onset, and (iii) the non-occurrence of any native words with an /s/ or /h/ in the coda. What is novel is the author's definition of the phonological word (in Section 2.5) in terms of the distinctive "low-high" pitch pattern to be found in Kharia, which is otherwise not a tone language. Because pitch patterns are used to define the phonological word, there is occasionally a mismatch between what is considered an integrated morphosyntactic unit (i.e. the semantic base with all its clitics), and what is considered a phonological word. Allowing for such mismatches is not inherently problematic. It is, for instance, in tune with Stephen R. Anderson's and Jerrold M. Sadock's bimodular treatment of clitics. What is also novel is the

author's treatment of the glottal stop [ʔ] – a notable auditory feature of spoken Kharia and interestingly like its more far-flung sister language Khasi – as being a partial allophone of [g] (the former occurring in coda positions and the latter as an onset in the syllable), stopping short of claiming complete allophony for the glottal stop on the grounds that [ʔ] marginally occurs as a causative infix as well. One of the author's claims that might particularly capture the reader's attention is that the pre-glottalized coda-position consonants [ʔb, ʔd, ʔj] are allophones of their non-glottalized counterparts [b, d, j]. The occurrence of these pre-glottalized consonants is so noticeable in Kharia that one is tempted to treat the pre-glottalization as a distinctive phonological feature but evidently that would run counter to the distributional facts. Earlier, in Chapter 1, there is a fairly detailed section on the Devanagari orthography that has been modified for and is now used for Kharia. In this section, additional insights into the phonetics and phonology of fast and slow speech in Kharia are to be found, but to uninitiated readers this section in Chapter 1 may only make sense if it is read after Chapter 2.

As regards the account given for the word morphology and the morphosyntax of Kharia, the author adopts a rather different kind of road map from the typical “beaten path” of descriptivist as well as generativist (more specifically, parametric/minimalist) accounts for so-called “less studied” languages. As I have mentioned above, in Chapter 2 the author presents an empirically supported case for the recognition of phonological words in Kharia on the basis of their pitch contour patterns rather than their internal composition in terms of simple “semantic bases” (roughly, stems, as the author redefines these in Section 1.4.1) with or without the clitics hosted by them. This is a special contribution made by the author to the understanding of something rather fundamental to Central-South Munda phonology with the help of the kind of precise digital tools available to acoustic phonetics today, which previous grammarians of Kharia have not been able to or cared to use. However, somewhat orthogonally to this, the author goes on to pick a number of clitics within phonological words and re-labels these clitics as “syntactic atoms” which are his main focus in Chapter 3. (Clitics predominate over affixes in Kharia. The author claims there are just a few derivational affixes, including a couple of infixes, the latter being a distinctively Austroasiatic feature.)

The truly intriguing categorial divisions that the author claims for Kharia are, however, the two major kinds of “syntagmas” that are to be recognized for the language rather than traditional divisions of the lexicon into, for example, nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The description of syntagmas is primarily based on the Kharia of Simdega (though the Kharia of Gumla, he admits in Chapter 4, shows certain restrictions on lexical items – nominals – that can occur in case-syntagmas while all kinds of semantic heads – read lexical items – can occur in syntagmas of the other kind in this dialect). While initially this may strike the reader as idiosyncratic, the sheer complexity of cross-categorization presented by Kharia data gradually allows the reader to see the point of it.

In Chapter 4 by way of introduction and then in Chapter 6 (in Section 6.6.2.1) in a fuller description, the author describes the unusual category of the standalone “verbal-noun” using terminology from traditional Arab grammar (i.e. *masdar*). This description provides an interesting way to account for the behavior of certain Kharia “verbs” – TAM/PERSON syntagmas. In addition, the author uses the PERSON rubric to cover a number of other intricate and often cross-cutting oppositions – between human and nonhuman, between honorific and nonhonorific, and between inclusive and exclusive first-person plurals, besides the singular/dual/plural distinction – that are to be found in the Kharia pronominal as well as subject-enclitic systems that co-occur with the Tense-Aspect-Mood (TAM) markers. The latter offer much by way of future prospects for a more comprehensive uncovering of

particularly the semantics (and pragmatics) of tense, aspect, and mood in Kharia. Also of particular interest to both syntax and the semantics of grammatical relations is the major distinction between the active and the middle voice to be found in this language.

Chapter 7, on Kharia syntax, is bound to be of interest to syntacticians and formal semanticists as it describes a wide range of structures and their complexities. Here, however, one would have liked to see a bit more by way of analysis. Given the fairly sophisticated conceptual foundations for the morphosyntax that the author carefully builds up in the earlier chapters, the reader is left expecting a bit more by way of how syntactic subordination, for instance, is structurally supported (or otherwise) by one or more *masdar* forms of the TAM/PERSON-syntagmas in the language.

The treatment of information-structure markers (i.e., general, contrastive, and additive focus clitics), earlier introduced in Chapter 3, Section 3.1.1 as “pragmatic markers”, is somewhat fuller than in other comparable grammatical treatments of this as well as other Austroasiatic languages, additionally supported by exemplars of their occurrences in pieces of discourse that provide the “settings” for the uses of these information-structure clitics as inter-sentential pragmatic markers.

I would like to state in conclusion that, notwithstanding my occasional criticisms of some of the finer points, this volume is not only a welcome addition to serious scholarship focused on indigenous languages of South Asia and the Himalayan region or to Austroasiatic linguistics overall (beyond the strict geographical boundaries of the subcontinent), but a highly laudable exemplar of thorough grammatical description based on meticulous (and respectful) linguistic documentation. In my view, it has also much to offer to practitioners of linguistic analysis who adopt rather more overtly theoretical approaches, by way of the sheer richness and intricacy of the challenges that the Kharia language poses, which the author has so ably captured in this landmark volume.

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