

Tangkhulic  
Tongues

David R.  
Mortensen

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Encountering  
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Working on  
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A Second  
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# The Tangkhulic Tongues

## How I Started Working on Endangered Languages

David R. Mortensen

September 18, 2014

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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.)

- 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.

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## Map of Ukhrul District

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## Tangkhul Field Methods



# 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, “*simconpʰəron*.”
  - 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 Ukhru 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 Learned

- 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 Ukhru simultaneously. They were closely related, but not nearly so closely related as to be considered dialects of one language.
  - I worked on Ukhru 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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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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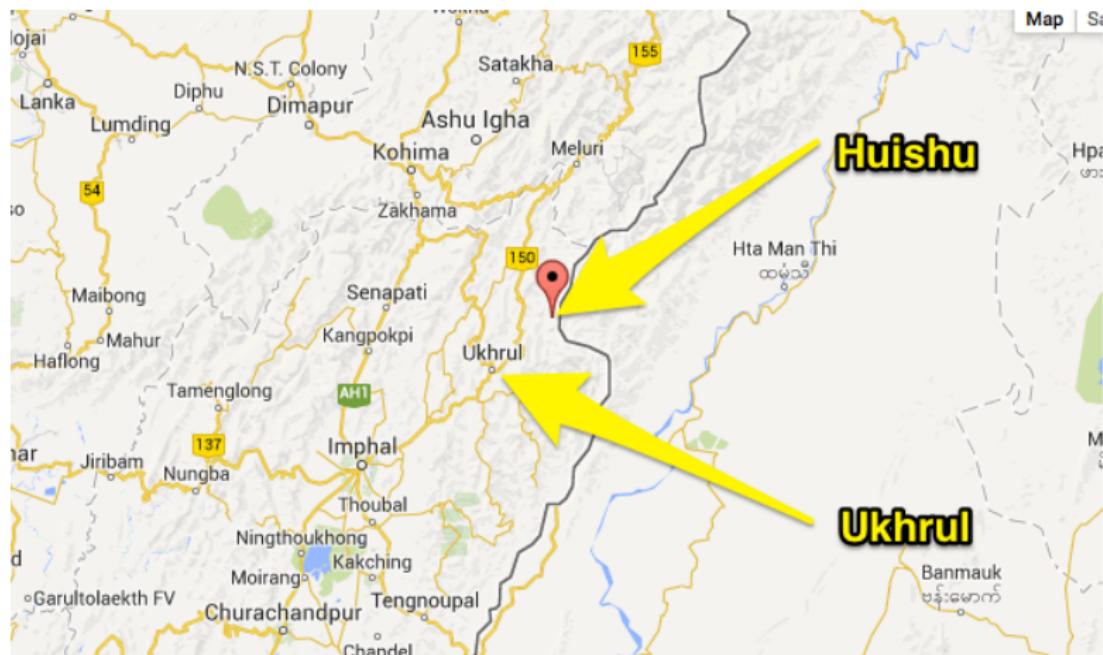
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# Phonological Discoveries

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- 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

- 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.

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# 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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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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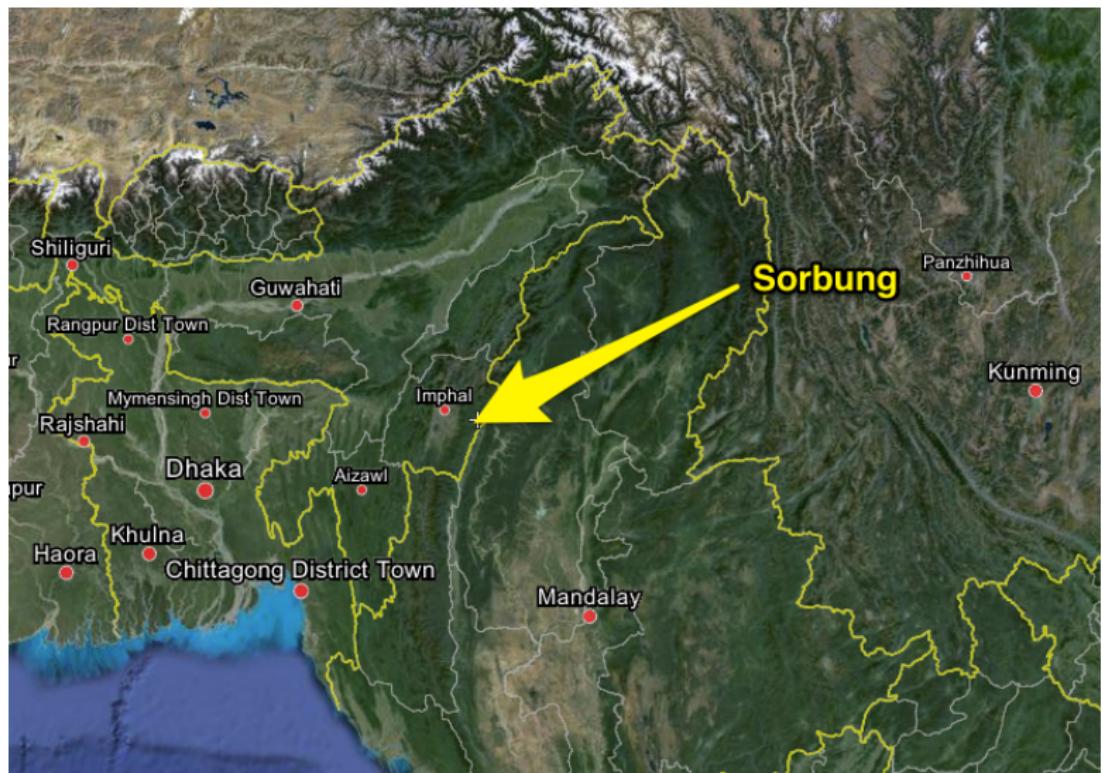
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# A Phonological Description

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- 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’	?ahwi	?ahuk	y	?uu
‘eat’	kəp <sup>h</sup> əðu	kətse	kəzi	saa
‘animal’	?asu	?ase	ʃi	saa
‘five’	p <sup>h</sup> əʃə	p <sup>h</sup> əŋi	pʃiŋia	rəŋaa
‘die’	kəse	kətik	kətsw	t <sup>h</sup> ii
‘shoot’	kəkop	ka?k <sup>h</sup> e	kəkəw	kaap
‘far’	kətu	kəke	kəhi	soo
‘water’	tunði	?aruk	ntsy	cuu

# Languages Where You Least Expect Them

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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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- 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 Utkhul 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

- **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.

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# 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 recommend 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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