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Languages of the World: Kusunda

Uday Raj Aaley and Tim Bodt discuss the Kusunda language of Nepal and some of its highly unique features.

Where is it spoken?

Kusunda, or *gilengdəy məhyeq gipən* ('language of the kings of the forest') as it is known to the speakers, was once spoken across Western and Central Nepal. However, at present the Kusunda tribe has just 150 members, living in the Dang, Pyuthan, Rolpa, Surkhet, Arghakhanchi, Kapilvastu, Gorkha and Tanahu districts. Even more staggering is the fact that only two Kusunda, one living in Dang district and the other one in Rolpa district, can speak the Kusunda language.

What kind of language is it?

Like Basque in Europe, Kusunda is a language isolate. It has no known relation to any other language or language family. This includes the main language families of Asia, such as Tibeto-Burman (also known as Sino-Tibetan and including languages such as Chinese, Burmese, Tibetan and most of the languages of Nepal and the Himalayas), Indo-European (languages such as Hindi and Nepali, but also English) and Dravidian (languages such as Tamil). Several theories have been put forward regarding the affiliation of Kusunda, but none has yet convinced linguists.

Where did it come from?

We simply don't know. Some have proposed that the Kusunda are the remnants of one of the early migration streams out of Africa, for example the one that brought humans through the Near East and the Indian subcontinent to Australia. They may have inhabited a much larger geographical area, but were gradually replaced or absorbed by speakers of other languages. Perhaps we can still find traces of languages related to Kusunda in contemporary languages spoken in South Asia and the Himalayan region.

Who speaks it?

There are only two women who speak the language, one aged in her eighties and one in her fifties. A few people in their forties, fifties and sixties know some basic vocabulary. All the other 150 people that ethnically identify as Kusunda speak other languages: mainly Nepali, but also Magar. Even the few people that speak Kusunda are bilingual in Nepali. They have to be, because until they met each other, they had no one to talk to in their own language!

How has Kusunda survived?

The last Kusunda speakers managed to retain their language into the 19th and 20th century. They lived in small, isolated family and clan groups in the jungles of Central and Western Nepal, leading a nomadic life, collecting food from the forest, and making everything they needed from what they could find in the jungle. Occasionally they traded forest produce for basic essentials. This meant there was not much need to communicate with other people. Being settled in one place, they continued to speak their own language. But even the early British explorers and linguists who reported on them indicated that there were so few speakers living in such scattered communities that the language would soon become extinct.

As Nepal's sedentary population increased, there was an increasing pressure on the jungles in which the Kusunda lived. The area in which they could move became more and more fragmented. Their chances of meeting other Kusunda decreased, and slowly they had no choice but to marry people of other ethnicities, to speak other languages, and to settle down in villages. In the 1950s and '60s, Nepal's forest policies nationalised ownership and restricted user rights of the forests, forcing Kusunda groups to abandon their nomadic lifestyle. Hence, the shift from Kusunda to other languages was triggered by external factors.

Is Kusunda safe, endangered, moribund or extinct?

For the past 150 years, ever since the first report on Kusunda in the mid-19th century, Kusunda has been deemed moribund. After the death of one well-

known speaker several years ago, media reports stated that the language was extinct. But, against all odds, the language has survived. The Kusunda people have hope that, with help from the Nepal government and the international linguistic community, their language can be brought back from the brink of extinction.

Since the late 1950s, several linguists have partially documented and described the language. More recently, the US-based Endangered Language Fund, the European Research Commission and a small crowd-funding action have raised funds to make video- and audio-recordings of speakers, which have been made available online to encourage further analysis of the language. The Language Commission of the Government of Nepal is now supporting Kusunda language classes, in which the language is taught to ethnic Kusunda children. These efforts may prevent the language from becoming extinct.

What is it like?

Kusunda is unlike any other language of South Asia. It is characterised by sounds that are hardly found in the area, such as uvular plosives and a uvular nasal. For 'wind', Kusunda will say *qay* [qəj], for 'branch' *omog* [ɔ.mɔq ~ ɔ.mɔχ], for 'to be not' *qhaw* [qʰəw], for 'macaque' *hago* [hɑ:kʰɔ: ~ hɑ:ɔ:], for 'to die' *og* [ɔk ~ ɔ], and for 'to sit, stay, live' *han* [hɛŋ ~ hã:]. The voiced uvular and the uvular nasal have now basically disappeared from the language, but we can still recognise that they were once pronounced. Uvular stops are relatively common in Caucasian, Semitic and Pacific Northwest languages, but basically absent from South Asia.

Another unusual feature of Kusunda is its person-marking system. The Kusunda verb encodes agent/subject (whether it is first, second or third person and whether it is singular 'I', 'thou' or 'he/she/it', or plural 'we', 'you' or 'they') and tense/aspect information (whether it is past, present or future, perfective or imperfective). Hence, Kusunda speakers need to identify the object/patient of a transitive verb, but do not need to explicitly state the subject/agent of a transitive verb. So, *edu* already means 'I will give', and through adding a pronoun with the dative marker *-da*, a complete sentence is derived: *nenda edu* ('I will give thou'), *ginda edu* ('I will give him/her/them'),

tokda edu ('I will give us') and *nokda edu* ('I will give you'). By changing *edu* to the form of 'to give' for the other persons, we get sentences with different subjects: *tenda egu* ('(S)he will give me'), *ginda etek* ('We will give him/her/them'), *tokda enek* ('You will give us') and *nokda egək* ('They will give you').

An intransitive verb form, on the other hand, can form a complete sentence without an explicitly stated pronoun, because the person is included in the verbal form itself. For example, *tsipdu* means 'I will sleep', *tsiptn* means 'I am sleeping' and *tsipn* means 'I slept'. On the other hand, *nipdu* means 'You will sleep', *gipdu* '(S)he will sleep', *tsipdek* 'We will sleep', *nipdek* 'You will sleep' and *gipdek* 'They will sleep'. The forms *tsipdu* and *tsipdek* include the pronoun *tsi* ('I'), the forms *nipdu* and *nipdek* include the pronoun *nu* ('thou'), and the forms *gipdu* and *gipdek* include the pronoun *gina* ('(s)he/they').

Kusunda in five minutes

How are you? *Nu we nətin?*

I am fine. *Tsi we tsi.*

Thank you. *We əgən* (lit. 'did well').

I love you. *Tsi we ətən.*

Come and eat jungle fowl meat! *Aga, gilang tap əmba am!*

I will teach you Kusunda language. *Tsi nenda geməhyeq gipən ləmba ədu.*

We are the kings of the forest. *Tok giləng məhyeq.*

We do not drink milk. *Tok əmbu təmdaw.*

We stayed in the cave. *Tok sudung sadang.*

The shaman cured us. *Dangbey we əgən.*

We danced in the jungle. *Tok gilangga leymada.*

The women begged in the villages. *Nyaggdi getse lahangga ay ənda dəgey.*

Men played the musical drum. *Maktse dongdzi əgən.*

Our lean-tos were small. *Tigi uhi hunkun tsiuda.*

Find out more

Online

zenodo.org/record/3401526#.XfS74dVKjX4

Books

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Uday Raj Aaley is an educator and free-lance researcher from Nepal. He has worked mainly on the Tharu and Kusunda communities, describing their language and culture. He is currently teaching the Kusunda language to Kusunda children.

Tim Bodt is a postdoctoral student at the School for Oriental and African Studies, London. He has lived in and extensively travelled through the Eastern Himalayas, including Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, and speaks several of the languages there fluently.



Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda creating a model of a traditional Kusunda lean-to hut dwelling.



Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda performing the *qawli* ritual for appeasing the jungle

spirits.



Recording the last two Kusunda speakers.