

Dolakha Newar

Selections from Chapter 1 of Genetti (2007) *A Reference Grammar of Dolakha Newar* [Mouton Grammar Series]. Berlin: Mouton.

Newar is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by approximately 825,000 people (Yadava 2003: 141). Most speakers are located in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal, although there are other Newar communities scattered throughout the country. The village of Dolakha is one such community. It is clear from historical records that Dolakha was well-established as a Newar settlement by the 14th century and it is likely that it originated centuries earlier. The variety of Newar which is spoken in Dolakha is referred to by the speakers as *Dolakhae*, a term which I will use interchangeably with the longer *Dolakha Newar*. *Dolakhae* is mutually unintelligible with the dialects of the Kathmandu Valley. However, it is largely intelligible with Tauthali Newar and the other Newar varieties spoken in the districts northeast of Kathmandu.

The Village of Dolakha

The village of Dolakha is located approximately 145 kilometers to the east of Kathmandu, in the Dolakha district of the Janakpur zone. The village is composed of a series of *tols* 'neighborhoods' which are set on a steep, south facing hillside, high above the Tama Kosi river. The altitude is given as varying between 1700–1830 meters, or approximately 5500–6000 feet (Kalinchowk Youth Club 1988: 7). From Dolakha, one can see a spectacular view of the high peaks of the Himalayas, particularly the peak Gauri Shankar which towers above the village at 7,154 meters (23,471 feet). Dolakha is only about three kilometers from the Dolakha District government center of Carikot, which is directly on the road between Kathmandu and Jiri.

The most recent statistics on the population of Dolakha are the results of a baseline survey conducted and published in 1988 by the Kalinchowk Youth Club with the assistance of the United Nations Volunteer Participatory Development Program. The door-to-door survey lists the total population of Dolakha as 5,645 (Kalinchowk Youth Club 1988: 19).¹ While no explicit statistics on the ethnic breakdown of the village exist to my knowledge, generally it is assumed that the majority of these residents are Newar, although Thangmis, Tamangs and members of other groups are represented in smaller numbers. The Dolakha Newars are overwhelmingly Hindu, and tend to be from the Shrestha castes, including the Chatharia Shresthas (Mallas, Joshis, Pradhans, Amatyas, Rajbhandaris, etc.) and the Pantharia Shresthas (Shresthas proper and other groups) (Nepali 1965).

The number of speakers of the Dolakhae language is certain to be much larger than suggested by the door-to-door survey. This is because there is a strong trend in the village for young people to move to other parts of Nepal to follow business and educational pursuits, thus there is a large community of Dolakhae speakers in the Kathmandu Valley, and there are many others scattered throughout Nepal. Most teenagers move out of Dolakha for at least several years; many people remain permanently outside the village, although they may visit often, or leave their young children there to be raised by grandparents or other members of their extended family. There is a strong trend for Dolakhae people to marry Newars from the Kathmandu Valley or other areas outside of Dolakha. This provides further incentive to reside permanently outside the village. Children raised in these households tend to speak Nepali or other Newar dialects, although some may learn to speak Dolakhae if there are sufficient numbers of Dolakhae speakers living in or visiting the household. In general, though, there is a current trend for children not to learn the Dolakhae dialect. If this trend continues, the vitality of the language may be greatly diminished within one or two generations. One may thus consider the Dolakha dialect to be endangered.

While the lack of transmission of Dolakhae to the children of many Dolakha Newars is alarming, it should be noted that many in the community are making a conscious effort to preserve and promote the Dolakhae language. There have been three recent MA theses produced by Dolakha Newars on their language and culture (I. Pradhan 2001; U. Pradhan 2003; Y. K. Shrestha 2002). The last ten years has also seen the production of two newspapers in the language. In addition, Dolakha Nepal Bhasa Khalak is an active society expressly founded for the promotion of the Dolakhae language. Community gatherings, such as meetings of the Kalingchowk Youth Club, are multilingual, with speeches being made in Dolakhae, Kathmandu Newar, Nepali, and/or English. Thus the Dolakhae people are aware of the decline in the transmission of the language to the younger generation and are actively working to reverse this trend. Whether these efforts will be ultimately successful remains to be seen, but they are a clear attestation to the strength of the Dolakhae community, a clear prerequisite for language retention.

Dolakha is known for its antiquity and in particular its ancient temples. The most famous of these is the Bhimsen temple, which is important not only to the Newars but also to the Eastern Tamangs (Bickel 2000: 695; Tautscher 1998: 176–178). The legend which I was told by a Dolakha elder was that a group of porters were traveling over the hill and one traveler, discouraged that his rice was not cooked when his pot came into contact with a certain rock, struck the rock with a spoon, and that the rock began to bleed a mixture of blood and milk. People then realized that this rock was an incarnation of the god Bhimsen, asked his forgiveness, and built a temple surrounding it. A more elaborated, but

slightly different, version of this story may be found in Tautscher (1998: 177). The Bhimsen temple continues to be influential in Nepal to this day. Many people from Kathmandu make pilgrimages to worship at this temple, as the god Bhimsen is particularly well known for granting success in business. The stone itself is still claimed to be miraculous. Tautscher (1998: 177) provides the following account:

Bhimesvar is known to ‘sweat’ (liquid oozes from the stone) indicating a crisis in the kingdom of Nepal or even a threat to the royal family of Nepal. Bhimesvar is said to have ‘sweated’ in 1949, before the Rana prime ministers lost their ruling power, and in 1990 when heavy demonstrations occurred against the Panchayat government. The chief district officer of Dolakha himself had to worship the statue of Bhimewvar and the sweat of Bhimsen was carried in a cotton pad to the royal court in Kathmandu for sacrificial *puja* to appease the god.

While the Newars of Dolakha celebrate many of the same ceremonies as those of the Kathmandu Valley, the customs and rituals observed in the ceremonies are often unique. Mahani (Dasain) is the most important annual festival in Dolakha and the manner of celebration is unique to this community. Many Dolakhae people return to the village from other parts of Nepal to participate in Mahani annually.

Synopsis of Dolakha history

The municipality of Dolakha has a long history. Unfortunately, the details of this history are at times sketchy, although a number of stone inscriptions and old documents do provide us with a rough outline. The most in-depth work on Dolakha history is *Dolakhaako Aitihāsik Ruprekha* [Collection of Dolakha History] by the eminent historians Dhanavajra Vajrācārya and Tek Bahadur Shrestha (1974). The brief synopsis given here is primarily based on this work.

Concerning the prehistory of Dolakha, there has been some speculation that the area was originally ruled by Kiratas. Vajrācārya and T. B. Shrestha (1974: 16–17) cite three pieces of evidence in favor of this hypothesis. The first is the location of Dolakha which is in close proximity to modern Kiranti groups.² The second is that some cultural traditions appear to be similar to those of modern Kirantis. And the third is that the majority of Dolakha Newars fall into the Shrestha caste category, a category which traditionally applied to administrators and tradesman, as opposed to priests, farmers, or artisans. This suggests that when Newars originally established the settlement in Dolakha, they went as administrators to an area where the population was largely non-Newar. However, while Dolakha is located in the eastern region of the country, the current non-Newar inhabitants in the area immediately surrounding Dolakha are

not Kirantis, but speakers of either West Himalayish languages (Thami and Tamang) or Sherpa (Bodish).

Regarding the dating of the Newar settlement of Dolakha, it is clear that it was well-established by the time of the Malla period (A.D. 1200–1768). It is possible that the initial establishment was significantly earlier. Vajrācārya and T. B. Shrestha (1974: 16) note an assertion made by the historian Babu Ram Acharya that the development of Dolakha occurred after the establishment of trade links between India and China, during the reign of Amsuvarma, who ruled during the Licchavi period in the early 7th century.³ Desiring to provide secure shelters for travelers on this route, Amsuvarma created “security posts” along the passage. Dolakha is said to have been one of these posts, serving as well as a trade link between the Kathmandu Valley and eastern Nepal. Whether or not the establishment of a security post marked the original settlement of Newars in Dolakha is unknown, however it is very clear that Dolakha was well-established as a walled Newar settlement and fort by the early 14th century. Therefore the split of the Dolakha Newars from the Newars of the Valley occurred between 700 and 1600 years ago. Given this fact, it is not surprising to find the high degree of linguistic diversity which is found dividing the Kathmandu Valley and Dolakha “dialects”.

Beginning in the Malla period, the history of Dolakha becomes clearer. At that point, it was considered to be a city, having the required attributes of a wall surrounding the settlement for security, a surrounding forest, and evidence of cultural development in the form of temples and courtrooms (Vajrācārya and T. B. Shrestha 1974: 3). In the early portion of the Malla era, Dolakha was considered to be a feudal state, under the ultimate rule of the kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley.⁴ However during the later Malla era, as the Malla kings began to lose power, the rulers of Dolakha broke away from their feudal lords and attained independence. This appears to have happened primarily in the 16th century A.D., during which time the leaders of Dolakha took titles indicating increased independence and power, until the title *rājadhīrāj* ‘king’ was taken by Indra Singh Dev, who assumed the rule of Dolakha in A.D. 1534 (BS 1591). This independence was officially recognized in the treaty of Pashupati (in Kathmandu) in A.D. 1548 (BS 1605). Under the reign of Indra Singh Dev, Dolakha prospered economically and advanced culturally, and trade relations with Tibet were at their height. After about a century of independence (the exact date is unknown), Dolakha was again annexed to the kingdom of Kathmandu (Vajrācārya and T. B. Shrestha 1974: 39). Although Dolakha was considered to be a state of Kathmandu, there was very little interference from Kathmandu in internal matters.

Around the same time that Dolakha lost its independence, at least in name, to Kathmandu, Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of a small principality called Gorkha west of the Kathmandu Valley, began his campaign for territorial, and

subsequent economic expansion. His primary aim was to wrest control of the Kathmandu Valley from the three Newar kingdoms. He managed this in part by using force or diplomacy to take control of surrounding communities, hence isolating and eventually blockading the Kathmandu Valley. He successfully defeated the three Newar kingdoms in the late 1760s and shifted his capital to Kathmandu in March of 1770 (K. Pradhan 1991: 105). This campaign took more than 20 years to complete. The surrender of Dolakha to Prithvi Naryan Shah occurred in the middle of this campaign, in 1754. K. Pradhan writes that at the time Dolakha had a predominantly Newar population, but also that “a large settlement of Khasa [Nepali–cg] speaking people was found there” (1991: 95). Dolakha was important to Shah for several reasons: the fertile farmland that surrounded the city, its position in trade with Tibet, and its iron deposit (K. Pradhan 1991: 95). Prithvi Naryan Shah wrote a letter to the main citizens of Dolakha, offering them protection for their lives and property in exchange for their surrender. Dolakha surrendered without resistance, extending Shah’s territories to the east of the Kathmandu Valley (K. Pradhan 1991: 95). The relations between the new Shah government and Dolakha were strong. However, during the Rana regime (A.D. 1846–1951), Dolakha lost much of its influence. At the same time, a new trade route was established between Kalimpong and Tibet, which caused Dolakha to lose some of its economic vitality. While Dolakha has never regained the economic and political influence it held in previous centuries, it has become a small modern city of Nepal. Its historical significance is still held in respect, and the beautiful temples and monuments which are found throughout the village are reminders of its rich historical past.

Studies of the Dolakha Dialect

The first studies of the Dolakha Newar dialect were conducted by the Newar scholars Indra Mali (1979), Prem Sayami (1986), and Kashinath Tamot (1987, 1989). By far the most extensive work has been conducted by Dr. Rudra Laxmi Shrestha, whose work includes an early study of Dolakha verb inflection (1989, in English), a Ph.D. dissertation with a descriptive study of the language (1993), an extensive analysis of the Dolakhae verb (2000a), and a Dolakhae-Kathmandu Newar wordlist (2000b).

Other than R. L. Shrestha (1989), the primary studies available in English are my own works. Genetti (1988) was my first report on the language, to be superseded by Genetti (1990, published as 1994). I have also written articles on a number of aspects of the phonology and grammar of the language; rather than enumerate them here, I refer the reader to the references.

Genetti (2007), from which this is taken, is a comprehensive reference grammar with texts and wordlist.

Typological characterization

Dolakhae has a relatively simple phonemic inventory, with three series of stops (and one series of affricates) in five places of articulation. Breathy voice, found in Kathmandu Newar and Nepali, is mostly lost in Dolakhae, although occasional breathy pronunciations of some words may be heard. There are six vowels which may be nasalized phonemically, but no distinctive vowel length. There are a few morphophonemic processes, including a limited vowel harmony process that affects vowels of prefixes.

Dolakhae is a verb-final language with many of the typological features that are commonly found with languages of this type. For example, the language has postpositions as opposed to prepositions, is predominantly suffixing, and most modifiers precede the noun within the noun phrase. The subject of a transitive verb precedes the object in unmarked contexts; however, pragmatic factors frequently lead to other constituent orders being attested.

In Dolakhae, case is marked by a paradigmatic set of enclitics that appear on noun phrases. The three core cases are ergative, absolutive, and dative. Ergative is found marking subjects of transitive verbs. Absolutive case is unmarked. It is found with subjects of intransitive verbs and some objects (specifically, those which are semantically patients and whose referents are either inanimate, or animate and new to the discourse). The dative case enclitic is found marking objects which are semantic recipients, or objects which are semantic patients with animate and given referents. Some subjects are also occasionally marked with the dative case, although “dative-experiencer” constructions do not seem to be as extensive in Dolakhae as has been described for some other South Asian languages (see the papers in Verma and Mohanan 1990).

There is clear evidence for a subject category in Dolakhae. The language does not distinguish between direct and indirect object, instead there is a single category of object that incorporates both patients and recipients.

There is a clear distinction between finite and non-finite verb morphology. The finite verb reflects the person and number of the subject, and inflects in four distinct tenses. Separate inflectional paradigms are found in the negative, imperative, and optative moods. Non-finite morphology includes three morphemes in paradigmatic alternation which both nominalize and relativize clauses. Their distribution is quite complex. Other non-finite morphology includes the infinitive and the participle (a converb). Both are used extensively in clause combining.

The participial construction is one of the most intriguing parts of Dolakha syntax. The participle can be classified as a converb, which equally allows one clause to modify another in an adverbial relationship and the chaining of clauses

to indicate events in sequence. It is also used to incorporate auxiliaries into a clause and for other purposes. There is no switch reference system.

Complement clauses and adverbial clauses are also common and are often interwoven with clause chains and embedded direct quotation to create long and intricate sentences. Every language has its genius and, in my opinion, the genius of Dolakhae lies here. The relationships in these structures are highly complex and fascinating. Syntax and prosody work together in the structuring and comprehension of these structures.

A comprehensive discussion of all of these topics can be found in Genetti (2007), a fully indexed comprehensive reference grammar with text and wordlist.

The primary differences between the Dolakhae and Kathmandu dialects

As mentioned above, the Dolakhae and Kathmandu dialects, while clearly both Newar and closely related, are mutually unintelligible. There are several particular areas of divergence which contribute to this. A more in-depth discussion of these differences may be found in Genetti (1994).

Probably the strongest factor contributing to the unintelligibility between Dolakhae and Kathmandu Newar is a major phonological change that radically affected the Kathmandu dialect but not Dolakhae. This change entailed the loss of all syllable-final consonants, with compensatory lengthening of the nuclear vowel.⁵ A concomitant change was the development of phonemic vowel length. Although the lost consonants still appear in some environments (especially before vowel-initial case suffixes, in which case the consonants are syllable-initial, as opposed to syllable-final), the basic sound and rhythm of the language was altered dramatically, making communication with Dolakhae speakers more difficult. Additional phonological changes which further obscured the similarities include the substantial loss of breathy voice in Dolakhae (Kathmandu has an extensive breathy voiced series which extends to the sonorants), and the loss of the /l/ ~ /r/ distinction in Kathmandu (retained in Dolakhae).

The most surprising morphological distinction between the Dolakhae and Kathmandu dialects is found in the system of finite verb morphology. All three dialects of the Kathmandu Valley have a system of finite verb inflection which has been called the “conjunct/disjunct” system. (Hale (1980) originally described the system. Hargreaves (1991, 2005) is a more thorough examination of the semantic parameters upon which the conjunct/disjunct system, and other aspects of Kathmandu grammar, are based.) The conjunct verb forms are found in finite clauses with a volitional verb if: (i) the clause is declarative with a first-person actor, (ii) the clause is interrogative and has a second-person actor, (iii) the clause is reported speech and the actor of the utterance verb and the actor of

the volitional verb in the reported clause are coreferential (based on Hargreaves 2005: 6). Disjunct verb forms are used in all other finite environments.

The parameters on which the Kathmandu system are based are volitionality (or control, Hargreaves 2005) and evidentiality (more specifically epistemic source, Hargreaves 2005). This area is one of the most intriguing of Kathmandu Newar grammar, perhaps a large part of its own genius. By contrast, the Dolakhae system of finite verb inflection seems quite mundane; the finite verb marks four tense distinctions and agrees with its subject in person and number (although some intimations of conjunct/disjunct parameters may be found, see §6.4.3.4).

Further differences between the two languages exist in almost every area of the grammar. The most significant ones are probably the differences in nominalizing and relativizing morphology, the fact that Kathmandu Newari has two participial constructions where Dolakhae has only one, and the fact that Dolakhae has a strong subject category, in contrast to Kathmandu Newari, where the subject category is controversial (Genetti 1986; Hale and Watters 1973). Once again, the reader is referred to Genetti (1994) for a fuller comparison and discussion of these and other differences.

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- ¹ Interestingly, preliminary reports in the same publication listed a total population of approximately 10,000. This discrepancy with the actual survey results may be due to the recent trend of many Dolakha residents to move to other parts of the country, particularly the Kathmandu Valley, in order to find employment and increased socioeconomic success. It is possible that the original number of 10,000 may refer to an estimate of the total number of Dolakha Newars, while 5645 may refer to the actual number of people residing in Dolakha at the time.
- ² However, they also state that the area was heavily settled by Tamangs, Thangmis and Sherpas, ethnic groups that have clearly in this locality for many centuries.
- ³ According to Pradhan (1991: 209, note 10) there is some disagreement among historians as to the actual dates of Amsuvarma's reign. Slusser (1982: 25) states his rule "lasted from about A. D. 605-621, but his assumption of power at the courts of Sivadeva I preceded this by a decade".
- ⁴ Some evidence indicates that Dolakha had a closer relationship with Patan and Lalitpur than with Kathmandu (Vajrācārya and T. B. Shrestha 1974: 18).
- ⁵ In cases where the syllable-final consonant was nasal, the lengthened vowel was nasalized.