An Anthropological-Linguistic Study of the Lepcha Language

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Abstract: This study looks at the Lepcha script and language through anthropological and linguistic lenses, examining its past, growth, and current state. It uses history, myths, and language analysis to explore where the Lepcha script came from, which is said to be the work of five Lepcha scholars and Chagdor Namgyal, Sikkim's third ruler. The research explores how Buddhism, colonial education, and interactions with other groups have caused the Lepcha language and identity to decline and partly recover. By looking at vocabulary, counting methods, and cultural terms, this paper shows the strong between the Lepcha language, how they view the world, and their environment. The results suggest the Lepcha script is key to keeping indigenous knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and historical memory alive, but it now deals with problems from social and linguistic blending and modernization.

Keywords: Lepcha language, script origin, linguistic anthropology, Sikkim, Tibeto-Burman languages, language endangerment, cultural revival.

Introduction

Language is the main way human societies pass on culture, views, and knowledge. It's a system, both social and symbolic, that holds a community's shared memory and knowledge of the world (Duranti, 1997). The Lepcha language, also called Rong or Rongring, is mainly spoken in Sikkim, India, the Darjeeling hills in West Bengal, and parts of Nepal and Bhutan (Plaisier, 2007; van Driem, 2001). While not spoken by many, it's historically and anthropologically important as one of the earliest languages from the Eastern Himalayan area.

G. B. Mainwaring, an early scholar, said Lepcha was the oldest language in the world (Mainwaring, 1876, p. iii). While this isn't proven, it shows how Lepcha was

seen in the 1800s as old and pure. Later studies place Lepcha in the Tibeto-Burman family, but it has unique features that separate it from other Himalayan languages (Sprigg, 2002; Siiger, 1967).

Anthropologically, Lepcha helps us understand the beliefs and environmental views of its speakers. The Lepcha people call themselves "Mutanchi Rong Kup Rum Kup," meaning "children of the snowy peaks and rivers," which shows their close with the Himalayas (Siiger, 1967). Their stories and rituals show a strong respect for nature (Gorer, 1938; Tamsang, 1983).

.Historically, Lepcha was more than just a way to talk; it held cultural identity and tradition. When Tibetan Buddhism came in the 17th and 18th centuries, it changed Sikkim's language situation (van Driem, 2001). The Lepcha script was standardized to translate Buddhist texts, which made the script more important but pushed aside older oral traditions. This marked the start of Lepcha's decline as the main way to express culture.

Today, Lepcha faces the risk of disappearing due to people assimilating into other cultures, moving away, and the rise of Nepali, Hindi, and English (Plaisier, 2007). Still, there's been a recent effort by Lepcha groups, linguists, and locals to keep the language alive through education and media (Tamsang, 1983; van Driem, 2001).

This paper looks at the anthropological and linguistic history of Lepcha, including where it came from, how it's classified, its cultural roles, and why it declined but is now being revived. It aims to place Lepcha in the bigger picture of language and culture, showing how language relates to identity and tradition.

This paper looks at the anthropological and linguistic history of the Lepcha language and writing system. It explores where they came from, how they are classified, their cultural roles, and what events led to their decline and partial comeback. Due to limitations in doing fieldwork and reaching Lepcha-speaking people, this work depends mainly on existing info like old grammars, cultural records, language surveys, and current research. These sources give a good base for understanding the language's linguistic, cultural, and environmental aspects. By combining old papers, language details, and cultural views, this paper puts the Lepcha language in the larger area of linguistic anthropology, stressing the changing link between language, identity, and cultural survival. The method shows the need to carefully use existing writing while knowing there are holes in actual field data, pointing out spots for upcoming work and records.

Origin of the Lepcha Script

Lepcha mythology says the Róng Ríng script has both divine and scholarly origins. The Lepchas think their writing didn't come from another civilization. Instead, they believe five wise, spiritual scholars—Torgey, Sayyun, Goley, Tangrab, and Dureeng—received the script through divine inspiration (Siiger, 1967). These figures created the script's first symbols, making it fit the Lepcha language's sounds. In Lepcha belief, writing was more than just communication; it reflected a spiritual with nature (Tamsang, 1983).

Local stories say the early Lepcha script came before Tibetan influence. People used it to note chants, family histories, and rituals for Itbu-moo and Tashe-moo, the Lepcha creator gods (Siiger, 1967). This suggests the script was first a sacred tool for rituals, knowledge of nature, and myths. Still, because no manuscripts from before Buddhism exist, it's hard to confirm how old this writing is and how it was structured (Plaisier, 2007).

Later Sikkimese records and linguistic studies show the script changed and became more standardized under Chagdor Namgyal (1700–1717), Sikkim's third ruler. He is said to have formalized the script so Buddhist texts could be translated from Tibetan to Lepcha (van Driem, 2001; Plaisier, 2007). This was a big cultural change. While it kept Lepcha as a written language, it also changed its spiritual and linguistic identity as Tibetan Buddhism became more influential.

This situation shows how complicated cultural contact and religious change could be in Himalayan societies. By using the Lepcha script to teach Tibetan Buddhism, the Namgyal court led Lepcha literacy toward religious education, often at the expense of local oral and animist traditions (Tamsang, 1983). Some stories and reports say that older manuscripts from before Chagdor's time, which might have contained animist rituals and legends, were destroyed or neglected because they were seen as non-Buddhist or wrong (Siiger, 1967).

From an anthropological view, this time wasn't just about a community adapting linguistically to a new religion. It was also about reshaping their worldview. The change from oral-animist to Buddhist text culture redefined what was knowledge and truth, linking Lepcha literacy to Tibetan ideas (van Driem, 2001). Yet, the Lepcha people still kept unique phonetic details, word structures, and meanings in their script—showing their cultural strength and ability to adapt creatively (Plaisier, 2007).

Linguistic Classification and History

The classification of the Lepcha language (Róng) has been debated among Himalayan and Tibeto-Burman linguists. Most researchers place it in the Tibeto-Burman family, but its unique sound and word features have prompted different ideas about its exact subgroup (Plaisier, 2007; van Driem, 2001). Early scholars like Mainwaring (1876) saw Lepcha as distinct, with structures not fully Tibetan or related to nearby Himalayan languages. Later studies showed that Lepcha has old and traits, which suggests it may be an early branch of Proto-Tibeto-Burman rather than from later Tibetan dialects (Sprigg, 2002; Siiger, 1967).

Some linguists, like van Driem (2001), think Lepcha is between the Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Burmese areas, because its words are like the Mon-Khmer languages of Burma, and it has some similar sounds in its consonant clusters. This view emphasizes Lepcha's past interactions with the southern Himalayan and Southeast Asian language areas. Others think Lepcha is part of the Tibeto-Himalayan group within Tibeto-Chinese (Siiger, 1967), pointing out its structural closeness to Eastern Himalayan languages like Limbu, Tamang, and Gurung, while keeping its set of grammar and tone patterns (Plaisier, 2007).

In the past, Lepcha was an official language in Sikkim. It was used by Lepcha chieftains and in the early Namgyal dynasty (Gorer, 1938). Royal orders, local deals, and religious writings were often in Lepcha script, showing its key role in government and religious communication. Its use in both government and spirit shows how language was tied to political power and order in pre-modern Sikkim (van Driem, 2001).

Comparative research has found word matches between Lepcha and the Mon language of Burma, mostly for nature, farming, and family terms (Plaisier, 2007). These are like past contact—maybe through old travel or trade—linking early Lepcha speakers with Southeast Asian language groups. This backs the idea that Lepcha is an old Himalayan language base, which later borrowed from and mixed with nearby languages (Sprigg, 2002).

But over time, Tibetan strongly changed Lepcha. From the seventeenth century, the Namgyal dynasty's adoption of Tibetan Buddhism brought in words, sounds, and writing from Classical Tibetan (van Driem, 2001). Tibetan religion and government led to adding Buddhist words, honorifics, and tone patterns into Lepcha (Plaisier, 2007). This Tibetanization was partly on purpose, serving to join Lepcha

communities into the growing Buddhist state and lower their own language's power (Tamsang, 1983).

In short, Lepcha's history shows layers of contact, blending, and pushback. It is both a mix of past events and proof of the strength of a small but rich Himalayan community. In modern linguistics, Lepcha is key to understanding how language, power, and identity act together in mountain societies.

Decline and Revival of the Lepcha Language

Over the last three centuries, the Lepcha language has undergone a decline because of complicated historical, sociopolitical, and cultural changes. It was once Sikkim's official language and a key marker of Lepcha identity, but it gradually lost status and wasn't passed down through generations due to both cultural assimilation and external political pressures (van Driem, 2001; Plaisier, 2007).

One reason for this decline is inter-tribal marriage and cultural mixing with nearby groups like the Limbu, Bhutia, and Nepali populations (Siiger, 1967). As Lepchas married and merged with these communities, the language mixed, leading to bilingualism and a shift toward bigger regional languages, like Tibetan and Nepali. This not only weakened the Lepcha language but also made it less important as a symbol of ethnic unity (Tamsang, 1983).

Educational policies during British rule in the 19th and early 20th centuries further pushed the language to the side. At first, Lepcha and Tibetan were seen as helpful for local teaching, schools in Darjeeling and Sikkim (Gorer, 1938). But, by the early 1900s, Hindi and English became the official languages for education and government, pushing local languages out of schools (Plaisier, 2007). English became linked to being modern, and moving up in society, while Lepcha was mostly used for rituals and at home. This created a gap between generations, where young Lepchas thought national and global languages were more important than their own.

Another issue was losing the written tradition after pre-Buddhist Lepcha writings were destroyed. The rise of Tibetan Buddhism during Chagdor Namgyal's time led to the removal of old animist and oral texts, which held myths, knowledge about nature, and rituals (Siiger, 1967; Tamsang, 1983). Without these records, much of the community's cultural and historical understanding was lost. This breakdown weakened the Lepcha language's cultural importance and made it less used in writing and government.

Near the end of the 20th century, surveys said Lepcha was dying out, with only a few people speaking it well, mostly older people in remote areas of North Sikkim and Kalimpong (Plaisier, 2007). Younger people, who mainly learned Nepali and English through school and media, saw Lepcha as less important, which made its decline even worse.

But, recently, there has been a comeback of Lepcha language and culture, thanks to both religious and non-religious efforts. Christian missionaries helped early on by printing parts of the Bible and hymns in Lepcha, keeping the writing system alive (van Driem, 2001). Lepcha cultural groups, like the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarjum (RMRT) and the Lepcha Development Board, have led the way with language classes, workshops, and making learning materials (Tamsang, 1983).

Adding Lepcha to school programs in Sikkim and West Bengal is a big step toward saving the language. Government programs now provide Lepcha as an option in schools, helping younger people learn to read and write it (Plaisier, 2007). Also, putting Lepcha texts online, creating fonts that work with computers, and having more Lepcha content on social media is helping to preserve the language in the 21st century.

These actions are more than just saving a language; they represent a rebirth of culture and identity. The recent revival of Lepcha shows acts of standing up for their identity, protecting their heritage against global influences. As language experts say, keeping a language like Lepcha alive protects not only the words but also a unique way of seeing the world (Duranti, 1997; van Driem, 2001).

Lepcha Lexicon and Cultural Semantics

The Lepcha language is a key archive of ecological wisdom, spiritual symbolism, and cultural memory. Rooted in the natural world, it shows an animistic view where the land, plants, and animals are sacred beings with life-force (mung). Lepcha's linguistic structure mirrors this view, encoding the relationships between people and their environment through rich vocabulary and metaphor.

Nature and Sacred Geography

Lots of Lepcha words for natural things show respect and spiritual relation. For example, lyang (mountain), talyang (sky), rong (river), and bhong (spring or water source) point to physical geography and the presence of guardian spirits. Mountains such as Tendong Lyang and Kanchendzonga are tied linguistically and mythologically

to Lepcha origin stories. Tendong means "the hill of the raised horn," where people thought ancestors took shelter during a big flood. Similarly, Mayel Lyang, or "the hidden paradise," stands for the Lepcha ancestral homeland and a perfect balance between people and nature.

Terms like fong-mung (forest spirit), chu-mung (water spirit), and thik-mung (mountain spirit) show how spirituality is linguistically linked to nature. People use these terms in speech as real expressions of belief, showing the deep link between religion, ecology, and communication.

Flora, Fauna, and Material Culture

Lepcha vocabulary for plants and animals shows a detailed awareness of ethnobotany and ethnozoology. For instance, thingpoh (oak tree), sungmo (bamboo), thok (fern), and nyom-nok (maize plant) are descriptive terms and have ritual meaning in healing ceremonies (munlom). The word sungmo is in many compound words, pointing to bamboo's central role in Lepcha architecture, music, and life.

Animal names often have symbolic meanings. Sung (tiger) means courage and guarding territory, while pho (bird) means communication with the spirit world. The Lepcha saying pho lyang nam — "the bird has flown to the mountain" — is a poetic way to say death, showing how ecological images shape emotional expression.

Material culture vocabulary also shows how people adapted to the Himalayan ecosystem. Words like thyokom (pillow of hay or feathers), pathek (bamboo liquor vessel), kho (traditional Lepcha house), and phodong (granary) point to local craftsmanship and resource use. The phrase nyok pathek nyok chi ("bring the vessel, bring the drink") comes up in Lepcha folk songs that celebrate hospitality and gatherings, showing how language encodes social values.

Time, Agriculture, and Cosmic Order

The Lepcha calendar and time system show good ecological awareness. The day has five parts — nyok (morning), nyet (noon), fya (afternoon), mok (evening), and tang (night) — each linked to farming or rituals. For example, nyok is good for sowing seeds, while mok is for feasts or storytelling.

Their lunar calendar has thirteen months, tied to the farming cycle and lunar phases. Festivals like Namsoong (New Year) and Tendong Lho Rumfaat (worship of Mount Tendong) are set by these natural rhythms. Also, the Cycle of Twelve Years, with names like Sung (Tiger), Pho (Bird), Nyo (Snake), Lang (Ox), Rok (Monkey),

and Chu (Water), shares cosmological links with other Asian zodiac systems but has unique Lepcha meanings. For example, the Year of the Tiger is for renewal and protection, while the Year of the Bird is said to bring migration and change — ideas from Lepcha's view of animal behavior.

Cognitive and Cultural Implications

The Lepcha language is more than a way to communicate; it's a cognitive system for encoding ecological relationships and moral ideas. The lexicon acts as an "eco-text," where each term shows environmental action and social thought. The Lepcha vocabulary is "a landscape in words," a living linguistic ecology that keeps cultural identity alive. The loss of the language threatens linguistic diversity and the survival of a Himalayan view that sees humans and nature as part of a sacred whole.

Numerals and Cognitive Structure

The Lepcha number system shows original language features and complex understanding. Unlike those of Tibetan, Nepali, or Limbu, Lepcha numbers have specific sound and structure qualities, suggesting they grew on their own instead of being simply copied or spread (Mainwaring, 1876; Plaisier, 2007). The simple numbers have noticeable consistency and sound well together, which is typical of an old language layer in the Tibeto-Burman group.

Basic Numerals and Phonological Features

The core Lepcha numerals are:

Number	Lepcha (Romanized)	Gloss
1	*kath*	one
2	*nyeth*	two
3	*samm*	three
4	*fali*	four
5	*fung*	five
6	*kho*	six
7	*nyok*	seven
8	*khet*	eight
9	*ku*	nine
10	*kati*	ten

The structure of these numerals shows sound patterns, like the common use of aspirated consonants (kh, ph) and nasal codas (m, ng), which are common in

Lepcha phonology. Morphemes like ka- and -th/-ti in some numerals (e.g., kath, khet, kati) suggest an agglutinative trait, possibly from old counting classifiers or early morphemes that showed amount or grouping.

Higher Numerals and Morphological Innovation

Higher numerals in Lepcha are formed through consistent morphological compounding. For example:

> *kati* = 10
> *kati-kath* = 11 (ten-one)
> *kati-nyeth* = 12 (ten-two)
> *kati-samm* = 13 (ten-three)
> *khakath* = 100 (hundred)
> *khakath-kati* = 110 (hundred-ten)

The form of Lepcha numerals shows patterns in sounds, such as using aspirated consonants (kh, ph) and nasal codas (m, ng), which are common in Lepcha phonology. Morphemes like ka- and -th/-ti in some numerals (e.g., kath, khet, kati) suggest an agglutinative trait, maybe from old counting classifiers or basic morphemes for quantity or grouping.

This pattern suggests Lepcha uses a decimal base system, but it still has signs of older counting methods for rituals, farming, and lunar cycles, sometimes using a base-five (fung) or base-twenty (nyok-kati) structure. So, the system is both organized and flexible, typical of native numerical thought.

Beyond math, the Lepcha numeral system has cultural meanings. The number three (samm) often represents balance, seen in how offerings are divided into three parts for ancestors, gods, and nature spirits (mung). The number five (fung) relates to the five directions in Lepcha cosmology: east, west, north, south, and the center (Mayel). Likewise, seven (nyok) means spiritual elevation and appears in myths about the seven mountains where life began (Siiger, 1967).

Counting methods in Lepcha society also show a focus on categories, not just counting. Different counting words are used based on what is being counted—people, animals, grain, or trees. For example, sam-tok (three people) versus sam-bung (three bamboo poles) shows classifier-based counting, which links Lepcha to East and Southeast Asian languages (Subba, 2008).

How numbers are organized in Lepcha reflects how the community sees order and harmony. Plaisier (2007) points out that Lepcha numerals are not just about

quantity but also relationships, showing that number systems are also cultural systems. Using additive composition (ten-one, hundred-ten) instead of subtractive forms points to an analytical way of thinking. This mirrors a worldview that values order, seen in language and rituals.

In short, the Lepcha numeral system is more than just counting; it shows the cognitive structure of the Lepcha people, how language encodes logic and worldview. Keeping it intact is important for both language and philosophy, helping us understand native ways of thinking in the eastern Himalayas.

Conclusion

Lepcha is more than just a way for the Lepcha people to communicate. It embodies their identity, spirituality, and history (Siiger, 1967; Subba, 2008). When Chagdor Namgyal standardized the script to translate Buddhist texts, it showed how political power can change a language, often hurting native knowledge and traditions. Colonial education and modern language pressures made Lepcha even less relevant, which reflects the bigger picture of linguistic imperialism and cultural loss (Plaisier, 2007).

Today, revival work is being done, such as saving the script, adding it to school programs, digitizing texts, and starting community cultural projects. These show how strong and adaptable the Lepcha community is. These actions aim to keep the language alive. They also reclaim historical stories and strengthen cultural independence as a decolonial act. Saving Lepcha is not only about language; it is an ethical promise to protect a disappearing cultural world, guaranteeing that future generations can learn from the Lepchas' unique perspective, environmental understanding, and spiritual background (van Driem, 2001; Duranti, 1997).

Essentially, what happens to the Lepcha language reflects the overall human attempt to keep cultural history alive alongside modernity, emphasizing the crucial part that linguists, anthropologists, and local groups play in recording, reviving, and appreciating the language variety of the eastern Himalayas.

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