

Rabha

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Reviewed by Harald Hammarström

Like the other volumes in the Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region series, the present monograph constitutes a comprehensive grammar of Rabha, a Tibeto-Burman language of the Himalayas. This volume is a little more, including a grammar (pp. 1-488), a comparative study of Rabha and its closest relatives Bodo and Garo (pp. 489-663), Rabha texts with interlinear glossing (pp. 664-704), and a Rabha-English vocabulary (pp. 705-843) plus appendices (pp. 843-858).

This hardcover edition is a re-working of the author's PhD thesis (Deccan College, Poona, India, 1999) and describes the Róngdani dialect of Rabha. The Rabhas inhabit the plains on both sides of the Brahmaputra river in Assam, in the North East of India. The cover has pictures of the speakers. Rabha (all dialects in total) is estimated to have 60,000 speakers. Rabha is rarely written. Rabha was previously essentially undescribed (the closest relative already described is Garo (Burling 1961)). The data was collected primarily via day-to-day conversation over 2 years, with extensive double-checking with speakers. The author is committed to a functional descriptive style with interlinear examples (in line with Leipzig glossing rules¹). Somewhat unconventionally, the grammar part is divided into phonology, lexical analysis, and phrase and sentence level rules ('rules' should be understood simply as formation principles in a functional style rather than rules in some formalism).

The phonology section is high in detail, and has minimal pairs for the 18 consonants, 6 vowels, plus a two-way tonal contrast (see below). Stops show a typical three-way contrast between voiced, unvoiced aspirated and unvoiced unaspirated, though there is pressure from Assamese for developing a fourth contrast, voiced aspirated. The phonemics otherwise show few surprises.

The chapter on lexical analysis begins with a discussion on Rabha word classes. The author distinguishes two large classes, namely, nouns and verbs, as well as three smaller classes, namely, adjectives, adverbs and indeclinables. The author's justification for this division is stated opaquely as "... such a differentiation was thought to be utilitarian to allow a coherent way of looking at diverse functions ..." (p. 133) and a longer discussion on p. 446-447 does not make things easier to understand. However, the actual division is in fact in line with mainstream views on word classes (Evans 2000). Noun roots are roots which take nominal affixes (p. 133-134) and verb roots are roots which take verbal affixes (p. 169-170). Verbs and adjectives are quite similar morphological classes, but a

¹ <http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>, accessed 20 Aug 2008.

few roots do not take the full verbal paradigm, and they are defined as adjectives. It is not clear where the exact border between adjectives and adverbs is to be placed, but this too has to do with the ability to take certain affixes, and many adverbs show reduplication. The indeclinables then, form the class that remains that does not take any affixation at all. Here fall conjunctions, interjections and a few more words which, distributionally (it seems), go in the same syntactic slot as adverbs. In sum, the author's analysis of word classes mixes the criterion of ability to take affixes and distributional similarity, in an untransparent way.

Derivational morphology of noun and verb roots are shown in the lexical analysis chapter, along with plenty of examples. Rabha has a morphological passive and a morphological causative. While noun roots are “naturally” polysyllabic, most verb roots are monosyllabic, and the author even suspects that all seemingly polysyllabic verb roots will be found to be compounds historically (p. 170).

The subsequent chapter, called phrase level analysis, describes not only the noun and verb phrase in good detail but also the inflectional morphology of nouns and verbs, as well as pronouns, classifiers and numerals. A lot of verb morphology is agglutinative and transparent, as infinite forms combine with finite forms of auxiliary verbs. Such processes can make earlier inflectional morphology disappear in a fairly short time and, as argued recently by DeLancey (2008), Bodo-Garo (Rabha's closest relatives (see below)) lost its original Proto-Tibeto-Burman agreement system in exactly this way.

The chapter on sentence level analysis, however, is only seven pages long, so there are a lot of questions on clausal syntax which are not answered, e.g., how to focus constituents. Similarly, there is no place in the book where such an important matter as the semantics of tense and aspect is discussed.

Thus ends the descriptive grammar part of the book. The following chapter, called correlative analysis, is a comparative study of Rabha and its closest relatives Bodo and Garo. One especially exciting section in this chapter is that on tonogenesis, for Bodo and Rabha have phonemic tone, while Garo arguably does not. Garo has a glottal stop, shown by the author to be in perfect correlation with Bodo and Rabha tone, and in addition, Bodo has replaced a final -k in Rabha and Garo with tone (pp. 496-509). The three languages are closely related, and the author duly sets up sound correspondences and reconstructs a skeleton of lexicon and morphology.

The final chapters contain glossed interlinear translated texts and an extensive Rabha-English vocabulary.

On the whole, the book certainly deserves praise for its dedication to detailed data on the Rabha language. A good example of the “document everything”-spirit (Noonan 2008; van Driem 2002) is the appendix (pp. 844-847) which contains data on an old numeral system in Rabha as well as a recently invented numeral system (the numeral system in actual usage is described in the main section). Such “completeness” is precisely what, e.g., typologists who otherwise have little access to the language, appreciate finding in a grammar book.

On the negative side, the presentation is sometimes vague and the organization is not quite the conventional (especially the chapter called phrase-level analysis, which contains quite disparate material). This would not have meant trouble if there was an index, which

unfortunately, there isn't. While the data is all there, it may be necessary to browse the table of contents to locate it.

Although explanations of grammatical facts as well as theoretical motivations are phrased oddly more than a couple of times, the plentitude of examples gives the reader the ability to make his or her own judgment.

I noted no serious spelling, typesetting or reference errors.

The grammar should be of interest to Himalayanists and typologists alike. It cannot be emphasized enough that the documentation of an undescribed language is always an important and long-lasting contribution to the field of study. In this case, there are also concrete contributions to the enigmas of tonogenesis and Tibeto-Burman historical linguistics.

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