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THE AFFINAL KIN REGISTER IN DHIMAL

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study deals with the grammatical indexing of the marked relationship between affinal kin in Dhimal[1], a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by 20-40,000 people in the lowlands of southeastern Nepal and adjoining areas of West Bengal, India. There are two mutually intelligible dialects, an eastern and a western. This study focuses on the more widely spoken western dialect.

Dhimal has generally been characterized as a simple pronominalizing language. Beneath this facade of simplicity, however, lies a more complex agreement structure. In addition to the pattern of subject agreement, the participants of the verb may be marked in transitive scenarios with portmanteau suffixes indexing both subject and object (King forthcoming). Furthermore, there is also a distinct speech register in which the social relationship obtaining between affinal kin groups is marked. This multifaceted relationship is indexed both lexically, through distinct pronominals, and in the verb agreement morphology. Aside from linguistic coding, this relationship may also be marked by prescribed behaviors, such as avoidance and ritualized non-verbal greetings upon meeting. This paper, however, will only touch on these issues, which merit a thorough investigation of their own, as they relate to the grammatical aspects of this relationship.

The grammatical marking of kinship status in Australian aboriginal languages has been well documented (see Haviland 1979; Heath 1982). These complex and varied systems are characterized by distinct pronominal forms (often plural) and avoidance language involving extensive lexical replacement. Less well known are similar systems in other languages. While the Dhimal system of indexing the social relationship between affinal kin may be one of the most elaborate in Tibeto-Burman, it reflects both universal tendencies and areal patterns. This speech register shares much in common with honorific and other respect registers, including the employment of plural forms to mark singular

[1] A version of this paper was presented at the Himalayan Languages Workshop hosted by Carol Genetti at UC Santa Barbara, June 22-23, 1999. I would like to thank the participants for their helpful comments and suggestions.

actants and socially-constrained behavior between participants. The notion of markedness in the application of these context-dependent forms will be drawn upon in explicating their use. In the following sections, I will introduce the social context in which this register is used, describe its morphosyntactic characteristics, and explore the significance of these grammatical devices for the historical development of Dhimal.

2. CLANS, MARRIAGE, AND IN-LAWS

In his seminal work *The Gift* (1990), Marcel Mauss identified the gift exchange as a fundamental element in human society, one which permeates the legal, economic, moral, religious, and other cultural spheres of a given people. The very act of giving, which requires giving back, generates solidarity between the givers and the receivers. Mauss recognized that this exchange is not limited to material goods, but extends to humans in the form of labor or women. Lévi-Strauss (1969), however, explicitly explored the exchange of women between families, clans, and other groups, citing it as one of the most important forces in traditional societies. In many cultures, the relationship between key actors involved in or affected by this exchange is one that receives explicit coding in the grammar. In Dhimal society, a woman plays a pivotal role in this register, in that those who employ it are the individuals who stand to gain from or be deprived of her and her children's labor after marriage.

To understand the nature of the morphosyntactic marking used between affinal kin, one must examine the social context in which it is embedded. In the Dhimal world, kin and clan are important structures of social organization and ritual life. There are 13 exogamous, patrilineal clans and numerous sub-clans, which determine the deities one worships, whose death one has to mourn, and whom one may marry. In seeking a prospective wife a man is restricted from choosing a woman among his own clan, and from those related to him within several generations[2]. He must not only woo the woman of his choice, but also pass muster with her parents. During marriage negotiations, a woman is at liberty to reject any suitor not to her liking, and if her parents reject a suitor of her choice, she has several options open to her[3]. In any case for the marriage to be socially sanctioned a bride-price must be paid and gifts exchanged. Some of the stakeholders who must be compensated materially or monetarily (even if in

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[2] I have heard speakers of the western dialect claim that the Purbiya or eastern Dhimal speakers descend from those who broke these marriage taboos and were forced to settle to the east.

[3] While parents attempt to restrict a young woman's options for partners, if the woman is determined and resourceful, she may have the ultimate say. A woman may elope with her beau or in extreme cases, even threaten suicide.

symbolic form) for their loss include the woman's parents, her girlfriends, village youths, and elders. This exchange begins a reciprocal relationship of obligations and rights.

The affinal register is reciprocally employed between two distinct groups: i) the parents of a husband and wife, and ii) a man and his wife's senior relatives. The first group encompasses participants belonging to the same age group and standing in the same relationship to each other, while the second group delineates the participants by relative age. Regmi (1985, 112), in his study of socioeconomic patterns in Dhimal society, notes the use of what he terms "suffixes of respect" between affinal kin, though he incorrectly limits their use to wife's brother. In this social domain, marked forms are employed in all persons, tenses and aspects, and it is considered disrespectful to use forms from the standard agreement paradigm. Table 1 lists the reciprocal relations in which this register is used (a more extensive list of affinal kin terms is included in the appendix)[4].

behai (CSpF)	←→	*behai* (CSpF)	
beheni (CSpM)		*beheni* (CSpM)	
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mhawa (DH)	←→	*juwa* (WF)	*mausi* (MZ-)
		jube (WM)	*mausa* (MZ-H)
		go (WB+)	*mamai* (MB-)
		naju (WZ+)	*mami* (MB-W)
		kaka (FB-)	*boi* (PSib+)
		ate (FB-W)	*aju* (PF)
		pisai (FZ-)	*ajai* (PM)
		peusa (FZ-H)	

Table 1. Kin relations requiring the honorific

The kin groups employing these forms are symmetrical only in the case of the parents of the bride and groom. The term for the parents-in-law (*behai-beheni*) refers to both the givers and the receivers in this exchange. The terms show some interesting connections to kinship terms in two other Tibeto-Burman

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4 Standard abbreviations are used: C (child), P (parent), Sp (spouse), F (father), M (mother), B (brother), Z (sister), Sib (sibling), S (son), D (daughter), W (wife), H (husband). Plus (+) and minus (-) signs indicate elder and younger respectively, and ↔ indicates a reciprocal relationship.

languages. In Newari, the term *behaiti* signifies 'wife', while in Bodo, *bihau-bikhunju* has the same meaning as in Dhimal. The near correspondence of these terms suggest that they may be borrowings, but from where is not clear, though the feminine ending *-ni* in the Dhimal form points to a possible Indic origin.

Relations between the *mhawa* (DH) and his senior in-laws are characterized by respect, distance, and the maintenance of social harmony. One indication of this respect is the affix *ju*, used in terms for respected persons, which occurs as a prefix in the terms *juwa* (WF), *jube* (WM), and as a suffix in the term *naju* (WZ+) This root is also found in the terms for another honored group—one's grandparents (*aju-ajai*). The kinship term *go*, signifying wife's classificatory elder brother, and elder sister's husband, is also revealing in this respect. It likely stems from PTB **m-gaw* meaning 'head', a body-part which is often used in terms for elder male relatives in Tibeto-Burman (see Matisoff 1979, 26).

While marked forms are employed reciprocally, the status of the bridegroom in Dhimal culture suggests a certain asymmetry. Regmi (110) notes that the *mhawa* "son-in-law"[5] is jokingly abused and is served substandard food by the bride's female kin on his first night. Many lowland indigenous groups in Nepal show striking similarities. In ceremonies preceding a wedding, a Rajbangshi bridegroom is verbally abused in song by the bride's girlfriends, while in Dhanuwar society, the bride's senior female relatives verbally abuse the bridegroom and generally treat him shabbily. In Saptariya Tharu dialect of Maithili, the terms of address for father and mother-in-law are *thakur* and *thaukrain*, which derive from words meaning 'lord' and 'lady' respectively, while honorific agreement forms are primarily used with affinal kin. These patterns suggest a relatively low status for the groom, at least in the early stages of this relationship[6].

Although the system is reciprocal for those participating in it, it is still largely asymmetrical in regard to participants. Outside this marked relationship lie all the *mhawa*'s kin (except his parents), and the bride and her younger siblings. In contrast to the formal relationship with his senior in-laws, a man has a friendly, joking relationship with his wife's younger siblings. Because they are his wife's juniors, his *huigo* (WB-) and *hulme* (WZ-) do not participate in the formal deferential aspects of this relationship. Unsurprisingly, they also do not employ the marked forms.

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5 The term *mhawa* clearly derives from PTB ***s-mak-pa** 'son-in-law'.

6 Noting the relationship between a Kayapo man and his in-laws, Haviland tentatively comes to the same conclusion for Guugu Yimidhirr (p. 388).