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review of: **A grammar of Lepcha, by Helen Plaisier**

Guillaume Jacques

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Review of *A Grammar of Lepcha*, by Helen Plaisier, Leiden: Brill 2007, 254 pp.<sup>1</sup>

Among the languages of the Sino-Tibetan family, Lepcha is remarkable for three reasons. First, it is one of few to have an indigeneous writing system, dating from the seventeenth century, its modest literary corpus mostly consisting of translations from Tibetan. Second, it is isolated within the family, forming an independent subgroup with no known close relatives. Third, it has played an important role in historical Sino-Tibetan linguistics, being one of the most commonly cited languages in Bodman (1980, 1988)'s articles.

The book under review is the first modern linguistic grammar of Lepcha. Two grammars of this language have been previously produced: Mainwaring (1876), and more recently Támsáng (1978). However, the former is largely outdated, while the latter is mainly a textbook for students rather than a linguistic description properly speaking. Plaisier's work is an exquisitely written description of the language, with all examples systematically given morpheme-by-morpheme glosses, in contrast to the former grammars. The traditional Lepcha script is used alongside Roman transliteration. Insights from Sino-Tibetan comparative linguistics also first appear in her description. In particular, p. 105 she makes the important remark that the irregular stem alternation in the verb 'to give' *bi / bo*<sup>2</sup> probably is one of the last traces in the language of a full-fledge agreement system akin to the one observed in the Kiranti languages.

This observation is probably correct, but it should be noted that no known language has exactly the same pattern. In Limbu, for instance, the cognate verb 'to give' is also one of the few irregular verbs, and exhibits stem alternation that is due to vowel harmony with the agreement suffixes (Michailovsky 2002: 53); however, a rounded vowel /u/ vocalism appears when the recipient is in the *third* person, while front vowel vocalisms /i/ and /ε/ appear when the recipient is *first or the second* person; this is the reversed of the situation in Lepcha. More investigations into Lepcha historical phonology will be needed before the origin of this alternation can be made clear. Also, it would be useful to know whether similar alternations occur with other verbs in older Lepcha texts.

Plaisier has managed to make a very readable grammar of the Lepcha language, and it will become easier for Sino-Tibetan comparative linguists to learn to read texts in this language, using the six glossed texts in the appendix of her book<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately, her grammar cannot be considered a complete description of this language, unlike other books published in the same series. There is almost no analysis of either relativization or complementation, although several examples of relative and complement clauses can be found in the texts. Also, her approach to morphology is rather sketchy. Almost nothing is said about non-productive nominal morphology, such as the existence of *ta-*, *tu-* or *ka-* prefixes (as in *tabók* 'belly', *tukpát* 'knee' and *kajóm* 'finger') which might be ancient, and only very few remarks are made regarding older verbal morphology (p.51). Moreover, although she acknowledges the presence of Tibetan loanwords in

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Nathan Hill for his corrections on this review.

<sup>2</sup> The first form is used when the recipient is non-speech participant, and the second when it is a speech participant.

<sup>3</sup> A few minor mistakes have been detected in the glosses. For instance, p. 148. *ǎring-re* is glossed *language* instead of *language-DEF*.

Lepcha, no systematic attempt is made to propose rigorous criteria to distinguish between cognates and loanwords<sup>4</sup>.

With the present book as a basis for further research, it is hoped that a more comprehensive description of Lepcha syntax, as well as an in-depth analysis of its history will eventually be published. More collections of glossed texts, either ancient or modern, would also be extremely useful for Sino-Tibetan linguists.

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Jacques G. 2004. *Phonologie et morphologie du japhug (rGyalrong)*, Thèse de doctorat, université Paris 7 – Denis Diderot. <http://xiang.free.fr/these-japhug.pdf>

Mainwaring, G.B. 1876. *A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language as it exists in the Dorjeling and Sikkim Hills*, Calcutta.

Michailovsky, B. 2002. *Limbu-English dictionary of the Mewa Kola Dialect with English-Limbu Index*, Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.

Támsáng, K.P. 1978. *Róngrínghrím: A Grammar of the Lepcha Language*. Kalimpong : Lyángsóng Támsáng.

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Jacques 2004: 83-200 for an attempt to carry this investigation in another language influenced by Tibetan.