

Contact-induced language change and remnants of the former system – the verbal agreement of Koĩc (English: Sunuwar; Tibeto-Burman)

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Koĩc ([kɔĩts]; English: Sunwar; Nepali: सुनुवार Sunuvār) is a Kiranti language spoken in eastern Nepal. With about 38 000 speakers, Koĩc is one of the bigger languages of the 123 languages of Nepal.¹ Koĩc once had a biactantial agreement system with transitive verbs agreeing with agents and patients (Carol Genetti 1988), a typical feature of Kiranti languages. In modern Koĩc, transitive verbs agree with the agent but not with the patient. As most speakers of Koĩc are bilingual with Nepal's official language Nepali (Indo-Iranian), changes in the grammatical system of Koĩc that result in structures similar to those of Nepali are likely to have been caused by language contact. Besides the mentioned loss of verbal object agreement, the loss of marking dual number in nouns is another example of such a contact induced change. The latter change occurs increasingly in places where frequent language switching between Koĩc and Nepali is the rule.

A comparison of modern Koĩc verbal paradigms and the obsolete verbal paradigms with biactantial agreement collected by Genetti (1988) shows rather regular similarities in form and function between old and new person and number markers. Such a comparison shows in addition the retention of a structural difference in reference to a first person singular agent as opposed to reference to non-first person singular speech act participants. In the equivalent Nepali paradigms, there is no such difference between indicating first person agents or other agents.

A brief overview of changes in the Koĩc language from a biactantial to a monoactantial agreement marking system will be followed by a presentation of the morphological and semantic continuities between the older and newer person marking system of Koĩc. Finally, possible reasons for the special status of the marking of a first person singular agent will be discussed.

References

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¹ The figures for languages of Nepal and speakers of Koĩc come from the Census of 2011 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012).