

## LAMJUNG YOLMO: A DIALECT OF YOLMO, ALSO KNOWN AS HELAMBU SHERPA<sup>1</sup>

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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.

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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

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,

2004:830) in the Lamjung variety. There are also some variations in the copular system of the two groups of speakers.

A small-scale lexical survey has been undertaken, following the method outlined in Blair (1990:26-34) to allow for a stronger quantitative understanding of the degree of lexical similarity. This survey technique involves lexical level comparison where words are assessed as being ‘similar’ or ‘different’ based on their degree of phonological similarity. The 100-word Swadesh list was used for data. Lamjung Yolmo data was collected during the primary field trip, the Yolmo data was taken from the Yolmo dictionary (Hari and Lama, 2004) and the Kagate data was from an elicitation session with a speaker undertaken by myself and supplemented by the data in Höhlig and Hari (1976).

The lexical similarity between the three languages (Yolmo, Lamjung Yolmo and Kagate) is shown below, ordered from least to most similar.

Table1: Lexical similarity (shown in percentages)

Languages compared	Lexical similarity
Yolmo and Kagate	79%
Yolmo and Lamjung Yolmo	85%
Lamjung Yolmo and Kagate	88%

The first thing to note is that all three have a very high lexical similarity. This is evident compared to other Tibeto-Burman languages that Yolmo is often discussed as being similar to; according to Ethnologue (Lewis, 2009) Yolmo has a lexical similarity of 65% with Lhasa Tibetan and 61% with Sherpa. Also interesting to note is that Kagate and Lamjung Yolmo have a higher lexical affinity with each other than with the main body of Yolmo speakers, which may lend weight to the folk history of their con-current migration.

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 Tribhuvaun 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,

2004) and Lhasa Tibetan (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.

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