

Report Chulung

During January and February of 2020, Prof. Ichchha Purna Rai (Tribhuvan University) and Rolf Hotz (University of Zurich) conducted a project of documentation of Chulung¹ (Kiranti) in both Dhankuta city and Akhisalla (Dhankuta district). The present report is a description of the project, which had as its main aim the compilation of a trilingual dictionary of the language.

The language

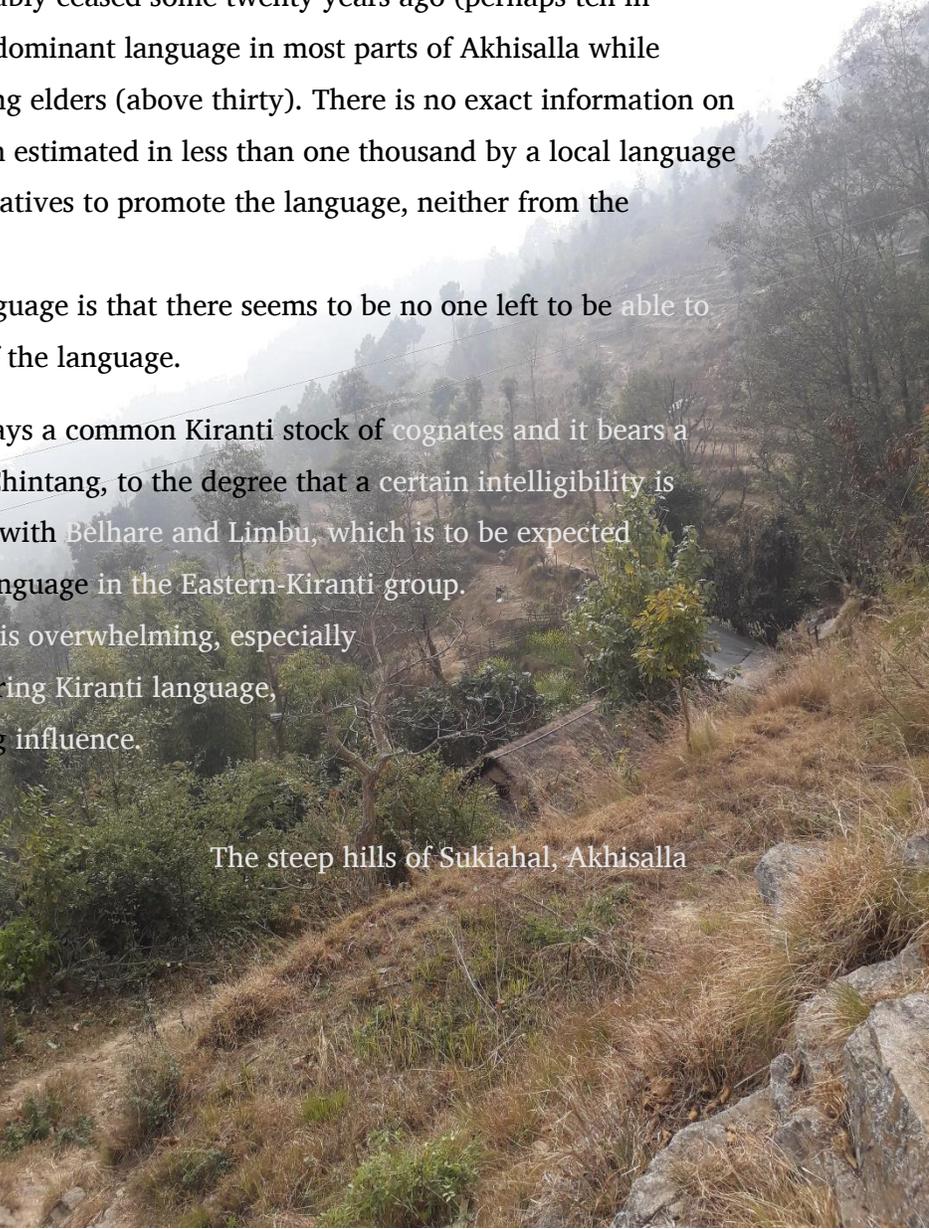
Chulung is an undocumented Kiranti language (Tibeto-Burman) from eastern Nepal. Most speakers reside within the two small villages that make up Akhisalla, apart from other surrounding scattered hamlets. The city of Dhankuta is also home to a number of speakers of Chulung, who have moved there seeking new opportunities.

The transmission of the language probably ceased some twenty years ago (perhaps ten in remote areas). Nepali has become the dominant language in most parts of Akhisalla while Chulung is only heard commonly among elders (above thirty). There is no exact information on the amount of speakers, but it has been estimated in less than one thousand by a local language activist. There are no currently no initiatives to promote the language, neither from the government not private.

One consequence of the loss of the language is that there seems to be no one left to be able to recite the *mundhum*, a ritual register of the language.

In terms of lexicon, the language displays a common Kiranti stock of cognates and it bears a striking similarity to the neighboring Chintang, to the degree that a certain intelligibility is possible. There are further similarities with Belhare and Limbu, which is to be expected due to the usual classification of the language in the Eastern-Kiranti group.

The influence of Nepali on the lexicon is overwhelming, especially in terms of nouns. Bantawa, a neighboring Kiranti language, has also exerted, however, a less strong influence.



The steep hills of Sukiahal, Akhisalla

¹ The language is pronounced as [ˈtʃʰɪlɪŋ].
Iso (639-3) and id (cur).

The grammar of Chulung is far from being completely described and in this project we attempted to cover only but a glimpse of its depth. From our preliminary overview, we took notice of the biactantial verbal agreement, i.e. a conjugation paradigm for transitive verbs which is different from the conjugation of intransitive verbs. This transitive paradigm marks both agent and patient and these forms are largely unpredictable. Negation has also a special paradigm and the negation suffix differs according the grammatical number of the agent. Reflexive verbs take an uninflected suffix plus an auxiliary verb (to do) inflected for person, number and TAM.

The project

During January and February, we worked with native speakers in order to collect words. This was mostly done starting from Nepali, since all our informants are bilingual in that language. For specific vocabulary we employed illustrations. This was especially needed for animals, insects, flora, body parts and objects used in rituals. Other words required a sort of enactment, as in specific verbs of cutting and the transitive paradigm of verbs.

Most of the work was carried out in the city Dhankuta, where we worked with informants that reside there. We also made three trips to Akhisalla. The latter was crucial in order to meet older (and more conservative) informants, check the gathered data and have an idea of the vitality of the language.

Apart from Prof. Rai and Hotz, two native speakers of Chulung were strongly involved in the project. They are: Padam Kumari Rai and Rabina Rai. They helped us in the collection of words, their disambiguation, translation of texts and correction of the final data.

We hope to finish editing the collected words soon and to produce a dictionary that can be a contribution to the documentation of the Kiranti language family as well as to future descriptive work in this language.

Prof. Rai & Hotz

Dhankuta March, 2020



The bazar of Thalthale, Akhisalla