

Mouton Grammar Library 4

*van Driem*  
A Grammar of Limbu

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Editors  
Georg Bossong  
Wallace Chafe

Mouton de Gruyter  
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George van Driem

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## Abbreviations

1	first person	EXIG	auxiliary of exigency (9.9)
2	second person		
3	third person	exp	expletive
A	agent (4)	f	feminine
ABS	absolutive case marker (2.4.1)	fig	figuratively
		G	glide
ADH	adhortative (8.1)	GEN	genitive (2.4.4)
adj	adjective (2.1)	i	inclusive <sup>1</sup>
adv	adverb	imp	impersonal conjugation (4.2)
AP	active participle (8.4)	IMP	imperative (8.2)
ASS	assertive (9.10)	IND	individualizer (see <i>ca-ĩ</i> , <i>dik</i> and <i>dzik</i> in glossary)
Bur	modern Burmese		
C	consonant		
caus	causative (10)	INF	infinitive (8.6)
cl	clitic	INST	instrumental (2.4.3)
col	collective expectation	IPF	imperfective (5.1)
		irr	irregular
COL	colour affix	IRR	irrealis (6.3)
COM	comitative (2.4.7)	interj	interjection
		interr	interrogative
CON	conditional (6.2)	inv	invariable
conj	conjunction	lit	literally
CTR	contrary to (see <i>ni?</i> in glossary)	LOC	locative (2.4.6)
		m	masculine
d	dual <sup>1</sup>	n	noun
DEF	imperious (5.2)	NEG	negative (non-nexal negation, 4.5)
dem	demonstrative	Nep	Nepali
DEPR	deprehensative (9.10)	NOM	nominalizer
		NOT	nexal negation (3.1.1)
dim	diminutive		
di	dual inclusive <sup>1</sup>	NP	negative participle (8.4)
dir	directive (10)		
de	dual exclusive <sup>1</sup>	npG	negative perfect gerund (7.5.2)
e	exclusive <sup>1</sup>		
EMPH	emphatic particle, emphatic verbal suffix	NPT	non-preterit (4.4.7)
		ns	non-singular
Eng	English	num	numeral
ERG	ergative case marker (2.4.2)	∅	zero
		OPT	optative (6.1)
		p	plural <sup>1</sup>

P	patient (4)	SUS	aspectivizer of sustained action (5.3.7)
part	particle		
PAS	passive (8.8)		
pe	plural exclusive <sup>1</sup>	TB	Tibeto-Burman
pej	pejorative	Tib	written Tibetan
pf	prefix, prefixal slot (esp. 4)	v	verb
PF	perfective (5.1)	V	vowel
pfG	perfect gerund (7)	vi	intransitive verb
pi	plural inclusive <sup>1</sup>	VOC	vocative (2.4.5)
poet	poetic, characteristic of elevated diction	vr	reflexive verb (4.2)
postp	postposition, postpositive	VS	<i>Vikram Samvat</i> era
PP	passive participle (8.5)	vt	transitive verb (4.2)
prG	present gerund (7)	*	reconstructed or unattested form
PT	preterit (4.4.7)	[ ]	phonetic transcription/etymological note
Q	yes/no question marker (6.4)	//	phonemic transcription
REF	reflexive/reciprocal (4.4.5)	<>	morpheme/allomorph
REP	reported speech particle (9.8)	<	derives from
RES	resultative aspectivizer (5.3.5)	→	direction of a transitive relationship
S	subject (4)		
s	singular <sup>1</sup>		
sf	suffix, suffixal slot (esp. 4)		
ST	Sino-Tibetan		
STC	<i>Sino-Tibetan, a Conspectus</i> (see bibliography)		
sub	subordinator		
SUB	subordination through <i>-ille</i> (9.4)		
SUP	supine (8.7)		

---

<sup>1</sup> also as a superscript to disambiguate English glosses

## Transliteration and Transcription

Nepali words are transliterated from the *devanāgarī* script using the following symbols:

	<i>a</i>		<i>ā</i>	
	<i>i</i>		<i>ī</i>	
	<i>u</i>		<i>ū</i>	
			ɽ	
	<i>e</i>		<i>ai</i>	
	<i>o</i>		<i>au</i>	
	<i>ṃ</i>		<i>ḥ</i>	
<i>k</i>	<i>kh</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>gh</i>	<i>ṅ</i>
<i>c</i>	<i>ch</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>jh</i>	<i>ñ</i>
<i>ṭ</i>	<i>ṭh</i>	<i>ḍ</i>	<i>ḍh</i>	<i>ṇ</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>th</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>dh</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>p</i>	<i>ph</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>bh</i>	<i>m</i>
	<i>y</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>v</i>
	<i>ś</i>	<i>ṣ</i>	<i>s</i>	
		<i>h</i>		

- (1) Silent *a* is not rendered in the transliteration, even though it is generally not deleted in the *devanāgarī* orthography.
- (2) The distinctions between *i* and *ī*, *u* and *ū*, *b* and *v*, *ś* and *ṣ* and *s*, preserved in conservative orthography, are also rendered in the transliteration, although they do not correspond to any phonemic distinctions in modern spoken Nepali.
- (3) The *candrabindu* used to indicate vowel nasality in *devanāgarī* is rendered by the symbol *~* above the vowel.

*Pokhrel* et al. (2040) and Rabinovič et al. (1968) are taken as standards for modern Nepalese orthography:

Written Limbu (see 0.2) is transliterated as *devanāgarī* using the transliteration on p.554, except that *eḥ* [ɛ] is transliterated as *è*.

Literary Tibetan and Burmese orthography are transliterated using the following symbols:

Tibetan				Burmese				
<i>k</i>	<i>kh</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>ñ</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>hk</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>ñ</i>
<i>c</i>	<i>ch</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>ñ̃</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>s</i>	<i>hs</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>ñ̃</i> <sup>2</sup>
<i>t</i>	<i>th</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>ht</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>p</i>	<i>ph</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>ht</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>n</i>
<i>ts</i>	<i>tsh</i>	<i>dz</i>		<i>p</i>	<i>hp</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>bh</i>	<i>m</i>
<i>w</i>	<i>ʒ</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>ḥ</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>θ</i>
<i>y</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>l</i>			<i>h</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>a</i>	
<i>ś</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>a</i>		<i>i</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>ε</i>	
<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>o</i>		<i>ɔ</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>u</i>	

For Burmese: the creaky tone is indicated by *accent aigu*, the falling or heavy tone by *accent grave*, and the level tone is unmarked. Phonetic transcriptions of Modern Burmese are given between brackets using the following IPA symbols. Nasalization is treated as a syllable-final segment and indicated by placing *~* above the vowel.

syllable-initials						syllable-finals	
<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>θ</i>	ʔ	~
<i>p<sup>h</sup></i>	<i>t<sup>h</sup></i>	<i>k<sup>h</sup></i>	<i>c<sup>h</sup></i>	<i>s<sup>h</sup></i>			
<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>ḍ</i>	vowels	
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>ŋ</i>	<i>ɲ</i>				
<i>ṃ</i>	<i>ṇ</i>	<i>ŋ̣</i>	<i>ɲ̣</i>			<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>
<i>l</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>h</i>		<i>e</i>	<i>o</i> <sup>3</sup>
<i>ḷ</i>	<i>ẉ</i>	<i>f</i>				<i>ε</i>	<i>ə</i> <sup>3</sup> <i>ɔ</i>
						<i>a</i>	

and the diphthongs<sup>4</sup>  
*ai, au, ou*

<sup>2</sup> When *ñ̃* is used to indicate a front vowel, it is transcribed as *i*.

<sup>3</sup> not in closed syllables.

<sup>4</sup> not in open syllables.

## Key to Maps

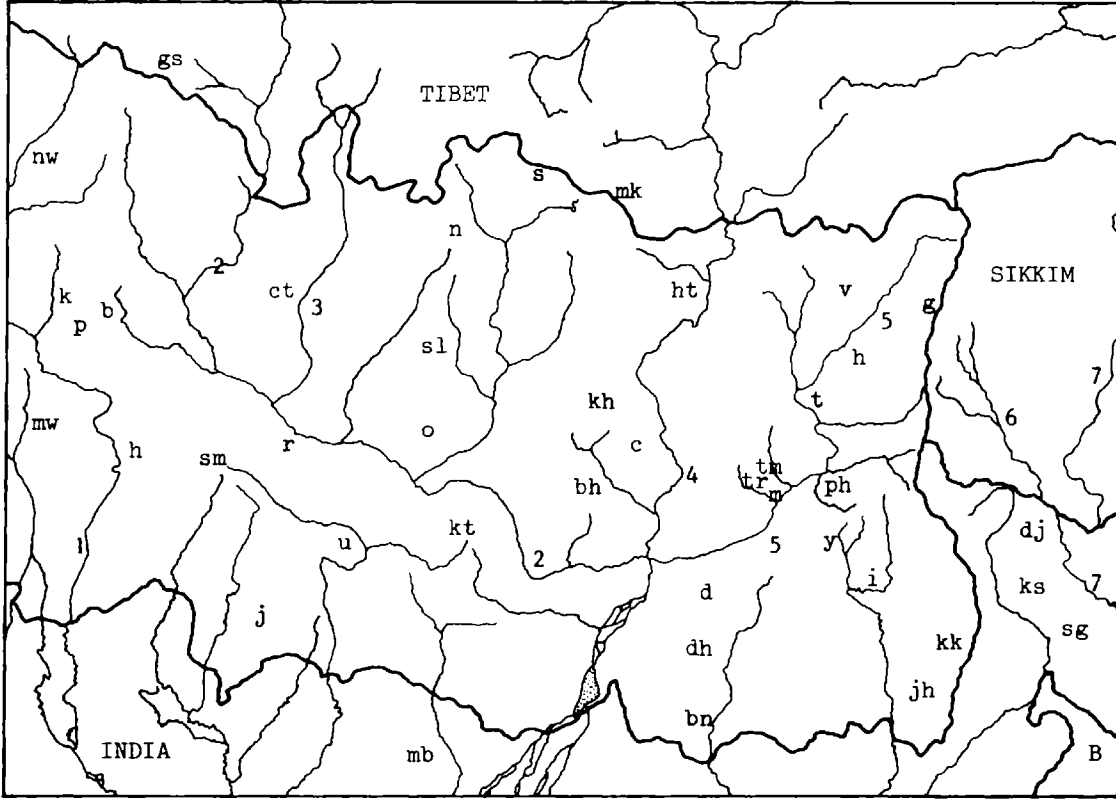
MAP 1: Eastern Nepal  
approximate scale 1 : 2 780 000

b	<i>Bhādgāũ</i> ( <i>Bhaktapur</i> )	kt	<i>Khoṭāñ</i>
bh	<i>Bhojpur</i>	m	<i>Myāñluñ</i>
bn	<i>Birāṭnagar</i>	mb	<i>Madhubanī</i>
c	<i>Cainpur</i>	mk	<i>Makālũ</i> 8481m
ct	<i>Carikoṭ</i>	mw	<i>Makvānpur</i>
d	<i>Dhankuṭā</i>	n	<i>Nāmce Bajār</i>
dh	<i>Dharān</i>	nw	<i>Nuvākoṭ</i>
dj	<i>Dārjīliñ</i> ( <i>Darjeeling</i> )	o	<i>Okhalḍhuṅgā</i>
h	<i>Hellok</i>	p	<i>Pāṭan</i> ( <i>Lalitpur</i> )
ht	<i>Haṭiyā</i>	ph	<i>Phidīm</i>
g	<i>Gañs-chen-mdzod-lña</i> ( <i>Kāñcanjanḡhā</i> , <i>Kum-</i> <i>bhakarṇa</i> ) 8598m	r	<i>Rāmechāp</i>
gs	<i>Gosāñthān</i> 8013m	s	<i>Sagarmāthā</i> ( <i>Mt.</i> <i>Everest</i> ) 8848m
h	<i>Harihar Gaḍhī</i>	sg	<i>Silīgaḍī</i>
i	<i>Ilām</i>	sl	<i>Solusallerī</i>
j	<i>Janakpur</i>	sm	<i>Sindhulīmāḍī</i>
jh	<i>Jhāpā</i>	t	<i>Tāplejuñ</i>
k	<i>Kāṭhmāṅḍũ</i> ( <i>Kāṭhmāḍau</i> )	tm	<i>Tamphulā</i>
kh	<i>Khādbārī</i> ( <i>Sañkhuvā</i> <i>Sabhā</i> )	tr	<i>Tehrathum</i>
kk	<i>Kākaḍbhittā</i>	u	<i>Udāypur Gaḍhī</i>
ks	<i>Karsiyāñ</i> ( <i>Kurseong</i> )	v	<i>Vālañchuñ Golā</i>
		y	<i>Yāśok</i>
1	<i>Bāgmatī</i>	5	<i>Tamor</i>
2	<i>Sunkosī</i>	6	<i>Raṅgit</i>
3	<i>Tāmākosī</i>	7	<i>Ṭiṣṭā</i>
4	<i>Aruṅ</i>		

MAP 2: Nepal in South Asia  
approximate scale 1 : 20 800 000

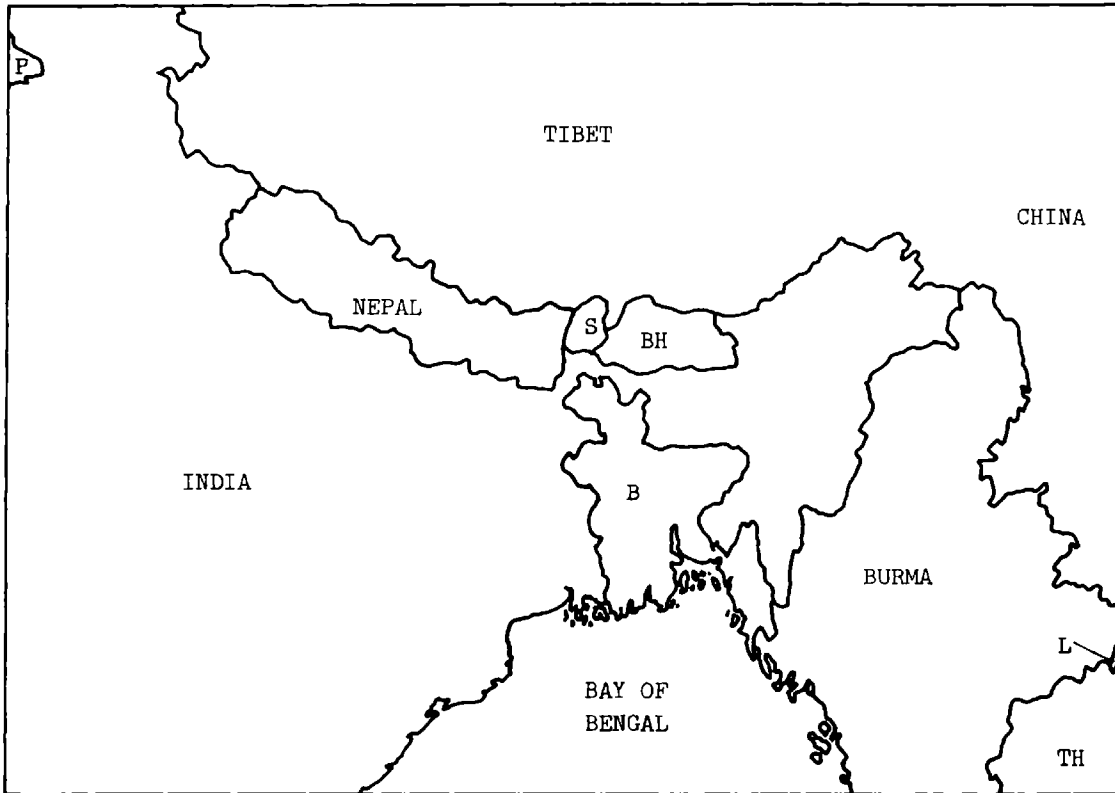
B	Bangladesh
BH	Bhutan
L	Laos
P	Pakistan
S	Sikkim
TH	Thailand





MAP 1

MAP 2





# Introduction

## 0.1. The Limbus

The Limbus are a sedentary agriculturalist people of the Mongoloid race dwelling in the hills of the *Košī* and *Mecī* zones of eastern Nepal, parts of Sikkim to the west of the Tista and in Darjeeling district. By far the largest part of the Limbu nation lives within eastern Nepal, which is the home of approximately 180,000 speakers of Limbu (Subba 1976: 142). The Limbus designate themselves by the name *Yakthunba* and their language by the name *Yakthunpa·n* or *Yakthunba pa·n*. Dās (1896b: 31) claims that the autonym<sup>1</sup> 'Yāk-thumbā' means yak-herd, but I can find no evidence to support this etymology, and I have been unable to find any Limbu who could tell me the origin or meaning of the term *yakthunba*. The component *yak-* is probably identical to the first part of the autonym of the more northerly dwelling *Kirātī* people, the Yakkhas or *Yākhā*, amongst whom it has, however, recently become fashionable to call themselves *Jimī*, *Majhiyā* or *Devān* (Regmi 1983). The component *-thunba* may derive from the etymon *\*thun-* of which the adjective *kedhunba* 'brave, heroic, manly, bold' appears to be an active participle. The word *Limbū* is a Nepali ethnonym, and the Limbu homeland in eastern Nepal is known in Nepali as *Limbuvān*. Campbell (1840: 595) believes the term *Limbū* to be a Gorkha corruption of the autonym 'Ekthoomba', although I suspect that the origin of the term *Limbū* must be sought elsewhere. Of the Limbu homeland Campbell (595) writes:

The Limboos consider themselves to be the original inhabitants of the country they now occupy, at least they are satisfied that none of the neighbouring tribes have any claims of preoccupation, but they are not agreed among themselves, on the point of nativity.

Indeed, there are various local legends, most of which are rather fanciful, tracing the origins of the Limbus or the lineages of their kings back to the province of Tsang

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<sup>1</sup> Terms differentiating various types of ethnonym are defined in Matisoff (1985a: 3-9).

in Tibet, to *Vārāṇasī* on the Gangetic plain, to ancient Babylon, to China and so forth (Campbell 595, *Cemjoṅ* 2018: 11, *Dās* 1896b: 31, *Limbū* 1978: 6, Regmi 1983: 74-75).

The Limbus are often identified by the term *Kirāta* or *Kirātī*. The term *Kirāta* first appears in the *Yajurveda* where it is used to designate an alpine, cave dwelling people of the Mongoloid race living in the northeast (Chatterji 1974: 26). Subsequent references to *Kirātas* in the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* and *Kirātārjunīya* portray the *Kirāta* as fierce, warlike and handsome savage hunters living in the densely forested (now largely denuded) eastern Himalaya, with golden complexions which gave them an appearance very distinct from the Indo-Aryan inhabitants of the Gangetic plain (Chatterji 28-34, *Dās* 1896a: 29, Kaisher K.C. 1972/1974). Although Chatterji (37-38) suggests that the term *Kirāta* probably covered all Mongoloid peoples living along the northeastern fringe of the Subcontinent, it is the speakers of the *Kirātī* group of Tibeto-Burman languages in eastern Nepal to which the term strictly applies. In the writings of some contemporary Limbu authors writing in Nepali (viz. *Cemjoṅ*, *Māden*, *Limbū*, *B.B. Subba*), the terms *Kirāta* and *Kirātī* are used to refer specifically to the Limbus.

Campbell (597) writes that at the time of the Gorkha conquest, the Limbus reigned with considerable autonomy 'in feudal subordination to the rajas of Beejapoor and Mukwanpoor'. *Makvānpur* fell to *Pr̥thvī Nārāyaṇa Śāh*, the founder of Nepal's currently reigning dynasty, on the 23rd of October 1762, and *Vijaypur* fell to the Gorkhas on the 17th of July 1774 (Stiller 1973: 122-3, 137). Continuing expansion in eastern Nepal brought the Gorkhas into contact with Sikkimese forces, and in 1774 a treaty was signed with the raja of Sikkim giving *Pr̥thvī Nārāyaṇa Śāh* all of eastern Nepal 'west of the Singalila watershed' and, in the *Tarāī*, all land as far as the Tista (Stiller 138). Although eastern Nepal was nominally under the rule of *Pr̥thvī Nārāyaṇa Śāh* at the time of his death on the 11th of January 1775, *Cainpur* was only wrested from the grip of Sikkimese forces in 1776 (Stiller 150), and Sikkimese territory in fact extended to west of the *Aruṇ* and included *Limbuvān* until the Gorkhas overran Sikkim in 1788 (Sprigg, MS: 2). Most peoples in eastern Nepal accepted Gorkhali rule peacefully (Stiller 138), but the Limbus were not actually pacified until after *Prāṇabala Rāṇā* became *subbā* of *Dhankuṭā* in 1782. Limbus, led by two freedom fighters, *Muregan* and *Thāmuyā*, are said to have fought against the Gorkha troops with poisoned arrows (*Cemjoṅ* 1948: 77). Campbell (597)