RECONSTRUCTING LINGUISTIC HISTORY IN A DIALECT CONTINUUM

The Kamta, Rajbanshi, and Northern Deshi Bangla subgroup of Indo-Aryan

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Except where it is otherwise acknowledged in the text,
this thesis represents the original research of the author.

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Abstract

This study outlines a methodological framework for reconstructing linguistic history within a dialect continuum and applies this methodology to an under-described, controversial, and complex subgroup of New Indo-Aryan (NIA)—the Kamta, Rajbanshi and Northern Deshi Bangla lects (KRNB).

Dialect continua are characterised by non-discrete boundaries between speech communities, and as a result previously divergent lects may undergo common innovations; the result is the familiar picture of overlapping dialectological isoglosses. The sequencing of these innovations and the historical relations between the lects involved are often highly ambiguous. Given the right sociohistorical conditions, a widespread innovation may be more recent than a localised innovation—the very opposite sequencing to that implied by the splits in a family tree.

Not surprisingly, discrete application to the NIA continuum of traditional methodologies—including the Comparative Method, etymological reconstruction and dialect geography—has yielded unsatisfactory and at times chronologically distorted results. Historical studies, therefore, have chosen between: (a) only studying the histories of NIA lects with written records; (b) reconstructing using the chronology suggested by the shape of a family tree; or (c) settling for a 'flat', non-historical account of dialect geography.

Under the approach developed here, the strengths of each of these traditional methods are synthesised within an overarching framework provided by a sociohistorical theory of language change. This synthesis enables the linguistic history of the KRNB lects to be reconstructed with some detail from the proto-Kamta stage (1250-1550 AD) up to the present day. Innovations are sequenced based on three types of criteria: linguistic, textual and sociohistorical. The old Kamta stage, and its relation to old Bangla and Asamiya, is reconstructed based on linguistic Propagation Events and Speech Community Events—two concepts central to the methodology. The old Kamta speech community and its language became divided into western, central and eastern subsections during the middle KRNB period (1550-1787 AD, dates assigned by

attested sociohistorical events). During the same period, KRNB lects also underwent partial reintegration with NIA lects further afield by means of more widely propagated changes. This trend of differentiation at a local level, concurrent with reintegration at a wider level, also characterises the modern KRNB period from 1787 AD to the present.

This account of KRNB linguistic history is based on a rigorous reconstruction of changes in phonology and morphology. The result is not only a reconstruction of historical changes, but of the proto-Kamta phoneme inventory, hundreds of words of vocabulary, and specific areas of nominal and verbal morphology. The reconstruction is based on data collected in the field for the purposes of this study. Phonological reconstruction has made use of the WordCorr software program, and the reconstructed vocabulary is presented in a comparative wordlist in an appendix.

The methodology developed and applied in this study has been found highly successful; though naturally not without its own limitations. This study has significance for its contribution both to the methodology of historical linguistic reconstruction and to the light shed on the linguistic prehistory of KRNB.

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Linguistic abbreviations & conventions used

Glossing rules and abbreviations follow the Leipzig conventions:
http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/files/morpheme.html

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
A	agent-like argument of canonical transitive verb
ABL	ablative
ACC	accusative
ADJ	adjective
ADV	adverb(ial)
AGR	agreement
AN	animate[1]
ANP	anaphoric[1]
AUX	auxiliary
BEN	benefactive
CLF	classifier
CMP	comparative[1]
DAT	dative
DEF	definite
DEM	demonstrative
DIST	distal
FUT	future
GEN	genitive
H	high (in terms of honour), contrasts with L (low)[1]
IMP	imperative
INDF	indefinite
INF	infinitive
INS	instrumental
INT	interrogative[1]
INTR	intransitive
IPFV	imperfective
L	low (in terms of honour), contrasts with high[1]
LOC	locative
MI	morphological innovation[1]
NOM	nominative
NUM	numeral[1]
NT	neutral (in terms of honour), contrasts with high and low[1]
OBL	oblique
P	patient-like argument of canonical transitive verb
PDL	propagation-defined lect (see section 3.2.1)[1]
PE	propagation event (see section 3.2.1)[1]
PFV	perfective
PI	phonological innovation[1]

[1] These abbreviations are not part of the Leipzig conventions.

PL	plural
PN	propagation network (see section 3.2.1)[2]
PROX	proximal/proximate
PRS	present
PST	past
PTCP	participle
r̥	syllabic ‘r’ as transcribed in Indic studies (cf. 3.3.1)
REL	relative
S	single argument of canonical intransitive verb
SBJ	subject
SC	speech community[2]
SCE	speech community event[2]
SG	singular
TR	transitive
*(*x*)	the presence of *x* in the reconstructed datum is ambiguous
*(*x*,*y*)	*x* **or** *y* was present for the reconstructed stage
*[*x*]	the datum is reconstructible in two forms, one with *x* and one without *x*.
*[*x*,*y*]	the datum is reconstructible in two forms, one with *x* and one with *y*.
{X,…}	innovation pertains to lects *X*,…

[2] These abbreviations are not part of the Leipzig conventions.

Abbreviations for languages, locations and social groups

*	Reconstructed form
BH	Bhatibari, West Bengal, India (site of data collection during stage 1)
Bhoj.	Bhojpuri lect
BN	Bongaigaon, Assam, India (site of data collection during stage 1)
c.'X'	Central 'X' (e.g. c.KRNB)
c.Mg	Central Magadhan subgroup of lects (along with w.Mg. termed the 'Bihari' lects, including Maithili)
ext.'*X*'	Extended 'X' (e.g. ext.c.KRNB)
e.'*X*'	Eastern 'X' (e.g. e.Mg)
e.Mg	Eastern Magadhan subgroup of lects (Oriya, Bangla, Asamiya, KRNB, Mal Paharia, etc.)
H	Hindu (socio-religious group)
Hn	Hindi (language)
KRNB	Kamta, Rajbanshi, Northern Deshi Bangla subgroup of Indo-Aryan
KS	Kishanganj, Bihar, India (site of data collection during stage 1)
M	Muslim (socio-religious group)
Mg.	Magadhan subgroup of lects, further divided into e.Mg. and w.Mg.
MH	Mahayespur, Jhapa, Nepal (site of data collection during stage 1)
MIA	Middle Indo-Aryan
Mth.	Maithili
n.w.'*X*'	North-western 'X' (e.g. nw.KRNB)
NIA	New Indo-Aryan
Np.	Nepal (nation) and Nepali (lect)
OIA	Old Indo-Aryan
p-	reconstructed ancestral (or proto-) language stage (e.g. p-Kamta)
p-Kamta	Reconstructed stage in linguistic history; ancestor of modern KRNB lects; defined by integrated propagation events.
Rjb	Rajbanshi
RL	Rangeli, Morang, Nepal (site of data collection during stage 1)
RP	Rangpur, Bangladesh (site of data collection during stage 1)
SC	speech community
SCA	Standard Colloquial Asamiya
SCB	Standard Colloquial Bangla
SCH	Standard Colloquial Hindi
SCO	Standard Colloquial Oriya
SH	Shalkumar, West Bengal, India (site of data collection during stage 1)
Sjp	Surjapuri
TH	Thakurgaon, Bangladesh (site of data collection during stage 1)
w.'*X*'	Western 'X' (e.g. w.KRNB)
w.Mg	Western Magadhan subgroup of lects (along with c.Mg. also termed the 'Bihari' lects, including Bhojpuri)
'x'; 'y'	Synchronic variation between forms 'x' and 'y'