

## What favors the development of rara? A Himalayan case study

The Himalayan and Caucasian regions host a number of relative rara, i.e. features that are rare relative to the surrounding Eurasian macro-area, but not relative to the world at large (Bickel & Nichols 2003, 2005a, 2005b, Nichols & Bickel 2005a, 2005b). Examples include, among others, high degrees of verb synthesis, radical double-marking, possessive inflection classes, or inflectional optatives. In this paper I focus on absolute rara in the Himalayas, i.e. features that deviate from the worldwide (not just Eurasian) norm, such as, among others:

- Upside-down split ergativity: ergative alignment for first person, but not further down the referential hierarchy (Bickel 2000)
- Antipassives (instead of passives) used for first person patient reference
- Syntactic ergativity in complementation (Bickel & Nichols 2000)
- Free prefix ordering (Bickel et al. 2005)
- Endocclisis (Bickel et al. 2005)
- Conjunct person forms (where one form references the speaker in statements but the addressee in questions) (Bickel 2000, Curnow 2002)
- Spatial cases ('at the tree up there', 'at the tree down there', etc.) (Rai 1988, Bickel 1997)
- Triplication as a derivational process (Rai & Winter 1997, Rai et al. 2005)
- Breathy voiced stops derived from voiceless aspirates ( $p^h \rightarrow b^h/V\_V$ )

All these features are found only in Tibeto-Burman (TB), specifically in the Kiranti, Newaric and Bodish branches of the family. Why do we find rara especially here, and not in the surrounding regions?

I propose that one key factor favoring the development and survival of rara is the absence of massive cross-family substrate interference over at least 2Ky. Such interference appears to threaten the survival of rara: the large language spreads that affected northern Eurasia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia over several millennia (Nichols 1992) resulted in a general decrease of rara on these regions. Much more recently (since about 150 years), a large cross-family shift (from TB to Indo-Aryan Nepali) affects the Himalayas, and again, it results in the loss of rara. By contrast, there is no evidence that the surviving, rara-sporting TB languages of the Himalayas were ever affected by large-scale substrates over the past 2Ky (while there may well have been shifts between typologically similar TB languages.)

The absence of large cross-family substrate effects does not mean isolation, and it does not preclude intense language contact for political, cultural and economic reasons. Indeed, some of the TB languages with rara (specifically, Kiranti languages spoken in the South, and Newar) show evidence for specific developments triggered by earlier contact with Indo-Aryan (especially politeness and ritual language strategies, calques and lexical borrowing). But these contact situations do not appear to have ever resulted in language shift and were typically limited to elite segments of the population.

There is tentative evidence that the model proposed for rara developments in the Himalayas carries over to other hotbeds of rara: at the western fringe of Eurasia for example, most rara surveyed by Haspelmath (1998) are only found in Indo-European languages, and while these received much within-family substrates, there is no evidence for massive between-family substrate interference over the past 2Ky.

As an additional factor favoring rara, Nettle (1999) suggests that nonstandard variants (rara) are more likely to stabilize in a smaller than in a larger community. At least one rarum found in the Himalayas is in conflict with the theory behind this: free prefix ordering crucially involves non-stabilization in a small community, yet is a rarum.