

Chapter 1

Introduction

ལུང་པ་རེད་རེད་ལ་སྐད་ལྟགས་རེད། ལྷ་མ་རེད་རེད་ལ་ཚོས་ལྟགས་རེད་རེད།
luŋ-pa re-re-la ke-luk re?; lama re-re-la tɕʰø-luk re-re?

“Every valley has its language and every lama has his religion” (Tibetan proverb).

The German author and translator, Heinrich August Jäschke (1881:iv) wrote, “The present language of the [Tibetan] people has as many dialects as the country has provinces. Indeed, as in most geographically similar districts, well nigh every separate mountain valley has its own singularities as to modes of utterance and favorite collocations of words...” Tibetan speech varieties are derived from Old Tibetan, and from that source have developed independently through space and time as the various migrating groups divided and subdivided and settled in isolated places in the Himalayan region.

1.1 History of the focus speech varieties: Kyirong, Yòlmo, SST

Around a thousand years ago, some ancestors of the Tibetans settled in a fertile valley called Kyirong where they learned to grow wheat and barley. Years later, a number of their descendants climbed over the eastern mountains from Kyirong and down into the Lende Valley, where they settled. Later, others migrated south from Kyirong, navigating through the Himalayan pass where two rivers called the Kyirong Tsangbo and Lende Khola converge, and they settled in various regions of Nepal.² According to tradition, “the people who now live in the Langtang region of Nepal came south from Kyirong in ancient times, and the Yòlmo later moved east from Langtang” (Huber 2002:3).³ The Yòlmo originated from Kyirong and were likely settled in Nepal’s Sindhupalchok District, a place they call Helambu, by the 18th century (Pokhrel 2003:99). The Kagate, who refer to themselves as Syuba, which means ‘paper makers’, live in the Ramechhap District of Nepal, and originally came from Helambu (Bielmeier 1982:46). Hoehlig and Hari (1976:1) obtained evidence supporting Bielmeier’s statement, writing that,

² This pass where the Kyirong Tsangbo and Lende Khola converge, called Rasuwa Gadhi, is a place containing little more than the remnants of an old stone fort surrounded by rushing water and towering rock. It has historically been known as an important ‘doorway’ between Tibet and Nepal.

³ Likely this migration from Kyirong to Langtang occurred before the 17th century. McVeigh wrote, “The earliest settlers [in the Langtang region of Nepal] came from Kyirong, Tibet, sometime before the mid-1600s, bringing with them their animals, their high-altitude crops and a whole set of values and institutions upon which the valley’s culture is founded” (2004:108).

“According to their traditions the Syuba came originally from the Helambu area. They migrated about four generations ago due to food shortages and the lack of possibilities to support themselves.”

Old Tibetan was spoken in Central Asia and Tibet from the 7th to the 10th centuries.⁴ Over a millennium, the language diversified into twenty-five dialect groups, two of which are relevant to this research.⁵ The **Kyirong-Kagate group** is made up of the Kyirong, Lende⁶, Langtang, Yòlmo, Kagate, and Tsum speech varieties. According to Bielmeier (1982:47) and Huber (2002:2), Kyirong is closely related to Lende, Langtang, and Kagate.⁷ Hari and Lama (2004:699) wrote that Yòlmo and Kagate are very closely related varieties, yet according to Hoehlig and Hari (1976:19), warrant independent study. The **Ü-tsang** (དབུས་གཙང་) **group**, meaning ‘middle, centre + pure’, includes Standard Spoken Tibetan. The Ü-tsang group is also referred to as the Central Tibetan Dialect group. SST, *tsí-kɛ?* (ཐྱི་ཁྱད་), corresponds to the variety of Central Tibetan called *yr-kɛ?* (རྟམ་ཁྱད་), which is spoken in Lhasa and surrounding villages.⁸

Classification:

Sino-Tibetan > Tibeto-Burman > Himalayish > Tibeto-Kanauri > Tibetic⁹ (Old Tibetan - twenty five dialect groups) >

Ü-tsang dialect group > SST

Kyirong-Kagate dialect group > KD/YD

1.2 Geography of the focus region: Rasuwa and Kyirong

The Kyirong live north of Dunche in the Rasuwa District, Bagmati Zone, Central Development Region of Nepal, and across the Nepal-Tibet border in Kyirong District, Shigatse Prefecture, Western Central Tibet, Tibet Autonomous Region. Kyirong District includes Lower Kyirong¹⁰ and the Lende Valley.

⁴ Tournadre 2001:50, 2003:27. See Appendix H for a tentative basic description of Old Tibetan.

⁵ See Tournadre 1980:282-283 and 2003:31 for a description of the dialect groups.

⁶ Lende was not included in Tournadre’s Kyirong-Kagate group listing. However, this variety is, according to Huber, a sub-dialect of Kyirong (2002:4).

⁷ Regarding Yòlmo, Bielmeier wrote that, at the time of writing, nothing had been published on “the dialect of the Helambu Sherpas [Yòlmo]”, and that he had collected no data, and was therefore not in the position to place Yòlmo within this dialect group (1982:46-47).

⁸ Tournadre interchanges the terms ‘Standard Tibetan’ and ‘Central Tibetan’ (2001:51, 2003:25-26).

⁹ Ethnologue web version

¹⁰ Lower and Upper Kyirong: Upper Kyirong (ancient Gungthang?) is in Dzongka District, while Lower Kyirong (ancient Mangyul?) is in Kyirong District. Together, Dzongka District and Kyirong District make up Kyirong County. The boundary between the two districts runs near Ragma, and lines up roughly with the dialect boundary between the Kyirong and Dzongka speech varieties.



Figure 1: View north over Kyirong from Naktali, Rasuwa District

Lower Kyirong, part of which can be seen beyond the intermediate ridge in Figure 1, is where the majority of Kyirong live. Kyirong is a south-sloping valley with fields of potato, barley, and buckwheat, with dense forests and rare wild plants, a valley which begins along the edge of the Tibetan plateau, and descends mile after meandering mile between twisted mountain ranges until it crosses over the border into Nepal. Flowing along the valley is the Kyirong Tsangpo. At the border where rock walls tower, the Kyirong Tsangbo meets the Lende Khola and the two rivers unite to become the violent Bhote Kosi thundering into the Trishuli Gorge, the gorge that dramatically defines the western edge of the Nepal Langtang Himal.¹¹

1.3 Description of the focus people: the Kyirong

Though divided by a political border, the Kyirong are one people, a cross-border people. This is a claim made by the people themselves who live in the districts of Rasuwa and Kyirong.

¹¹ See Appendix B maps.



Figure 2: A group of Kyirong who live near the Kyirong-Rasuwa border

Kyirong culture has many characteristics which are common to the different Tibetan groups, an obvious one being Tibetan tea (black tea, hot water, salt, and butter). The Kyirong and Lende have a saying, 'If you drink lots of Tibetan tea, your legs will not be sick', *p̄: t̄ɕa: māŋmó t'úŋ-na, káŋdó mi-nē*. There are distinctions related to Kyirong female clothing (see Figures 2 and 3).¹² Literacy rates among the Kyirong are unknown, but it has been seen that oral traditions of the people remain strong. The belief system of the Kyirong appears to be similar to that of most Tibetan peoples, that is, Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is a mix of Tantric Buddhism from India and the ancient indigenous Bön and pre-Bön belief systems. These people, however, are primarily animist in their worldview.

¹² Female Kyirong dress distinctions: front and back apron (*páŋde:* and *ɛā:má*), steel belt (*giandzin*), and shirt (*wandzu*). The *giandzin* is also worn by Lende women.

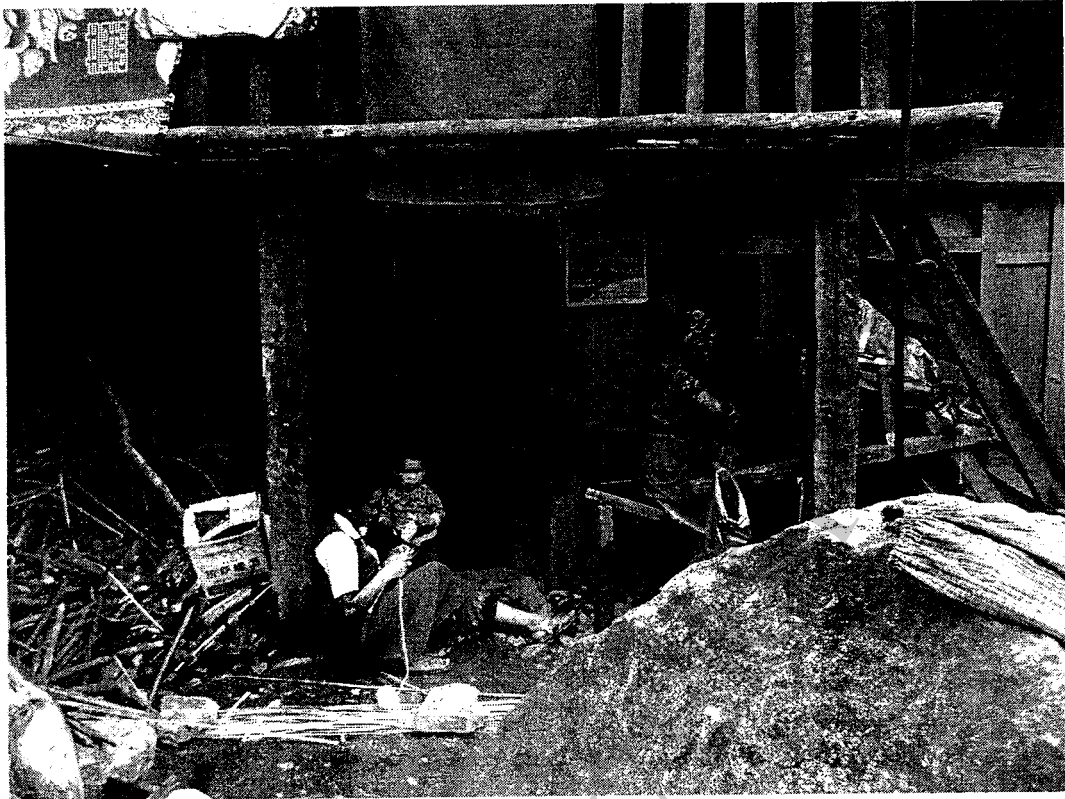


Figure 3: Kyirong who live near the Kyirong-Rasuwa border

The population of the Kyirong in the focus region, Rasuwa and Kyirong Districts, is unconfirmed. Omid states that there are 5400 Kyirong living in Nepal, the Ethnologue (web version) states 4790, and Hattaway (2004:147) states 4300. Regarding population figures of Kyirong in China, the Ethnologue states 100¹³, and Hattaway (2000:147) states 6113. The most recent available census for the Kyirong District, a census entitled ‘The Earth Dog Year (1958) Household Enumeration for the Nine Divisions of sKyid grong District’, gives the figure of 2844 Kyirong Tibetans. This figure, however, does not include the entire Kyirong population. Not included were aristocrats and their tax paying subjects, monks and nuns of certain monasteries, blacksmiths, butchers, and Newari merchants (Childs 2000:33). The population of the Kyirong will remain unknown until more recent census information is released by the local governments.

1.4 Description of the name ‘Kyirong’

The name ‘Kyirong’ therefore refers to three entities. The name refers to the **place**, *k'i-ronḡ* (ལྗོང་རོང་), which means ‘Valley of Happiness’, to the **speech variety**, with suffix *-ke*, *k'i-ronḡ-ke* (ལྗོང་རོང་ཀེ),¹⁴ and to the **people**, with suffix *-nga*, *k'i-ronḡ-ŋa* (ལྗོང་རོང་ང་). There are various English spellings of the name: Kyirong, Gyirong, Kyirung, Kyerung. The spelling

¹³ This figure is a ‘dummy’ figure only, used in lieu of reliable population information (see Appendix C).

¹⁴ Ethnologue code: kgy

‘Kyirong’ is closest to the Tibetan spelling (ལྷིར་རྩེ་), and therefore is used in this document. The SST pronunciation is *kí-roŋ*; the Kyirong pronunciation is *cí-ró:*. In WT, the name is skyid grong (སྐྱེད་གྲོང་) and if spoken, would be pronounced *kí-dorj*.

1.5 Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationships between three Tibetan speech varieties as they are spoken today: Kyirong (KD), Yòlmo (YD), and Standard Spoken Tibetan (SST). The areas of investigation are the lexicon, pronunciation, grammar, and semantics.

1.6 Research Question

Which variety, Yòlmo or Standard Spoken Tibetan, is closer to Kyirong?

1.7 Hypothesis

Kyirong and Yòlmo are closer speech varieties than Kyirong and SST in selected areas of the lexicon, pronunciation, grammar, and semantics.

1.8 Written Tibetan

According to tradition, the Tibetan writing system, which is called ü-chen (ཡུ་ཅེན་), was developed from Sanskrit by Thönmi Sambhota during the reign of the Tibetan king Songtsän Gampo, thirty-third king of the Yarlung Dynasty. Songtsän Gampo lived from 609-649 AD, and reigned as king from 627-649 AD.¹⁵

Several written registers have developed over the centuries (Tournadre 2003:26-27). This thesis distinguishes two which are relevant: Written Tibetan (WT) and Religious Written Tibetan (RWT). WT is the written form of the spoken Tibetan languages. RWT is the written form of the language of religion and philosophy, pure literary Tibetan (Tournadre 2003:27), the book-language, *tcø-ke?* (ཚུལ་ཀེ་).

SST has a standardized written form. Kyirong and Yòlmo do not. Therefore, in certain cases, the WT spelling has been modified to reflect the KD and YD pronunciations.

¹⁵ Historical Map of Tibet I: Yarlung Dynasty, [CA 7th-9th Centuries]; DharmNet International. Jäschke (1881:iv) wrote, “There are two chief periods of literary activity to be noticed in studying the origin and growth of Tibetan literature and the landmarks in the history of the language. The first is the Period of Translation which, however, might also be entitled the Classical Period, for the sanctity of the religious message conferred a corresponding reputation and tradition of excellence upon the form, in which it was conveyed. This period begins in the first half of the seventh century, when Thonmi Sambhota, the minister of King Srongtsangampo, was sent to India to learn Sanskrit.”