LAMJUNG YOLMO: A DIALECT OF YOLMO, ALSO
KNOWN AS HELAMBU SHERPA

Lauren Gawne

gawnel@unimelb.edu.au

This article is a brief introduction to the previously
undocumented language Lamjung Yolmo. This article will
present basic ethnographic information about the community
and an initial comparison of Lamjung Yolmo and closely related
languages will be made. The documentation work that is being
undertaken will also be outlined.

1 Introduction

Lamjung Yolmo is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in
Lamjung district of Nepal. It is most likely a dialect of Yolmo
(also referred to as Helambu Sherpa), which is spoken in and
around the Helambu valley northeast of Kathmandu. It is also
closely related to Kagate. This paper is the product of an
initial field investigation into Lamjung Yolmo conducted
September-December 2009. This paper will provide
ethnographic information about the speakers of Lamjung
Yolmo. An initial comparison between Lamjung Yolmo and
closely related languages will be made. Finally, the work
being undertaken to document this language will be outlined.

2 Lamjung Yolmo: the Language and its speakers

Lamjung Yolmo originates in four culturally homogeneous
villages 3 hours walk northwest of Besisahar in the Lamjung
district of Nepal. Lamjung Yolmo speakers are
homogeneously Tibetan Buddhist and many speakers take the
surname Lama.

Lamjung Yolmo speakers generally agree that their
community originates in the migration of a group of Yolmo
people from the Sindhupalchok and Nuwakot districts of
Nepal, some 200 kilometres to the east, around the Helambu
valley. This migration is said to have taken place around five
to six generations ago, although there is no definitive date.
While Thurgood (2003:5) notes that it is dangerous to rely on
folklore when working with any Sino-Tibetan language, the
similarity between the language and culture of the two groups
lends sufficient weight to the Lamjung Yolmo speakers' claims.

Lamjung Yolmo speakers are occasionally referred to as
‘Kagate’, although they should not be confused with the
Kagate of Ramechhap, with whom they share this name as
well as a common origin (see §3 below). This is a reference to
the profession of paper making that Lamjung Yolmo speakers
undertake. Papermaking is considered to be a low caste
occupation in the strict Hindu caste system that exists in
Nepal. It seems that while the Yolmo in the Helambu area are
of a relatively high social standing (Clarke, 1980b; 1990),
those who left the area do not hold a similar social standing in
their new environments. Whether this reflects their historic
social position within the Helambu society, or came about as a
result of travelling has not been established.

The area Lamjung Yolmo speakers now live in is heavily
agricultural, with rice and potatoes being primary crops.
Surrounding villages are populated by Gurungs, Tamangs,
Chetri, Brahmin and, increasingly, retired soldiers of the UK
Ghurka regiment. Lamjung Yolmo speakers do not use their
language with outsiders, instead resorting to Nepali, and
occasionally Gurung.

Gauging speaker numbers is a difficult task. There has been a
lack of population retention in the villages in Lamjung in
recent years. Many have left to seek employment

1 This is the revised version of the paper presented at the 30th
Annual Conference of Linguistic Society of Nepal held at Kathmandu, 26-27
November, 2009.

opportunities in larger cities of Nepal, such as Besisahar, Pokhara and Kathmandu, or overseas, with Israel and various Arab countries being popular destinations. Others have moved to the Terai, further south in Nepal, where farming is easier and the weather is less harsh. Community members do not always leave as family units, quite often the male will leave to find employment leaving his wife and children in the village, which results in the majority of those still resident in the home villages being predominantly female. This is a pattern found in many of the villages in the area according to data from the 2001 census extracted by Digital Himalaya (2010). To give one example of the effect of migration on village life, one village that had a population of 64 families 30 years ago now has 4 families remaining, only one of those with children. Another one of the four villages has suffered a similar fate, however the two remaining villages are in a stronger position with some 20-30 families between them, and strong evidence of language transmission to children.

In regards to language use, as Desjarlais (2003:14) also notes for Yolmo spoken in Helambu, speakers frequently switch between Yolmo and Nepali. More frequently, Nepali is also more commonly being used in the home and with children. This appears to be especially true of those that have moved away from Yolmo-speaking villages.

Given the population movement and reduction of domains in which Lamjung Yolmo is being used the best we can do is establish a speaker population of anywhere from 500-1500 speakers. This figure is largely dependent on whether those who have left their villages still use their mother tongue, and the level of intergeneration transmission.

There is no known previous documentation of the Lamjung Yolmo. There has been work done with the main body of Yolmo speakers in the Sindhupalchok and Nuwakot districts, with a dictionary (Hari and Lama, 2004) and forthcoming grammar (Hari n.d.). There was also work undertaken on Kagate in the 1970s with work being published on the phonology and discourse of the language (Höhlig and Hari 1976 and Höhlig 1978 respectively).

3 Comparison of Lamjung Yolmo and related languages

Lamjung Yolmo is most closely related to Yolmo (also known as Helambu Sherpa, Ethnologue code SCP) and Kagate (Ethnologue code SYW). There are estimated to be between 10,000 to 50,000 speakers of Yolmo (Hari and Lama, 2004:702-03), and around 1000 speakers of Kagate (Höhlig and Hari, 1976).

The oral history of the migration of Lamjung Yolmo speakers from the Helambu area is reflected in that of the Kagate of the Ramechhap district (Höhlig and Hari, 1976). Their stories are almost identical, except that while the focus language community of this paper moved about 200 kilometers west of the Helambu valley, the Kagate moved almost the same distance to the east, and settled in the Ramechhap district. Both groups left at around the same time (5-6 generations ago).

Given their common history, we would expect a strong level of similarity between the Yolmo of the Helambu area and the diaspora communities that have developed in Ramechhap and Lamjung. Ethnologue (Lewis, 2009) states on the Helambu Sherpa information page that the language is not mutually intelligible with Kagate, however Hari (n.d.:1), who has worked extensively with both languages, argues that ‘to quite a large extent they are mutually intelligible dialects.’

Impressionistically, there appears to be a high level of lexical and syntactic similarity. One clear difference between Lamjung Yolmo and the main community of Yolmo speakers is the lack of alternating verb stems (Hari and Lama,
There are, of course, some limitations to this data. Firstly, this project is focused on Lamjung Yolmo, and so the data for the other languages was less easy to access and validate. Secondly, this is only a small-scale manual analysis of the cross-linguistic lexical variability and thus may not be a strong measure of the mutual intelligibility of these languages.

Given the high level of lexical similarity between Lamjung Yolmo and the main group of Yolmo and the oral history of the Lamjung community, it is likely more correct to say that Lamjung Yolmo is a dialect of the major group of Yolmo speakers, rather than a separate language. This appears to also be likely true for Kagate based on the above data, however it is often referred to as a separate language due to its different name and prior attention in linguistic publication. In regards to speaker attitudes, Lamjung Yolmo speakers I have met so far generally consider themselves to speak a variety of Yolmo, or a variety of Lama Bhasa – that is, the language of Tibetan Buddhist people. There appears to be no general attitude that they speak a different language, but rather that they speak a dialect of some larger body of languages.

As a side note, recent fieldwork carried out by students of Tribhuvan University as part of the Nepal Linguistic Survey and presented at the LSN annual conference in 2009 indicates there is also a pocket of Yolmo speakers living in the Ilam district in the very far east corner of Nepal (Thokar, 2009). Thus the spread of this language through isolated diaspora communities appears to not have been a one-off event.

4 Documentation of Lamjung Yolmo

The documentation of Lamjung Yolmo is currently being undertaken as part of the author’s PhD. This project consists of the production of a short grammar of the language, and more detailed focus on the copular system of the language, which, like in related Bodic languages such as Sherpa (Kelly,
Lamjung Yolmo (Tournarde and Dorje, 2003) is the
source of much epistemic modal information. Community
materials, including the production of a small dictionary, are
also being made at the community’s request.

5 Conclusion

This paper has been a brief introduction to the Tibeto-Burman
language Lamjung Yolmo. This small group of speakers is a
timely reminder that Nepal’s rich tapestry of languages is
made more complex by the movement of people and the
establishment of independent diaspora communities.

References

International and The University of Texas.

Clarke, G. E. 1980. 'A Helambu History'. Journal of the Nepal

Clarke, G. E. 1990. 'Ideas of merit (Bsod-nams), virtue (Dge-
ba), blessing (byin-rlabs) and material prosperity (rlen-
'brel) in Highland Nepal'. Journal of the Anthropological

Desjarlais, R. R. 2003. Sensory biographies: lives and deaths

February, 2010].

Hari, A. M. n.d.. Yohlmo Sketch Grammar.

śabdakośa (Yohlmo-Nepali-English dictionary).
Kathmandu: Central Dept. of Linguistics, Tribhuvan
University.

Höhlig, M. 1978. 'Speaker orientation in Syuwa (Kagate) '.
Papers on discourse. J. E. Grimes. Kathmandu: Summer

Höhlig, M. and A. M. Hari. 1976. 'Kagate phonemic
summary'. Kathmandu: Summer Institute of Linguistics
Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies.

Kelly, B. F. 2004. 'A grammar of Sherpa. Tibeto-Burman
languages of Nepal: Manange and Sherpa. C. Genetti (ed.)

February 2009].

Thokar, R. 2009. 'Linguistic fieldwork in Jhapa and Ilam
districts'. A paper presented in the 30th Annual conference

Thurgood, G. 2003. 'A subgrouping of the Sino-Tibetan
languages: the interaction between language contact,
change, and inheritance'. The Sino-Tibetan languages. G.
Thurgood and R. J. LaPolla (eds.). London, Routledge: 3-
21.

Tibetan: Language and civilisation. Ithaca: Snowlion
Publications.