

Daniel McCloy

Professor Mizuki Miyashita

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## **Limbu: A Sketch of an Endangered Language**

### ***Abstract***

*This paper provides an overview of the Limbu language of Nepal, with particular focus on the issues of Reversing Language Shift (RLS). It also includes an overview of the language status and situation, and a brief linguistic sketch of the language itself. It reviews Webster's (1999) assessment of RLS activities in Limbu.*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

All the minority languages of Nepal are at risk. Limbu is better situated than most other minority languages, but the process of language shift to Nepali has already made substantial inroads among the Limbu people. Nepali is the *lingua franca*, and enjoyed many years of being the only official language of Nepal. Until the 1990 revolution, minority languages were officially treated as threats to national unity. Since that time, government policy has been to promote minority languages, (Webster 1999) but very little practical or effective work is being done to reverse language shift among the minority languages.

#### **1.1 Motivation of Language Choice**

I have a personal interest in Limbu, as my research into automated cross-language adaptation has relied on pre-parsed and analyzed Limbu texts. Up until starting this paper, I had not had the opportunity to study beyond a basic overview of Limbu. This paper will provide that overview, and take my study much further.

## 1.2 Language Name

The language is typically referred to as "Limbu", although the indigenous term is *yakthuṅbapān* or *yakthuṅpān*. The term *tajeṅpān* refers to common Limbu, while *mundumban* refers to a priestly high-form, which is also known by some older people. Limbus may refer to themselves as *yakthu* or *yakthuṅba*. The region in which they live is known as *pallo-kirānt* ('Far Kirant') or *limbuwān*, 'Land of the Limbus'. (Grimes 1996)

## 1.3 Language Classification

Limbu is a member of the Kiranti group of Tibeto-Burman. Within this group it is the prototypical Eastern variety. Weidert and Subba (1985) sketch a rough division of Kiranti languages as shown in Figure 1.1. (A political map of the Limbu area will be presented in the Section 1.4.)



Figure 1.1 *A Rough Division of Kiranti Languages*

Kiranti itself falls within the Eastern Himalayan subgroup of Bodic languages in the Tibeto-Burman family.

## 1.4 Population and Location

According to the 1991 census report, there were 238,088 Limbu speakers in Nepal, comprising 1.37% of Nepal's population. Limbu is also spoken in India and Bhutan, and there

may even be migrant workers in Myanmar. The total population in all countries is 266,000 or more. (Grimes 2000) This paper, however, will focus on the Limbu of Nepal. The traditional Limbu area is shown in Figure 1.2 below.



Figure 1.2. *Map of Limbuwan, the Limbu Area*

Limbus live in the middle hills at elevations from 2,500 to 5,000 feet (Grimes 2000), between the plains of the *Terai* to the South and the Himalayan Mountains to the North. They are traditionally farmers, growing corn, millet and rice, and raising livestock, including pigs. (Weidert and Subba 1985) Only 27% of Limbu men and women have completed 5 years of formal education. Of these, only one-ninth are women. (Grimes 2000)

### 1.5 Language Variation

The Limbu "language" is comprised of many different varieties, which are often categorized into four "dialects": *Taplejung*, *Panthare*, *Phedappe*, and *Chattare*. There is about

80% to 90% inherent intelligibility between these dialects. Chattare is poorly understood by speakers of other dialects. (Grimes 2000)

## 1.6 Language Contact and Resources

The history of Limbu data collection dates back to 1793, when William Kirkpatrick visited Nepal and collected a 63-item Limbu wordlist. (van Driem 2001) The first major linguistic work devoted to Limbu was H.W.R. Senior's *A Vocabulary of the Limbu Language of Eastern Nepal*, published in 1908. (Weidert and Subba 1985) Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (1909) also contained a specimen of Limbu with a grammatical discussion. (van Driem 2001) None of these early works transcribed the forms adequately. In 1961,<sup>1</sup> the Limbu scholar Iman Singh Chemjong produced a Limbu dictionary, followed in 1970 by his 66-page *Kirat Byakaran*, which illustrated many facets of Limbu grammar, and revised the traditional orthography. (van Driem 2001: 667, 677) The first thorough attempt at describing the grammar and lexicon of Limbu was *Concise Limbu Grammar and Dictionary* by A. Weidert and B. Subba in 1985. In 1987, George van Driem's *Grammar of Limbu* provided a more in-depth analysis of Limbu grammar. Boyd Michailovsky also wrote a number of papers describing grammatical and phonological phenomena of Limbu.

Of particular relevance to the issues of language development, in 1999 the Royal Nepal Academy published a paper by Jeffrey Webster that examined Limbu language promotion with reference to Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). The Royal Nepal Academy is also preparing a Limbu-Nepali-English dictionary.

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<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps early 1962. The citation date is 2018 VS.

<sup>2</sup> The information in Table 2.2 is a composite of Weidert's sound inventory table and his phoneme table. I have replaced his older phonetic characters with standard IPA characters here. Any inaccuracies in the conversion are my own, and not Weidert's.

## II. PHONOLOGY

*The Limboo language is totally different from the Lepcha, with less of the z in it, and more labials and palatals, hence more pleasing.*

— Joseph Dalton Hooker (1854, quoted in van Driem 2001)

Weidert and Subba (1985) provide the following sound inventory of Limbu.<sup>2</sup> The characters shown in grey are not included in their chart of primary phonemes, as they are only variants of the primary phonemes, or used in borrowings.

CONSONANTS	labial	dental	retroflex	palatal	velar	glottal
stop, voiceless unaspirated	p	t	ʈ	c	k	ʔ
stop, voiceless aspirated	p <sup>h</sup>	t <sup>h</sup>	ʈ <sup>h</sup>	c <sup>h</sup>	k <sup>h</sup>	
stop, voiced unaspirated	b	d	ɖ	ɟ	g	
stop, voiced “aspirated”	b̤	d̤	ɖ̤		g̤	
nasal	m	n			ŋ	
fricative		s				h
flap			ɽ			
trill		r				
lateral		l				
glide	w			j		

VOWELS	front		back		DIPHTHONGS
High	i i:		u u:		
Mid-close	e e:		o o:		ɛi̯ ɔi̯
Mid-open	ɛ ɛ:		ɔ ɔ:		
Low			a a:		

Table 2.1 *Sound Inventory and Phonemes of Limbu*

## Voiced and Aspirated

Throughout South Asia, across language families, it is common for the sound inventory of oral stops to be presented in a four-way pattern: *voiced* versus *voiceless* combined with *aspirated* versus *unaspirated*. This configuration is not only a feature within the Tibeto-Burman family, but it is also well-documented among Indo-Aryan languages, including Nepali (Genetti 1991). That this phenomenon crosses the boundaries of language families is evidence of the phonological influence these genetically-unrelated languages have had on each other.

Of particular interest, however, is the "voiced aspirated" series, as it is traditionally referred to. By definition, voicing and aspiration cannot actually co-occur. Aspiration is defined as '*delayed voice onset*', that is, voicing is delayed until production of the following vowel is well underway. How, then, can a voiced plosive be aspirated? As the phonetic characters in Table 2.1 indicate, this series of "aspirated voiced" plosives is actually a series of *breathy* plosives. The vowel that follows such a consonant, rather than having delayed voicing, is *murmured*. Both breathiness and delayed voicing are based on having a more relaxed state of the glottis (McCloy 2000), so perhaps "relaxed glottis" or [+slack] would describe this contrast more accurately than the traditional term "aspirated" does.

Limbu offers greater justification for paralleling the aspirated and breathy series than Nepali does. The inventory of Nepali oral stops corresponds very closely to that of Limbu. However, in Nepali, the breathy series constitutes a set of independent phonemes. The relationship between the aspirated and breathy series is merely a matter of symmetry in the phonemic inventory: For every aspirated oral stop, there exists a breathy oral stop at the same point of articulation, but no phonological rule links

the aspirated and the breathy stop together. Limbu, on the other hand, demonstrates a direct phonological relationship between the aspirated and breathy series. According to Weidert and Subba (1985), the voiced unaspirated stops are variants of the voiceless unaspirated stops, and the murmured stops are variants of the voiceless aspirated stops. The voiced variants appear after a nasal or glottal stop, or intervocalically. (van Driem 1987) For example, in contexts where /k/ surfaces as [g], likewise /k<sup>h</sup>/ surfaces as [g]. Thus, Limbu clearly justifies analyzing the breathy series as the voiced counterpart to the aspirated series, highlighting the value of encapsulating a single distinctive feature.

### **Vowel Length, Nasalization, and Tone**

Vowel length is distinctive in Limbu, except for the mid-close vowels /e/ and /o/. (Weidert and Subba 1985) Van Driem (1987) also posits the existence of the central mid vowel /ə/ as a phoneme, albeit rare, and states that this, too, does not partake in length opposition.

In Nepali, on the other hand, vowel length is not distinctive. In written Nepali, a contrast is indeed made between short and long forms of /i/ and /u/, but this is merely a spelling convention, and does not affect spoken pronunciation.<sup>3</sup>

Nepali does make use of a different distinctive feature for vowels: nasalization. (Genetti 1991) Nasalization is fully contrastive for all Nepali vowels.

In Limbu, vowel nasalization is not distinctive except in a small number of Nepali loan words. (van Driem 1987)

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<sup>3</sup> Presumably, the contrast exists in the Devanagiri writing system because some other Indo-Aryan language (perhaps Sanskrit?) made a phonemic distinction for vowel length on the close vowels. Whether by direct inheritance or by indirect borrowing (perhaps from Hindi?), written Nepali maintains this convention, even though in the modern spoken language there is no length contrast in the pronunciation. There may, however, be homophones that utilize this orthographic distinction for contrastive purposes in writing.

Neither Limbu nor Nepali has phonemic tone.

### **The Retroflex Series**

The retroflex series of stops [ʈ, ʈʰ, ɖ, ɖʱ] and the retroflex flap [ɽ] are not native to Limbu, but are common Indo-Aryan features that have been introduced through Nepali. These occur in Nepali loan words or on onomatopoeic expressions. (Weidert and Subba 1985)

### **Voicing and Gemination**

Limbu phonology militates against intervocalic voiceless oral stops. Two strategies for eliminating this occurrence are voicing (as previously discussed) and gemination. In gemination, the stop is 'doubled.' Phonetically, this is realized as the stop being held for a longer period of time before its release. Michailovsky (1986) demonstrates that the rules that govern whether gemination or voicing will apply hinge on issues of syllable structure.

Consonant length is distinctive in Nepali too, but I have not heard any claim that a long consonant in Nepali is the result of a gemination rule.

### **Other Influences of Nepali on Limbu Phonology**

Weidert and Subba (1985) note that the influence of Nepali has strengthened the position of the trill [r] as an independent phoneme in Limbu, as opposed to being a mere variant of /t/.

He further notes that a mismatch between the Nepali and Limbu vowel systems sometimes impacts pronunciation. Table 2.2 below depicts the positions of vowels in each language's vowel space as described by Weidert and Subba (1985: 27). According

to Weidert and Subba, this mismatch sometimes results in "difficulty in properly distinguishing mid vowel height in Limbu words. In a few cases the mid vowels already follow the Nepali way of pronunciation."

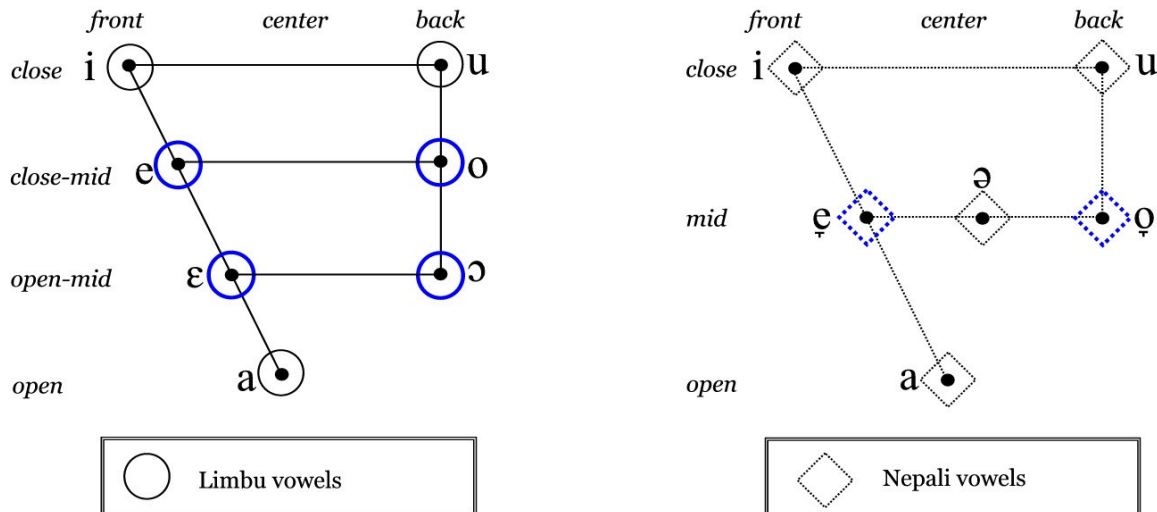


Table 2.2 *Comparison of Nepali and Limbu Vowel Positions*

Perhaps another influence on Limbu phonology from Nepali can be traced in the case of the voiced bilabial stop /b/. Van Driem (1987: 11) initially reported that /b/ was an independent phoneme, as demonstrated by the minimal pair *la:b* 'moon' and *la:p* 'wing'. Later, he (2001: 676) clarified that indeed this was an innovation of the otherwise conservative Phedappe dialect, the result of abbreviation. In the case of the above example, the traditional Limbu word for 'moon' is *la:ba*. This example is not a singularity, as some other native Limbu words have also undergone the same process. Van Driem (1987: 3) also revealed that /b/ is most frequently found in loan words. It seems to me that perhaps the reason that abbreviation was possible (without loss of distinction) was precisely because loan words from Nepali had already given /b/ a boost towards phonemic status in the language.

### III. MORPHOLOGY AND SYNTAX

There is a vast amount that could be mentioned in an overview of Limbu grammar. In this paper I will touch on only a selected subset, and provide some reference to any corresponding features in Nepali.

#### 3.1 Constituent Order

Limbu has SOV constituent order.

- (a) *'He opens the door'* (Webster 1997)
- |        |             |         |         |
|--------|-------------|---------|---------|
| khe-1E | lamdetʔl-in | hɔnd-u: |         |
| he-ERG | door        | -DEF    | open-3P |
| S      | O           |         | V       |

This is true also of Nepali. (Genetti 1991) In fact, virtually all languages of the region have this same basic constituent order, whether of the Indo-Aryan family (such as Nepali) or Tibeto-Burman family (such as Limbu). Ebert (1994) says that while Kiranti languages (that is, the sub-category of Tibeto-Burman to which Limbu belongs) have a basic word order of SOV, there is considerable freedom for rearranging constituents. This freedom arises because grammatical relations are specified not only by nominal case-marking, but also by agreement-marking on the verb. This is true of Nepali, too. (Genetti 1991)

#### 3.2 Nominal Case Marking

Limbu uses postpositions both to mark basic grammatical relations and to mark secondary arguments outside the predication of the verb.

- (b) *'That man looks from the balcony.'* (Webster 1997)
- |      |          |             |                          |       |
|------|----------|-------------|--------------------------|-------|
| kɔŋ  | yapmi -n | bardali -ʔo | <b>-lam</b>              | ɔmɔʔ  |
| that | man      | -DEF        | balcony-LOC- <b>from</b> | look  |
| that | the man  |             | <b>from</b> the balcony  | looks |

Nepali likewise uses postpositions.

### 3.2.1 Ergative Case

Limbu marks the most agentive actant of a transitive verb (van Driem 1987) with an ergative marker (ERG), which is exemplified in sample sentence (a) above. The same postposition is used also to mark the instrumental and genitive cases, and thus they may be considered to formally constitute a single case. (Weidert and Subba 1985)

Nepali also uses ergative case marking, but with an aspectual split. That is, the ergative marker is optional in imperfective contexts.

- (c)    **ram -le**        **bat**        **k<sup>h</sup>ajo**  
          Ram -ERG        rice        ate  
          *Ram ate rice.*
- (d)    **ram**                **bat**        **k<sup>h</sup>anc<sup>h</sup>a**  
          Ram                rice        eats  
          *Ram eats rice.*

Indeed, Webster (1997) also indicates that the Limbu ergative has a person split, such that the third person formal pronoun does not take the ergative marker,<sup>4</sup> and also a split that may, like Nepali, be aspectual.

### 3.2.2 Absolutive Casemarker / Definite Marker

According to van Driem (1987), the absolutive case marks the patient, which is "the less agentive actant" (the semantic role may be beneficiary, victim, undergoer or recipient of the action), and this patient is "marked by the absolutive case marker when definite and by its zero allomorph when indefinite." Also the subject (i.e. only actant) of an intransitive clause also takes the absolutive case marker.

Webster (1997) prefers to call this marker a definite marker, as that seems to be the main functional purpose. It is thus labeled -DEF in example sentences (a) and (b)

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<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to locate an example of this split.

above. In example (a) it marks the patient of a transitive verb, and in (b) it marks the subject of an intransitive verb.

Nepali does not have an absolutive case,<sup>5</sup> nor is any definite/indefinite contrast grammaticalized in Nepali.

### **3.3 Verbal Morphology**

#### **3.3.1 Overview**

The morphology of the Limbu verb is far more complex than that of the Nepali verb, as it has three prefixal slots and eleven suffixal slots.

In both languages, both negation and tense/aspect are expressed within the verb morphology. In both languages, the basic tense distinction is between preterite and non-preterite.

The Limbu verb is marked for agreement with both the agent and patient. The Nepali verb agrees with the agent only.

In Limbu, actant agreement is both for person and for number. In Nepali, agreement is for person, number, and register of the subject. That is, Nepali grammaticalizes a system of honorifics that is not present in Limbu. This may reflect that caste and status was traditionally less important in Limbu culture than it was in Nepali culture.

For number, Nepali distinguishes between singular and non-singular. Limbu distinguishes between singular, dual, and plural. In some cases, such as for third-person patient agreement, the distinction between dual and plural is collapsed to simply "non-singular".

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<sup>5</sup> Some may analyze the absolutive to be marked with a zero morpheme.

Nepali makes a three-way distinction of person (first, second, and third), while Limbu makes a 4<sup>th</sup> distinction of the "inclusive" person, that is, first and second person as a joint actant. We will examine this person category more closely in Section 3.3.2.

With several of the participant agreement morphemes, it is possible to label them precisely. For example, the <-u> suffix (▶3) marks a THIRD PERSON PATIENT. An examination of Appendix I, *Limbu Verb Affixes for Actant Agreement*, reveals that with complete consistency, the ▶3 morpheme is used always and only in THIRD PERSON PATIENT situations.<sup>6</sup> The distinct grammatical meanings of various other morphemes, however, have become obscured in the mists of time, as, synchronically, it is only *in particular combinations* with other agreement morphemes that they have grammatical meaning. Any label, thus, serves only as a simplified description of where the morpheme shows up in the pattern depicted in Appendix I. Explaining the meaning of all such labels is beyond the scope of this paper.

### **3.3.2    *The Inclusive Person***

I cannot claim to be a real scholar of Limbu, and so perhaps it is rather presumptuous of me to make assessments of this nature, but I believe that Limbu actually demonstrates something quite significant in the way the grammar treats the *inclusive person category*.

Traditionally in linguistics, we speak of "first person inclusive" when we are referring to the first person and the second person being joint participants. We contrast this with "first person exclusive", by which we refer to the first person participating

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<sup>6</sup> This <-u> morpheme marking THIRD PERSON PATIENT situations is a common feature among Tibeto-Burman languages. (David Watters, personal communication.)

without the second person. We perceive this as a distinction within the first person.

That is, we conceive of the person distinctions as follows:

first person	exclusive
	inclusive
second person	
third person	

Figure 3a. *Inclusive as a sub-category of first person*

This is the model by which van Driem (1987) analyses the Phedappe dialect of Limbu.

However, from a logical perspective, is it not equally valid in general to consider the inclusive/exclusive contrast to be a sub-categorization of the *second* person? That is, if the first person is a joint actant with the second person, we could just as well call this "second person inclusive", and then if the second person acts *without* the first person, we'd call this "second person exclusive." According to such a model, we'd conceive of the inclusive/exclusive contrast as follows:

first person	
second person	inclusive
	exclusive
third person	

Figure 3b. *Inclusive as a sub-category of second person*

Logically, both perspectives are equally valid. Probably the reason that linguists tend to assume that inclusive/exclusive is a *first* person distinction is this: While English<sup>7</sup> does not make such a distinction, it does group inclusive situations with first person situations. That is, in English, if '*you*' and '*I*' are jointly the subject, the pronoun that English utilizes is '*we*', which is the same pronoun that would be utilized if the subject were first person (plural) *without* the involvement of the second person. Thus, our Indo-European worldview gives us the bias of Figure 3a.

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<sup>7</sup> and Indo-European languages in general

The judgment on whether Figure 3a or Figure 3b is a better model must depend on the particular language under analysis. Does the grammar of the particular language variety treat inclusives (a) more according to the pattern of first person, or (b) more according to the pattern of second person?

Based on the Limbu morpheme patterns shown in Appendix I, the answer is (b). Note that the data in Appendix I does<sup>8</sup> differ from the Phedappe dialect data presented by van Driem (1987). We will first examine this Pantare dialect data synchronically, and assess how well van Driem's analysis fits it, and then attempt to understand the significance of the process that is occurring.

In our Appendix I data, inclusive forms are more like second person forms than they are like first person forms. For example, consider the structures for dual agents (of these various person categories) acting on third-person non-singular patients, as shown in Table 3.1 below:

Person of dual agent		Stem					Sense
<b>1<sup>st</sup></b> (i.e. purely first)		V	-s Du	-u 3	-si 3NS	-gya 1NS	<i>We<sup>excl</sup> two V them.</i>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> &amp; 2<sup>nd</sup></b> (i.e. inclusive)	a- Inc	V	-s Du	-u 3	-si 3NS		<i>We<sup>incl</sup> two V them.</i>
<b>2<sup>nd</sup></b> (i.e. purely second)	ke- 2	V	-s Du	-u 3	-si 3NS		<i>You two V them.</i>

**Table 3.1 Dual agents on 3<sup>rd</sup> person non-singular patient**

All three forms are structurally similar, the only difference, of course being the final suffix <-gya> (1NS) on the purely first person form, versus the prefix <a-> (Inc) on the inclusive person form, versus the prefix <ke-> (2) on the purely second person form. As can be seen from the comparisons shown in Appendix II, this 3-way contrast is fairly

<sup>8</sup> Prescriptivists would say *do*, recognizing that *data* is the plural of *datum*, but as a programmer, my grammar compels me to treat *data* as a mass noun.

consistent across the paradigm. The main point to note at present is that the first person form is distinguished by a *suffixal* marker, while the inclusive and second person forms are distinguished by a *prefixal* marker. Thus, the pattern of the inclusive is more similar to the pattern of the *second* person form. This pattern of difference is rather consistent across the paradigm. Consider next the structures shown in Table 3.2 below.

Person of dual patient	Stem				Sense
1 <sup>st</sup>	yapmi 2>1		V		He V <i>us<sup>excl</sup> two.</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> (i.e. inclusive)		a- Inc	V	-si 3NS	He V <i>us<sup>incl</sup> two.</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup>		kε- 2	V	-si 3NS	He V <i>you two.</i>

**Table 3.2 Third person singular agent on dual patients**

Of particular relevance in this example is that the inclusive form has a prefix and a suffix, as does the second person form, while the first person form has a phonologically independent word /*yapmi*/ and no affixes. While the word /*yapmi*/ is somewhat of an aberration in the paradigm of Appendix I, the important fact to note is that this aberration did not affect the inclusive form, which thus patterns more similarly to the second person form, once again.

Appendix II compares each inclusive person form with the corresponding first person form and second person form. The comparison demonstrates that, according to this data, if one wants to use the term "exclusive", it is more fitting to speak of "*second* person exclusive/inclusive" than to conceive of exclusive/inclusive as a phenomenon belonging to the *first* person.

Even more fitting, however, is an analysis that treats the inclusive person as a separate and independent person category in its own right, as modeled in Figure 3c.

first person
inclusive person
second person
third person

Figure 3c *Inclusive as an independent person category*

Van Driem's (1987) analysis treats the inclusive/exclusive distinction as a sub-categorization of the first person, as modeled in Figure 3a. According to that analysis, the <a-> prefix is the FIRST PERSON marker. An examination of the patterning of this morpheme in Appendix I (where I have labeled it **Inc**) reveals a clear and consistent pattern in the paradigm: *The <a-> prefix appears **always and only** when an inclusive actant is involved.* (This is true regardless of whether it is the agent or the patient that is the inclusive actant.) Thus, according to this data, the <a-> morpheme is clearly functioning as an INCLUSIVE PERSON marker.

Van Driem labels the suffix <-ge / -gya> (shown in Appendix I as **INS**) as the EXCLUSIVE morpheme, and posits a corresponding null morpheme <-∅> as an INCLUSIVE marker that occupies the same slot, explaining, "Inclusivity of a first person actant is always formally unmarked." (1987: 102) However, if one observes the pattern of this **INS** morpheme in Appendix I, it appears that it is at least as appropriate to consider this suffix to be a FIRST PERSON NON-SINGULAR marker.

That <-ge> is not used in inclusive forms in fact demonstrates that the inclusive category is as distinct from the *first* person category as it is from the *second* person category. The <-ge / -gya> morpheme is not in any greater contrast with inclusive person forms than it is with second person forms, as can be seen in Table 3.1 above. Indeed, in some cases, the first person and second person forms are more similar to each other than to the inclusive person form. For example, in Table 3.3 below, the

inclusive form does not have the <-i> (12P) suffix, but the first and second person forms do.

Person of plural patient	Stem					Sense
		mε-	∇	-i	- gεʔ	
1 <sup>st</sup>		mε- 3NSA	∇	-i 12P	- gεʔ 1NS	<i>They V us<sup>excl</sup> all.</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>	a- Inc	m- 3NSA	∇			<i>They V us<sup>incl</sup> all.</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup>	kε- 2	mε- 3NSA	∇	-i 12P		<i>They V you all.</i>

**Table 3.3 Third person non-singular agent on plural patients**

This strengthens the argument that the inclusive category is being treated by the language as an independent person category.

Now, van Driem's analysis is based upon the Phedappe dialect, which is a more conservative dialect. The paradigm that he presents includes a 2→1 form that contains the prefix <a->, and if this is an accurate indication of what existed in the Panthare dialect (shown in Appendix I) before its displacement by the /yapmi/ form, then we can indeed say that the INCLUSIVE marker developed from what was originally a FIRST PERSON marker, and probably also that the FIRST PERSON NON-SINGULAR marker developed from what was originally an EXCLUSIVE marker.

It is interesting to note that van Driem's Phedappe paradigm (presented in Appendix III) is neater and tidier than the Panthare paradigm. For example, for first, inclusive, and second person patients, no dual/plural distinction is ever made for third person agents. In Panthare, however, a /yapmi/ form messes up that pattern, as 3d→1d (using /yapmi/) is distinct from 3p→1d (which follows the original pattern). However, Givón (1984) indicates that it is the sloppy parts of language that free innovation to occur.

Thus, the Limbu verb agreement system provides us with a view of how the language has grammaticalized four distinct and independent person categories.

### **3.4 The Influence of Nepali on Limbu Grammar**

Nepali has, over a long history of contact, influenced Limbu grammar in various ways. One interesting example of this can be found in the grammaticalization of mirativity in Limbu. The mirative mood signals "new information, as yet unassimilated in the speaker's mind." (Webster 1997) It signals that the information has just come as a surprise to the speaker. For example, upon burning his mouth on the porridge, a speaker exclaims "Oh my! It's hot!" utilizing the mirative mood.

Nepali signals the mirative with <-rɔhɛc<sup>h</sup>ɔ >. Limbu has a similar particle, <-rɛc<sup>h</sup>ɔ>, which Weidert and Subba (1985:54) claim signals "strong conviction". Webster (1997), on the other hand, sees this as derived from the Nepali mirative, and functioning in the same manner.

## **IV. REVERSING LANGUAGE SHIFT (RLS)**

### **4.1 Overview**

In his 1991 *Reversing Language Shift*, Joshua Fishman's primary thesis is that languages thrive or decline to the degree that they are transmitted intergenerationally. He proposes a scale to classify languages according to their degree of "intergenerational dislocation." This eight-point scale is called the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS). The various stages on this scale are briefly paraphrased in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1 The Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS)**

Stage 8	<i>Most speakers are socially isolated old folks.</i>
Stage 7	<i>Most speakers are beyond child-bearing age.</i>
Stage 6	<i>The language is informally transmitted orally to children in the home and community. This is the most crucial stage to attain.</i>
Stage 5	<i>Non-compulsory literacy in the language in home, school and community.</i>
Stage 4b	<i>Public schools in the language, run by outsiders.</i>
Stage 4a	<i>Lower education in the language meeting compulsory education requirements.</i>
Stage 3	<i>Use of language with outsiders in the lower work sphere.</i>
Stage 2	<i>Use of language in lower governmental services and mass media.</i>
Stage 1	<i>Use of language in higher level educational, occupational, governmental, and media efforts.</i>

We will make reference to this scale as we assess Limbu's position on this scale, and assess the appropriateness of various language planning activities.

#### **4.2 The History of Limbu Language Development**

Often one of the most vital steps in RLS is the development of an orthography, as this gives the language access to literary domains. There are many such domains, including primary education, newspapers, health promotion, and local governance, that require a language to be written (and people able to read it) in order to be able to compete in that domain with the language of wider communication.

In this regard, Limbu language development can be said to date back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the development of the Sirijangga script. At that point in history, the Sikkimese had been converting the Limbus to Buddhism, and the Sikkimese ruler commissioned the Limbu monk Sirijangga to develop a Limbu orthography as an aid to propagating Buddhist doctrine. However, books written by Sirijangga gave at least as much prominence to the traditional Limbu gods as to Buddhist doctrine, and served to foster a sense of Limbu nationalism. Ultimately, Sirijangga was murdered by the monks of a rival monastery in a conspiracy with the Sikkimese ruler. (van Driem 2001: 674)

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Limbus were forcibly converted to Hinduism following the Gorkha conquest. Theirs was the last kingdom to be conquered and incorporated into the kingdom of Nepal. During the period in which rule of the kingdom on Nepal was in the hands of the Rana aristocracy, all Limbu literature was banned, and the Sirijangga script fell into disuse. It was revived in Sikkim in the 1960s by Iman Singh Chemjong, who elaborated the script, particularly to accommodate phonemic distinctions made by Nepali. He also contributed to the development of Limbu with the production of a dictionary and other works on the language. His modified script was used by the Government of Sikkim for formal education programs beginning in the 1970s. (van Driem 2001) There, Limbu is now used in education up to class 12, and it is one of the official languages. (Webster 1999) In Nepal, however, until the revolution of 1990, the government perceived minority languages to be a threat to national unity, and did not support the development or promotion of the Limbu language.

In Nepal, the Limbu community is strongly positive toward having the Sirijangga script taught. However, only 1% of Limbu speakers are able to read the Sirijangga script. In contrast, 40% of speakers can read Limbu in the Devanagri script, the same script used by Nepali. 46.8% of the Limbu ethnic group is literate in Nepali. (Grimes 2000) This skill being carried over to Limbu accounts for the dramatically higher rate of Limbu literacy in Devanagri than in Sirijangga.

### **4.3 Current Strategies for Promoting the Limbu Language in Nepal**

Since the 1990 revolution, the government's position has been to look with favor upon minority language promotion. As of van Driem's (2001) information, there were 38 primary schools in Limbuwan that provided Limbu language instruction in grades 1 and 2. According to Webster (personal communication), this instruction utilizes the Sirijangga script. Since 1994, the government has broadcast a news program in Limbu for 5 minutes every day. Since 1995, a Limbu-Nepali newspaper, *Tanchoppa*, has been

published on a monthly basis. (Webster 1999) In 2002, a community-based literacy program was launched by a partnership between two organizations that are non-governmental. These are Education Development International, Nepal (EDI-Nepal), and the Limbu Literature Development Association (LiLDA). However, because of the current insurgency, implementing development programs in the rural areas of Nepal has been hampered.

#### **4.4 Assessment of Language Promotion Activities**

According to Webster (1999), "a distinctive characteristic of both the radio news program and newspaper is the almost complete absence of any loan words." These language promotion efforts thus utilize a higher register of Limbu than the ordinary variety of Limbu that is commonly spoken. Webster conducted a study to assess how well the average Limbu villager could understand the high-register variety, relative to the colloquial lower-register variety. His study encompassed a variety of genres, from radio news to folktales to narratives. His results demonstrated that there was a substantial loss in intelligibility when high-register language was heard. In fact, the radio news broadcast was "virtually unintelligible to the average Limbu listener."

#### **4.5 GIDS Assessment of Limbu**

Webster (1999) places Limbu in Nepal at stage 6 of the GIDS in most communities. He further says that in some other communities, Limbu is already slipping into stage 7. (In Sikkim, on the other hand, "Limbu is solidly at stage 4b, and is making inroads into stages 3 to 1." He notes that in Sikkim, Limbu has had the explicit support of the State for the past three decades, which must account for much of that difference.) Webster's stage 6 assessment was made before EDI-Nepal / LiLDA

programs were begun, and makes no reference to the Limbu language instruction in the first two grades later reported by van Driem (2001), but perhaps these developments would constitute inroads into GIDS stages 5 and 4 in the affected communities.

#### **4.6 Analysis of RLS Strategies**

Webster (1999), in considering the very low level of comprehension of the radio broadcasts and newspaper, asked, "What's the point? Who is the audience? If communication of a message is at all important to the producers of this literature (and media), then we have to conclude that they are not achieving this objective."

As he reviewed the philosophy of RLS, Webster the fact that Fishman's proposal was for the GIDS not only to serve as a gauge, but also as a roadmap in language planning. "Strongly implicit in this scale is that 8 comes before 7, and 7 before 6, in a planning sense. For example, it is absurd to think in terms of a status planning effort aimed at stage 4b, schools in the mother tongue, if the language is at stage 7 on the GIDS."

He also highlighted the role of diglossia, that is a stable bilingualism in which each language has its functions and domains of usage that overlap minimally, and are thus of little threat to each other. According to Fishman (1991), such diglossia should be the goal of language planners in stages 8 through 5. (Beyond stage 5, diglossia becomes more of a threat than a help, and the goal becomes to transcend it.)

Webster also highlighted Fishman's insistence on the primacy of community domains. In order for RLS to be successful in the long term, parents must be passing the language on to their children, and this learning must be reinforced in community domains. He quoted Fishman:

"Indeed, for RLS to Indeed, for RLS to 'take hold' these 'lower levels' constituting face-to-face, small-scale social life must be pursued in their own right and focused upon directly, rather than merely being thought of as obvious and inevitable by-products of 'higher level' (more complex, more encompassing, more power-related) processes and institutions.... [RLS must place] intergenerational mother tongue transmission at the very center [of RLS efforts] and make sure to defend that center before setting out to conquer societal processes that are more distant, dubious and tenuous vis-à-vis such transmission." (Fishman 1991: 4-6)

Webster illustrated why it may be ill-advised to attempt to promote a language in the higher 'national' domains prematurely. He explained the *competitive exclusion principle* (CEP) from cultural ecology: "Complete competitors cannot co-exist." That is, "if two populations compete for the same resource, and if that resource is in short supply, and if both populations need it for survival, one of the populations will be eliminated." In contrast with complete competitors are competitors that each have their own niches in which they cannot be defeated.

In the case of RLS, the "resource" is domains and functions of speech, and the competing "populations" are the acts of speech that language speakers will perform in one language or the other.<sup>9</sup> The CEP indicates that an endangered or weakened language that puts itself in complete competition with the dominant language will eventually die out. Rather, a smaller language should first seek a niche in which it can establish a solid hold. This niche is the community's intimate domains, and indeed, I believe these are the most important domains for transmitting the essence of the culture to future generations. Once these domains are solidly owned by the smaller language,

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<sup>9</sup> Webster actually describes the metaphor more loosely than this by saying that the "population" is the language speakers. More accurately, the competition occurs within an individual speaker (often unconsciously) each time he chooses one language over the other for a particular use of speech.

the language can be promoted into other domains, the impersonal society domains, but the language then competes from a position of strength, not weakness.

#### 4.7 Conclusions

Webster's (1999) primary conclusion was that language planning efforts for Limbu need to set goals that can be reached from where the language community is currently at. i.e. GIDS stage 6. Allocating resources to higher-level RLS activities (such as high-register radio broadcasts at stage 1–2) is less effective at promoting language use, and thus drains those resources away from more effective lower-level programs. Furthermore, the lack of success by such measures can lead to discouragement. Finally, it places the language in direct competition with the national language before Limbu's hold of community domains has been solidly established.

The EDI-Nepal / LiLDA program, on the other hand, is directed only at moving Limbu up into stage 5, and is based upon the commonly-spoken form of the language. More significant results can be expected from such a program than from splashy media efforts.

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<sup>i</sup> I created this map based on maps found in van Driem (2001) and on the web at KSafe.com (2004). The most significant difference is that KSafe.com depicts the Limbu area as extending more deeply into Sikkim. Perhaps that map reflects migration of the past century beyond the traditional boundaries of Limbuwan, or perhaps the difference indicates ethnic Limbu people who are no longer Limbu speakers.

**APPENDIX I: Limbu Verb Affixes for Actant Agreement** (Panthare dialect data from Webster, personal correspondence. Analysis based on van Driem's (1987) Phedappe dialect analysis.)

		PATIENT																																		
		1s	1d	1p	1&2d	1&2p	2s	2d	2p	3s	3dp																									
AGENT	1s	The construction of reflexives and reciprocals is omitted.					V.nɛ 1>2	V.nɛ.tɕ <sup>h</sup> i.ŋ 1>2 dPS 1sA	V.n.i.ŋ 1>2 12P 1sA	V.u.ŋ 3 1sA	V.u.ŋ.si.ŋ 3 1sA 3NS 1sA																									
	1d						The construction of reflexives and reciprocals is omitted.					V.nɛ.tɕ <sup>h</sup> i.gya 1>2 nsA 1NS			V.s.u.gya Du 3 1NS	V.s.u.si.gya Du 3 3NS 1NS																				
	1p											The construction of reflexives and reciprocals is omitted.								V.u.m.ba 3 DI 1NS	V.u.m.si.m.ba 3 pA 3NS pA 1NS															
	1&2d																The construction of reflexives and reciprocals is omitted.								a.V.s.u Inc Du 3	a.V.s.u.si Inc Du 3 3NS										
	1&2p																					The construction of reflexives and reciprocals is omitted.								a.V.u Inc 3	a.V.u.m.si.m Inc 3 DI 3NS DI					
	2s																										ke.V.aŋ 2 1	yapmi ke.V 2>1 2					ke.V.u 2 3		ke.V.u.si 2 3 3NS	
	2d																										yapmi ke.V.si 2>1 2 DPS	yapmi ke.V.s.ya 2>1 2 Du 1NS					ke.V.s.u 2 Du 3		ke.V.s.u.si 2 Du 3 3NS	
	2p																										yapmi ke.V 2>1 2					ke.V.u.m 2 3 DI		ke.V.u.m.si.m 2 3 DI 3NS DI		
	3s																										V.aŋ 1	yapmi V 2>1		a.V.si Inc DPS	a.V Inc	ke.V 2	ke.V.si 2 DPS	ke.V.i 2 12P	V.u 3	V.u.si 3 3NS
	3d																										mɛ.V.aŋ 3NSA 1	mɛ.V.i.ge? 3NSA 12P 1NS		a.m.V.si Inc 3NSA DPS	a.m.V Inc 3NSA	ke.m.V 2 3NSA	ke.m.V.si 2 3NSA DPS	ke.m.V.i 2 3NSA 12P	V.s.u Du 3	V.s.u.si Du 3 3NS
3p	mɛ.V.si.ge? 3NSA DPS 1NS																										mɛ.V.u 3NSA 3	mɛ.V.u.si 3NSA 3 3NS								

Labels for these agreement morphemes are not necessarily meaningful for this study, as a label is only brief a description of a pattern that is often complex. It is only in a particular combination with others that these morphemes identify a specific cell, in this way functioning almost as discontinuous portmanteaux. The main thing to note here is the *patterns* in which the morphemes appear.

## APPENDIX II: Patterns of Verb Agreement Morphemes for Inclusive Situations

For each of the nine inclusive (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person together) conjugations, the pattern of morphemes is more similar to that of the corresponding 2<sup>nd</sup> person conjugation than it is to that of the corresponding 1<sup>st</sup> person conjugation. That is, in each table below, the middle row patterns more like the bottom row than it does like the top row.

### (i) 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular agent on dual patients

Person of dual patient	Stem				Sense
1 <sup>st</sup>	yapmi 2>1		V		He V <i>us<sup>excl</sup></i> two.
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>		a- Inc	V	-si DPS	He V <i>us<sup>incl</sup></i> two.
2 <sup>nd</sup>		kε- 2	V	-si DPS	He V you two.

### (ii) 3<sup>rd</sup> person dual agent on dual patients

Person of dual patient	Stem					Sense
1 <sup>st</sup>	yapmi 2>1			V		They two V <i>us<sup>excl</sup></i> two.
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>		a- Inc	m- 3NSA	V	-si DPS	They two V <i>us<sup>incl</sup></i> two.
2 <sup>nd</sup>		kε- 2	m- 3NSA	V	-si DPS	They two V you two.

### (iii) 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural agent on dual patients

Person of dual patient	Stem					Sense
1 <sup>st</sup>		mε- 3NSA	V	-si DPS	- gε? 1NS	They all V <i>us<sup>excl</sup></i> two.
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>	a- Inc	m- 3NSA	V	-si DPS		They all V <i>us<sup>incl</sup></i> two.
2 <sup>nd</sup>	kε- 2	mε- 3NSA	V	-si DPS		They all V you two.

### (iv) 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular agent on plural patients

Person of plural patient	Stem				Sense
1 <sup>st</sup>	yapmi 2>1		V		He V <i>us<sup>excl</sup></i> all.
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>		a- Inc	V		He V <i>us<sup>incl</sup></i> all.
2 <sup>nd</sup>		kε- 2	V	-i 12P	He V you all.

(v) 3<sup>rd</sup> person non-singular agent on plural patients

Person of plural patient		Stem			
1 <sup>st</sup>		mε- 3NSA	√	-i 12P	- gε? 1NS
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>	a- Inc	m- 3NSA	√		
2 <sup>nd</sup>	kε- 2	mε- 3NSA	√	-i 12P	

Sense

*They V us<sup>excl</sup> all.*

*They V us<sup>incl</sup> all.*

*They V you all.*

(vi) Dual agents on 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular patient

Person of dual agent		Stem			
1 <sup>st</sup>		√	-s Du	-u 3	-gya 1NS
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>	a- Inc	√	-s Du	-u 3	
2 <sup>nd</sup>	kε- 2	√	-s Du	-u 3	

Sense

*We<sup>excl</sup> two V him.*

*We<sup>incl</sup> two V him.*

*You two V him.*

(vii) Dual agents on 3<sup>rd</sup> person non-singular patient

Person of dual agent		Stem				
1 <sup>st</sup>		√	-s Du	-u 3	-si 3NS	-gya 1NS
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>	a- Inc	√	-s Du	-u 3	-si 3NS	
2 <sup>nd</sup>	kε- 2	√	-s Du	-u 3	-si 3NS	

Sense

*We<sup>excl</sup> two V them.*

*We<sup>incl</sup> two V them.*

*You two V them.*

(viii) Plural agents on 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular patient

Person of plural agent		Stem			
1 <sup>st</sup>		√	-u 3	-m DI	-ba 1NS
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>	a- Inc	√	-u 3		
2 <sup>nd</sup>	kε- 2	√	-u 3	-m DI	

Sense

*We<sup>excl</sup> all V him.*

*We<sup>incl</sup> all V him.*

*You all V him.*

(ix) Plural agents on 3<sup>rd</sup> person non-singular patient

Person of plural agent		Stem						
1 <sup>st</sup>		√	-s Du	-u 3		-si 3NS		-gya 1NS
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup>	a- Inc	√		-u 3	-m DI	-si 3NS	-m DI	
2 <sup>nd</sup>	kε- 2	√		-u 3	-m DI	-si 3NS	-m DI	

Sense

*We<sup>excl</sup> all V them.*

*We<sup>incl</sup> all V them.*

*You all V them.*

**APPENDIX III: Limbu Verb Affixes for Actant Agreement** (Phedappe dialect data from van Driem 1987)

		PATIENT															
		1s	1d	1p	1&2d	1&2p	2s	2d	2p	3s	3dp						
AGENT	1s	Shading denotes cells with the greatest degree of structural difference					V.nɛ 1▶2	V.nɛ.tɕ <sup>h</sup> i.ŋ 1▶2 dPS 1sA	V.n.i.ŋ 1▶2 12P 1sA	V.u.ŋ ▶3 1sA	V.u.ŋ.si.ŋ ▶3 1sA 3NS 1sA						
	1d						V.nɛ.tɕ <sup>h</sup> i.gya 1▶2 nsA EX	V.s.u.ge dA ▶3 EX	V.s.u.si.ge dA ▶3 3NS EX								
	1p						V.u.m.ba ▶3 pA EX	V.u.m.si.m.be ▶3 pA 3NS pA EX									
	1&2d						a.V.s.u 1 dA ▶3	a.V.s.u.si 1 dA ▶3 3NS									
	1&2p						a.V.u.m 1 ▶3 pA	a.V.u.m.si.m 1 ▶3 pA 3NS pA									
	2s						ke.V.ʔɛ 2 ▶1s						ke.V.u 2 ▶3	ke.V.s.u 2 dA ▶3	ke.V.i 2 12P	ke.V.u.si 2 ▶3 3NS	ke.V.s.u.si 2 dA ▶3 3NS
	2d						a.ge.V 1 2						ke.V.u.m 2 ▶3 pA	ke.V.u.m.si.m 2 ▶3 pA 3NS pA			
	2p																
	3s						V.ʔɛ ▶1s	V.si.ge DPS EX	V.i.ge 12P EX	a.V.si 1 DPS	a.V 1	ke.V 2	ke.V.si 2 DPS	ke.V.i 2 12P	V.u ▶3	V.u.si ▶3 3NS	
	3d						mɛ.V.ʔɛ nsAS ▶1s	mɛ.V.si.ge nsAS DPS EX	mɛ.V.i.ge nsAS 12P EX	a.m.V.si 1 nsAS DPS	a.m.V 1 nsAS	ke.m.V 2 nsAS	ke.m.V.si 2 nsAS DPS	ke.m.V.i 2 nsAS 12P	V.s.u dA ▶3	V.s.u.si dA ▶3 3NS	
3p											mɛ.V.u nsAS ▶3	mɛ.V.u.si nsAS ▶3 3NS					