

NEW DATA ON THE KUSUNDA LANGUAGE¹²

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INTRODUCTION

Kusunda (ISO 639-3 code kgg, Glottolog code kusu1250) is a language at present spoken by only two women, Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda, 82 years old, and Kamala Khatri (Sen Kusunda), 54 years old (as of July 2019)⁵. Previously, Kusunda is known to have been spoken across a wide geographical area in mid-western and west-central Nepal. Ethnic Kusunda people can still be found in several districts of this region (Aaley 2017), although none of them speaks their language beyond isolated words.

Kusunda has previously been described as a language isolate (Reinhard and Toba 1970: 1; van Driem 2001: 258; Watters et al. 2006: 20). In addition, there have been several hypotheses and attempts at establishing phylogenetic links of the language with other languages and language families. Detailed overviews of the history of the description of Kusunda have, among others, been provided in van Driem (2001), in Watters et al. (2006) and in Donohue and Gautam (2013) and will not be repeated here.

AIM OF THIS REPORT

Although Kusunda has often been described as ‘moribund’ and even ‘extinct’, the Kusunda people themselves have the aspiration to revitalise their highly endangered language and culture. We hope that making our data freely accessible to anyone with an interest in the Kusunda people and their language, they will be encouraged to support the Kusunda people in this endeavour. Although we can still ask the

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⁵ In this paper and our metadata, GM refers to speaker Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda, and K refers to speaker Kamala Khatri (Sen Kusunda).

last speakers for clarification right now, we do not know how much longer this is possible. We especially encourage academics, researchers and others to analyse our data and provide inputs regarding the phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicography of the language.

In the short run, we especially appreciate suggestions to solve and reconcile the outstanding issues in Kusunda phonology. This will enable the design of a more accurate, phonologically consistent and usable orthography. Specifically, suggestions towards resolving the representation of sounds of Kusunda not represented in Devanāgarī (such as the uvulars and the central vowels) are urgently required. A more complete description of the Kusunda verbal morphology will contribute to writing a functional grammar of the Kusunda language that can be used in ongoing classes teaching the language to the next generation of Kusunda.

THE DATA

Between 29th July 2019 and 12th August 2019, we invited the two Kusunda speakers to Kathmandu, where we interviewed them. The corpus we collected encompasses the following number of files and their total length and size.

	# files	total length (hh:mm:ss)	total size (MB)
uncut audio files	79	20:39:49	43,791
cut audio files	132	19:44:51	34,455
video files	234	19:41:51	427,525
Kusunda audio files	40	04:44:25	3,211
Kusunda video files	32	05:32:30	84,546

Table 1: Summary of collected corpus.

The interviews consisted of elicitation of word lists, verbal paradigms and minimal pairs; general linguistic elicitation; elicitation and discussion of the ethnographic background; an origin story; personal narratives; narration from children’s books (based on Paterson 2002; Kefford and Moore 2010; Śhrestha 2010; Ghimire 2010; Adhikāri 2008 and White 2007); and natural conversation between the two speakers.

All files have been stored on www.zenodo.org/. The DOIs are presented in Table 2.

Date	DOI
29-07-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3376482
30-07-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3376673 and 10.5281/zenodo.3377011
31-07-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3379842 and 10.5281/zenodo.3384958
01-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380187 and 10.5281/zenodo.3386667
03-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380191 and 10.5281/zenodo.3387435
04-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380206 and 10.5281/zenodo.3386029
05-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380217
06-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380226
07-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380228
08-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380232 and 10.5281/zenodo.3385370
09-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380248
10-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380250
11-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380267
12-08-2019	10.5281/zenodo.3380265
in-situ videos	10.5281/zenodo.3380777
unprocessed audio files	10.5281/zenodo.3360063
processed materials	10.5281/zenodo.3401526
cut, triple-repeated sound files	10.5281/zenodo.3377537

Table 2. DOIs of Kusunda material on Zenodo.

SOME OUTSTANDING ISSUES

We did not have the time to explore the data we collected in much detail. Some of the outstanding issues that we identified are:

- What is the phonemic status of affricates in Kusunda? Is there a distinctive palatalised series [tʃ, tʃʰ, dʒ, dʒʰ] in addition to the alveolo-dental [ts, tsʰ, dz, dzʰ] series mentioned in all previous sources, including Watters et al. (2006)? Or is this speaker-dependant variation or phonotactically conditioned? And what is the status of the aspirated affricates? If there is, indeed, a phonemic contrast between these series, how could this be represented in a Devanāgarī orthography of the language?
- What is the status of the Kusunda uvulars (Watters et al. 2006: 40-43): uvular stops /q, qʰ, ɢ/ and a distinctive uvular nasal /ŋ/? How can uvulars be represented in a Devanāgarī orthography of the language?
- What is the phonemic status of voicing and aspiration of stops in Kusunda (Watters et al. 2006: 33, 34, 39)?
- Is there enough evidence for adding a distinctive vowel /ɐ/ to the phoneme inventory in Watters et al. (2006: 24-29)? How can central vowels /ɐ/ and /ə/ be properly represented in a Devanāgarī orthography?
- What is the exact status of ‘vowel harmony’ in Kusunda (Watters et al. 2006: 24), and how does this relate to ‘free variation’ in vowel realisation?
- Should Kusunda be analysed as having diphthongs (as has been done till now) or rather as having palatalised and labialised onsets or onset clusters and palatal and labial off-glide rhymes? How can these be represented in the Devanāgarī orthography?
- What is the status of prefixes in Kusunda? Do they represent an underlying system of expressing certain lexico-semantic fields?
- Can all the distinctive grammatical morphemes in the complex pronominalised verbal forms of the language (cf. Reinhard and Toba 1970: 1; Watters 2006: 59 onwards) be identified? Can an analysis of the texts assist in describing Kusunda verbal morphology to an extent that it can actually be taught to the next generation of Kusunda speakers?

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