

Tangkhulic
Tongues

David R.
Mortensen

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Working on
Huishu

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East Tusom
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Lessons
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The Tangkhulic Tongues

How I Started Working on Endangered Languages

David R. Mortensen

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Overview

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- A bit about my early background, with relation to documentation of endangered languages.
- How I happened on to documenting an endangered language (Kachai).
- How this led to work on another, much more endangered, language (Huishu).
- How that led to more extensive work on two other endangered languages, both of which were previously undescribed (East Tusom and Sorbung).
- The morals of this story.

Theoretical and Area Interests

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- Areal interest in Southeast Asia.
 - Previously carried out work on “Sinospheric” languages, especially Hmong.
 - Prior to Tangkhulic, did a very small amount of work on a more “Indospheric” language, Hakha Lai.
- Theoretical interests:
 - Phonology
 - Morphology
 - Historical linguistics/language change
 - Typology

Previous Work on Minority Languages

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- My main language, prior to my work on Tangkhulic, was Hmong.
 - A minority language of China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand (and also the US, Australia, France, French Guiana, etc.)
 - Threatened in some countries, but not endangered.
 - Large speaker population for a minority language.
 - Children learning the language in many communities.
- Hmong served as a “gateway drug” to work on endangered languages.

Previous Work on Minority Languages (cont.)

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- Why did I start working on Hmong?
 - I was assigned to learn Hmong while working as a missionary during my late teens and early twenties.
 - I turned out to be a rather poor missionary, but a much better linguist.
- After working as a missionary, and finishing my undergraduate degree, I entered the MA/PhD program in Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley, a fact which is pivotal in our story.

Field Methods on Tangkhul

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- Linguistics graduate students at UC Berkeley are required to take a two-semester course in Linguistic Field Methods.
- I was excited to take this course because I was interested in field linguistics.
- I was especially excited that the language to be investigated, when it was my turn to take the course, was a Tibeto-Burman language of North Eastern India.
 - I had been working as a Graduate Student Researcher for STEDT (the Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus), a research project that concentrated primarily on Tibeto-Burman languages.
 - I was also interested in tone, and I knew that TB languages of North Eastern India sometimes had very interesting tonal patterns.

Field Methods on Tangkhul (cont.)

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Lessons
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- As a field methods class, we started working with a graduate student of theology who was a speaker of Tangkhul, a language spoken near the border of Manipur, India and Burma (Myanmar).
- Tangkhul is not endangered.
 - It has about 142,000 speakers, according to a recent census.
 - It is used in education.
- What is it like typologically?
 - Tonal (three tones); moderately complex syllable structure.
 - Agglutinative; primarily suffixing; nominative-accusative alignment.
 - Verb final.

Map of Ukhrul District

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Old Tangkhul Naga Men Enjoy a Rice Beverage

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An Accidental Discovery

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- One day, my elicitation partner and I were working with our consultant.
- We asked her the word for ‘spider’.
 - She answered, “*ʃimcomp^həron*.”
 - Then she corrected herself: “No, that’s my language.”
- We asked, “What do you mean ‘my language’? Isn’t Tangkhul your language?”
- She explained that each village in the Tangkhul area had its own language variety. The language of Ukhrul town (Standard Tangkhul) was used as a lingua franca.
- Her native language was called Kachai (after her village), and was spoken only there (and by a few expatriate families).
- I immediately took up the project of documenting Kachai, which had not been documented previously.

Map of Kachai

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Language Endangerment in Ukhrul District

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Lessons
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- The “village dialects” of the Tangkhul ethnicity had become endangered for a variety of reasons.
 - They never had a large number of speakers since they were typically confined to a single village or cluster of villages.
 - Most were probably never spoken by more than 1,000 individuals.
 - Conversion to Christianity (primarily the American Baptist Denomination) brought **Standard Tangkhul** to each village as a language of worship and literacy.
 - The same forces brought **English** to each village as the language of the international Baptist community.
 - Incorporation of the Tangkhul area into the state of Manipur brought **Meithei** (Manipuri) as a language of government and education.
 - On a larger scale, incorporation into the nation of India brought **Hindi** as a language of military, government, and commerce.

Kachai and Limitations

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Lessons
Learned

- I worked on Kachai and Ukhrul simultaneously. They were closely related, but not nearly so closely related as to be considered dialects of one language.
 - I worked on Ukhrul to complete course responsibilities.
 - I worked on Kachai because it was previously undocumented and apparently endangered.
- This had the disadvantage of limiting the amount of time I could spend on either one.
- My consultant's time was also limited.
- Our work on Kachai consisted mostly of collecting lexical material and working on some basic morphosyntax.

A Spousal Referral

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Lessons
Learned

- My consultant was married to a Tangkhul man.
- She mentioned that he spoke a “dialect” that was *very* different from Kachai or Standard Tangkhul.
- Although he was very busy—he worked in a Christian ministry in inner-city Oakland—he made time to meet with me often enough for me to elicit a substantial word list.
- I also found that his language, Huishu, was even more endangered than Kachai.
- I found him to be an excellent speaker of his native language (something that cannot always be counted on), but he was too pressed for time to meet with me often.

An Additional Consultant

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- Fortunately, the Huishu consultant's younger brother was in town for some of the summer during which I was working most intently on Tangkhulic language documentation.
- *Tangkhulic* is the name that I settled on for the group of languages closely related to Tangkhul and spoken by members of the Tangkhul ethnicity.
- This additional consultant was not as strong a speaker of Huishu as the first, but the data I gathered from him were nonetheless useful.

Map of Huishu

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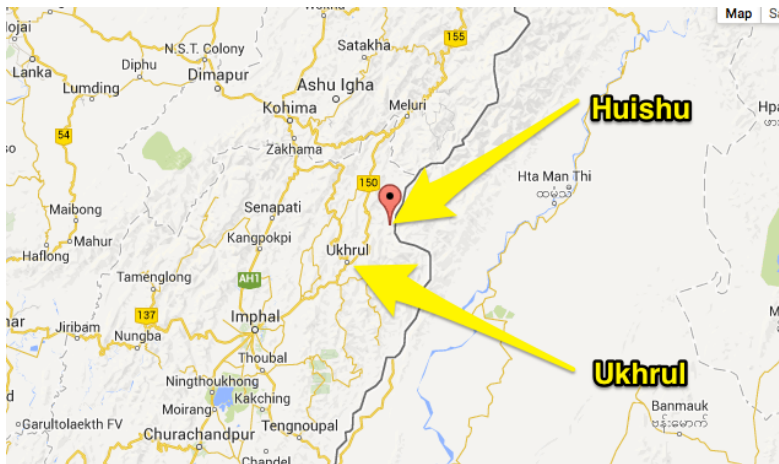
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Phonological Discoveries

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Lessons
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- Around the same time that I was working on Huishu and Kachai, I was learning a lot about the historical phonology of Tibeto-Burman.
- I noticed something unusual: in Huishu there were unexplained /k/'s at the ends of syllables after what should historically have been high vowels (/i/ and /u/, mostly).
- Changes like this go against the usual direction for sound changes and, while not entirely unknown, are quite rare.
- I eventually published a major article about this phenomenon, drawing most heavily on data from Huishu.
- Moral: there are things you are only likely to learn by working with an endangered language.

Exotic Kansas City

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Lessons
Learned

- My first three consultants could only meet with me for a limited amount of time.
- However, they were aware of another Tangkhul theology student and his wife who were living in Kansas City.
- I was able to secure a small grant which allowed me to travel to Kansas, stay for part of a summer, and pay this other couple to work as consultants.
- This couple was also from two different villages and spoken two different languages natively.
 - She spoke **East Tusom**.
 - He spoke **Sorbung**.
- Although data from closely related languages was collected by British military officers in the early nineteenth century, neither of these languages had been documented up to that point.

A Phonological Outlier

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Lessons
Learned

- Tusom is notable for its many phonological innovations:
 - Aspirated stops became affricates at many places of articulation.
 - High vowels became fricatives.
 - Final stops are lost.
 - Final nasals become vowel nasalization.
 - Etc.

Map of East Tusom

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At the Border

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Lessons
Learned

- Sorbung is notable because it does not seem to be a member of the Tangkhulic group at all, even though its speakers consider themselves to be ethnic Tangkhuls.
- It sits at the southern border of the Tangkhul area, near the so-called “Old Kuki” groups.
- Although it is quite distinct, it has more in common with these “Old Kuki” languages than it does with the Tangkhulic languages.

Map of Sorbung

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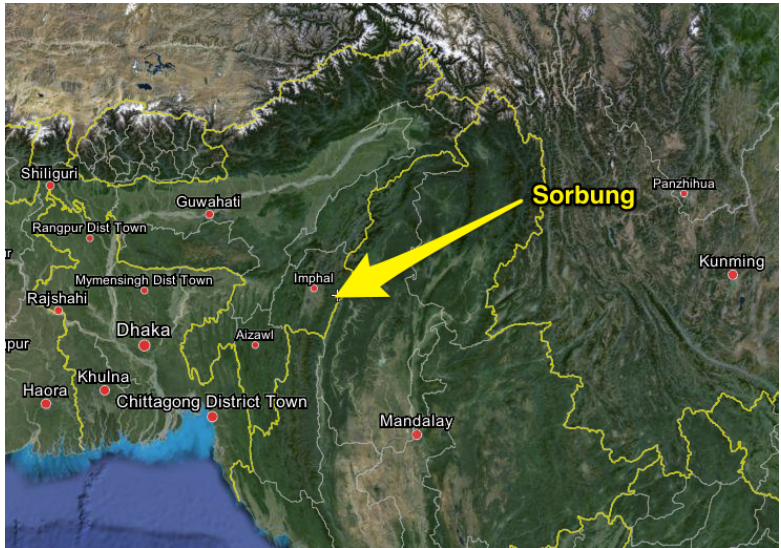
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A Phonological Description

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Lessons
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- I ultimately published a phonological description of Sorbung, in collaboration with a student. That article was the first published description of this endangered language.
- The description also included an extensive word list and notes on the genetic position of the Sorbung with Tibeto-Burman.
- I have sufficient data to publish similar phonological descriptions of Tusom, Kachai, and Huishu as well.
- I feel I owe it to the consultants who sacrificed their time to work with me to publish meaningful descriptions based upon our work together.

Some Lexical Items

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	Kachai	Huishu	Tusom	Sorbung
‘dog’	ʔahwi	ʔahuk	y	ʔuu
‘eat’	kəp ^h əðu	kətse	kəzi	saa
‘animal’	ʔasu	ʔase	ʃi	saa
‘five’	p ^h əŋe	p ^h əŋi	pʃiŋia	rəŋaa
‘die’	kəse	kətik	kətsu	t ^h ii
‘shoot’	kəkop	kaʔk ^h e	kəkəu	kaap
‘far’	kətu	kəke	kəʔi	ʃoo
‘water’	tunɕi	ʔaruk	ntsy	cuu

Languages Where You Least Expect Them

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Lessons
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- If you are looking for endangered languages, you will find them; where you find them will often defy your expectations.
- Many people would not expect that previously undocumented languages could be found in the United States.
- You might be prepared to believe that there were endangered languages spoken by immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area.
- You are less likely to guess that speakers of undocumented and endangered languages could be found at a theological seminary in Kansas City, Kansas.

Why Not Go to India?

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Lessons
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- At the time I was performing active field work on Tangkhulic languages, it was very difficult to travel to Manipur.
- There is a longstanding insurgency (one of the longest continuous insurgencies in the world) in Nagaland and Manipur.
- Tangkhuls are actively involved in this insurgency.
- The Indian government had many reasons to prevent visitors from entering Ukerhul district, in particular.
- **Now, however, the situation has greatly improved and there is no obstacle to engaging in fieldwork in Tangkhul villages.**

Employ Best Practices in Documentation

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- **One mistake I made while doing my documentation work on Tangkhulic languages was failing to employ best practices.**
- **Technological best practices**
 - Use high quality recording equipment for audio: headworn microphone, solid state recorder, or equivalent.
 - Use standard, open formats for text data and lexical databases.
- **Methodological best practices.**
 - Always repeat the elicited form back to the consultant until they are satisfied that it is correct, then proceed. This makes elicitation take much longer, but ensures better transcriptions.
 - Make complete transcriptions (including tone) while the consultant is available.

Greatest Regrets

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- **The documentation that I produced was not ideal for language maintenance or revitalization.**
 - The data was not made readily available to the relevant speech communities.
 - The form of the data was not appropriate for teaching or learning the languages.
 - Too much phonology and lexicon; too little morphosyntax, text.
- **This could be seen as a case of language abandonment.**
 - Like many field workers, I worked on a language (or group of languages) for a while, then moved on.
 - What is needed is linguists that will stick with language communities in the long term.
 - In my defense, I'm eager to return to Tangkhulic.

Concluding Remarks

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- All that being said, I highly recommending working with endangered language communities.
- It provides an opportunity to work to preserve precious cultural and linguistic resources.
- Working on the documentation, preservation, and revitalization of endangered languages is doubly rewarding:
 - You get to satisfy an **ethical imperative** to help some of the most marginalized communities in the world.
 - You get to seek out unique **intellectual challenges** when you develop documentation or technologies for endangered languages.

Further Questions?

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