

Shamanic languages as windows into Tibeto-Burman history?

The case of Kera'a

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Many aspects of the genealogical and contact history of Tibeto-Burman remain elusive due to insufficient research, language endangerment, a paucity of materials of temporal depth, and significant linguistic diversity. While there is some consensus on immediate sister-relations between individual languages, many higher-level sub-groupings are contested (see Post & Burling 2017, van Driem's (2001, 2015) "fallen leaves" model). This paper argues for an inside-out approach that focuses on the most conservative varieties within languages as bridging stones to other languages on which higher-level analyses may be built (see also [anonymized reference] on conservative clanlects). Numerous tribal societies of the Eastern Himalayas employ special languages in Shamanic rituals and it has been hypothesized that these preserve earlier linguistic stages (e.g. Stephen Morey, p.c., for Tangsa varieties). Anthropological evidence also suggests a certain time-depth given shared elements across Shamanic rites such as 'journey of the soul' chants that feature in death rituals in the wider region (Blackburn 2005, Morey 2011, Huber & Blackburn (eds) 2012, Dele 2018, Gaenszle (ed.) 2019). This talk focuses on the Shamanic language of the Kera'a (or 'Idu Mishmi', iso code: *clk*) and its relations with modern spoken Kera'a and possibly other languages.

The Kera'a live in the districts of Lower Dibang Valley and Dibang Valley of northeastern Arunachal Pradesh in far northeastern India, a region also claimed by China (see [anonymized reference] for an overview of the language and its speakers). The language used in the shamanic ritual is referred to as *igu ekobe* ('Igu language') or simply as *igu*, the term also used to designate the shaman him- or herself as well as the shamanic ritual. Like modern spoken Kera'a, Igu is endangered with few young people becoming shamans nowadays, despite rituals still being commonly performed and few Kera'a having converted to Christianity or Hinduism.

The corpus collected for this study consists of approximately 8 hours of audio and video recordings of the Ayi and Kaliwu rituals. Both seek to heal illness and petition for improved well-being. The first is more elaborate, lasting several hours, the second between about half an hour and an hour. The corpus contains recordings of one Ayi and three Kaliwu rituals, two of the latter performed by the same shaman. Extensive audio and video recordings of transcription and translation sessions add valuable information on content, language, symbolic meanings and mythological background.

This talk offers observations on how Igu relates to modern spoken Kera'a and other languages in its phonology, lexicon and syntax. Preliminary analysis suggests that a substantial amount of vocabulary in Igu lacks obvious etymologies in the local sub-branch Kera'a-Tawrä. We outline results from a comparative analysis of the same shaman chanting the same ritual, different shamans performing the same ritual, and of language structures across different rituals. In our analysis, we take into account features of traditional oral performance and how they shape linguistic patterns (e.g. 'speaking in pairs', Fox (ed.) 1988, Ong 1982).

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