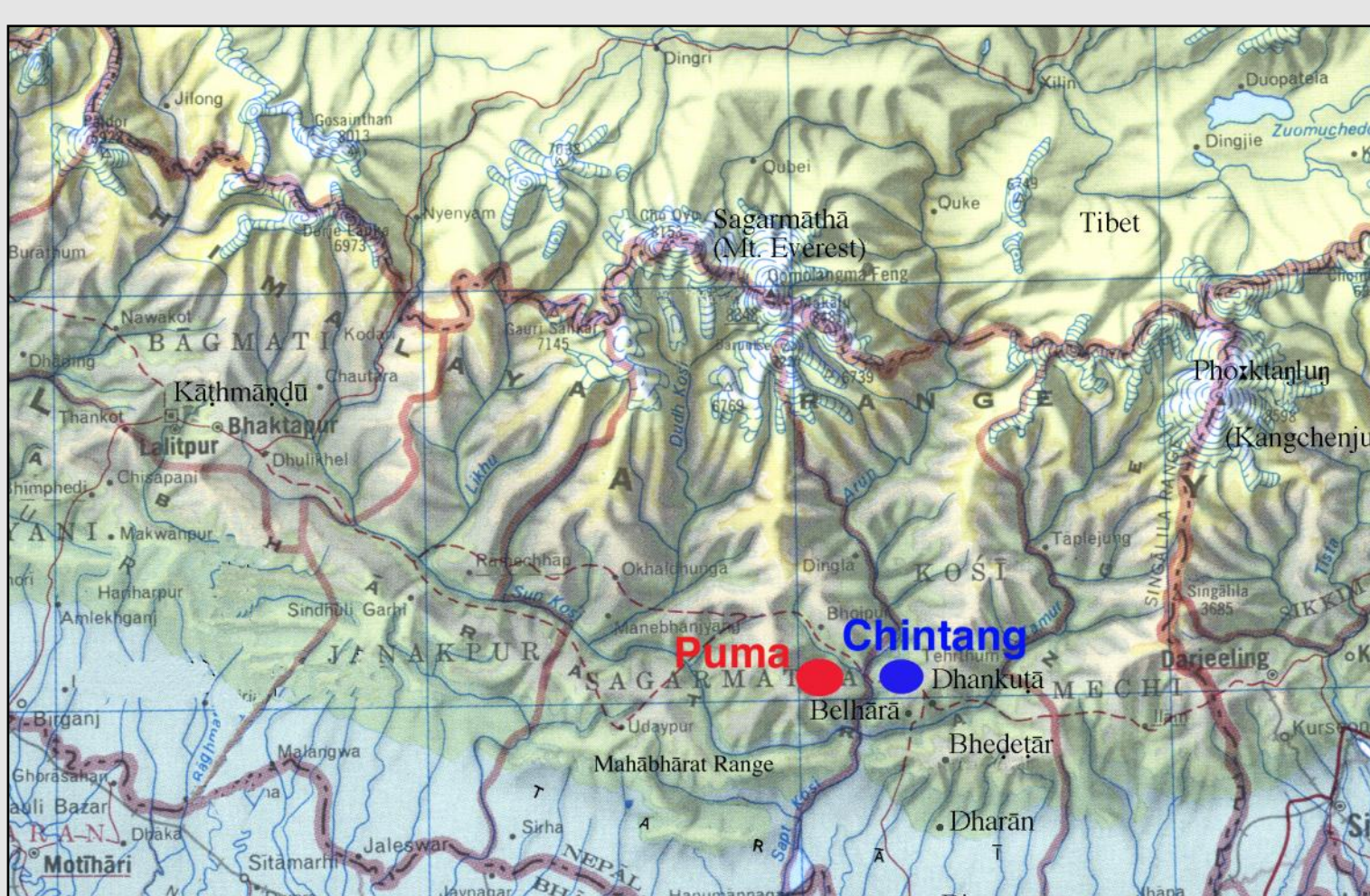




View on fields, houses, and the Himalaya

Introduction

More than 100 languages are spoken in Nepal, but most of them have less than 10,000 speakers. Chintang and Puma are two highly endangered languages spoken in the hills of East Nepal, which had been almost totally undocumented before CPDP. They belong to the Kiranti branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family, which includes more than thirty languages in this region. Both communities are multilingual, and their own languages are rapidly being supplanted by Bantawa (one of the major Kiranti languages) and Nepali, the national lingua franca. Nevertheless, they still have a distinct culture with a rich oral tradition, maintained by a decreasing number of knowledgeable elders, priests and shamans. Chintang and Puma are still learnt by children, and efforts are being made to introduce them into school education.



Centers of the areas where Chintang and Puma are spoken

Grammar and Lexicon

Kiranti languages have many unusual features that are rare in the languages of the world. An example is highly complex verbal morphology. For instance, the meaning 'they completely forgot it and came without it' can be expressed in Chintang by a single verb form, *umundanduthorse*. Many verbs in both languages have thousands of possible forms. Other interesting features include free prefix ordering, case stacking, triplication, flexible valency, complex clause link-

age constructions, low referential density, and a wealth of distinctions in spatial deixis. These features have been documented by CPDP, contributing to our knowledge of what is possible in the languages of the world. In order to let the speaker communities benefit from this knowledge, too, dictionaries with appended community grammars have been published and distributed for both Chintang and Puma.



A ritual with bird and flower offerings

Ethnography

The linguistic documentation of Chintang and Puma is intimately connected to their ethnography, since many genres such as myths, folk tales, and biographical narratives reflect cultural heritage. Special emphasis was put on the documentation of religious practice. The Kiranti have their own religion, which is characterised by the belief in gods and ancestral spirits and crucially depends on ritual specialists of various kinds who have the competence to communicate with these beings. Most rituals are carried out in a special speech register that is distinct from ordinary speech. Present-day religious practice is confronted with many new developments: more and more elements are imported from the dominant Hindu culture, and young people abandon the old traditions.

Language acquisition

Language acquisition, which has only been documented for Chintang, constituted another major area of interest. Research in this field has traditionally been based on large European languages, so small, exotic languages can make an important contribution to achieving a fuller understanding of how children learn to speak. The acquisition of Chintang is also of sociolinguistic interest. Most children in Chintang grow up with more than one mother language, so the roots of language attrition, shift, and death in acquisition can be directly studied here. Another point of interest is that much more freedom of movement and contacts is given to children in Chintang compared to Western societies, so the speech of other children plays a crucial role in language acquisition.



Children in Chintang

Results

CPDP has produced a substantial amount of materials and analyses. 283 hours of Chintang and 39 hours of Puma have been video-recorded. The number of transcribed words is 1,155,630 for Chintang and 152,221 for Puma. Corpora of this size present a milestone for quantitative research on small languages. In addition, CPDP members have published more than 25 papers. So far 12 Master's theses have been written on Chintang and Puma, and 3 PhD theses are in preparation. Research on the two languages and cultures is continued by the Chintang Language Research Programme (University of Zurich, <http://www.spw.uzh.ch/clrp/>) and by the project "Ritual, Space, Mimesis among the Rai of Eastern Nepal" (University of Vienna).



Training of native speakers

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