

# A BRIEF REPORT OF SOME JIREL VOCABULARY

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## Introduction

In an earlier era, when cognitive anthropology was narrowly focused on lexical semantics, one of its founding figures asked researchers to think of the enterprise not as getting words for things, rather as getting things for words, in other words describing the basic referential ranges of lexemes (Frake, 1969). Towards this end, a field dictionary of several hundred words, including information about how native Jirel's may organize them in their language was compiled during the course of fieldwork.

During The Jiri Valley Ethnographic Project, data were collected in four principle semantic domains: (1) kin terms, (2) objects and processes in the production of millet beer (*chang*) and its distillate (*raksi*), (3) macro-environmental zones, and (4) objects associated with the kitchen. A fifth domain is that associated with birds is discussed elsewhere in this volume (see Hamill et al., "Preliminary Ethnosemantics of the Avifauna Vocabulary in Jirel," in this volume). The most in-depth ethnosemantic information was collected on the bird domain. Other information, however was collected on the other four domains as fieldwork ensued.

## Linguistic Background

Almost all scholars agree that Jirel is one of the languages included in the Sino-Tibetan language family. Beyond that, however, there is little agreement on the internal structure of that family, or on the place of specific dialects, including Jirel, in the family. There is common agreement among many scholars that Jirel is part of the Tibeto-Burman group that is equivalent with Karen in the Tibeto-Karen sub-family of Sino-Tibetan family (Benedict, 1972; Matisoff, 1978). Shafer (1940; 1955), however,

disagrees on its placement and questions whether it is a direct sub-family of Sino-Tibetan, or whether it belongs to a lower order class. Instead, he places Jirel, although not explicitly, in a Bodic division of Sino-Tibetan. In general, after reviewing the literature on Tibeto-Burman historical linguistics, it is difficult to disagree with Matisoff's position (1978: 1), that little is known about the interrelationships of the hundreds of Tibeto-Burman languages.

The placement of Jirel in these classifications is somewhat problematic because almost nothing has been published on the language. In this research we made extensive use of an unpublished Jirel-Nepali-English dictionary, which was compiled over the past several decades by Anita Maibaum and Ester Strahm of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. These two field linguists have published a few descriptions on limited aspects of Jirel, covering such aspect as the discourse rules (Maibaum, 1978), Jirel clauses (Strahm, 1975), and a word list (Maibaum and Strahm, 1973). No general descriptive grammar of the language is available. The placement of Jirel as Tibeto-Burman, or Bodic, is therefore based on descriptions of languages spoken by adjacent groups, such as the Sherpas (Glover, 1974).

### **Kinship Domain**

The Jiri people are organized into twelve patrilineal clans and eleven sub-clans. These clans regulate marriage through extensions of the incest prohibition to all clan mates and first cousins without regard to clan membership. These clans, however, do not contain corporate lineages, and access to wealth and the means of production are individually owned. Here, we will report some of the lexical/semantic information collected with respect to kinship terms.

**Table-1**  
**Jirel Kin Terms and their Extensions**

<b>KIN TERM</b>	<b>EXTENSION</b>
G+2 Gammu gammu chete gammu tikti goppo goppo chete goppo tikti	MM, FM MMEZ, FMEZ MMYZ, FMYZ MF, FF MFEB, FFEB MFYB, FFYB
G+1 ama ama tikti ama chete	M MYZ MEZ
adjing tikti adjing chete aba aba tikti aba chete ani tikti ani chete	MYB MEB F FYB FEB FYZ FEZ
<b>EGO'S OWN GENERATION</b> noa adju adji noma	YB; FEBYS, FEZYS, MEBYS, MYZYS, ETC. EB; FEBES, FEZES, MEBES, MYZES, ETC. EZ; FEBED, FEZED, MEBED, MYZED, ETC. YZ; FEBYD, FEZYD, MEBYD, MYZYD, ETC.
G-1 pumo phujung	D; EBD, YZD, ETC. S; YBS, EZS, ETC.

Consanguineal kin terms were collected as a necessary part of understanding the distribution of subsistence resources, prestige, and political power.

Consanguineal kin terms and their distributions were gathered on an etic grid (see Table 1. Jirel Kin Terms and their Extensions). These cover ego's own generation, the first and second ascending generations, and the first descending generations.

It can be seen that all Jirel kin terms carry meanings that distinguish sex, and in the first descending generation, sex is the primary distinguishing

feature in the two terms, *phujung* and *pumo*. Their meanings may be represented componentially as:

<i>phujung</i>	+K+M	<i>pumo</i>	+K-M
(K=kinsman, M=male).			

In ego's own generation, the feature of seniority, or relative age (+/- R) is introduced into the kin term system, and the four terms here may be seen as having the following componential definitions:

<i>noa</i>	+K+M-R	<i>adji</i>	+K-M-R
<i>adju</i>	+K+M-R	<i>noma</i>	+K-M+R

The ten kin terms used in the first ascending generation carry the heaviest semantic load. They require features of sex (+/-M), and relative age (+/-R), but they also distinguish the side of the family, and whether or not the kinsman is in ego's direct line.

<i>ama</i>	+K-M-P+L	<i>aba</i>	+K+M+P+L
<i>adjing chete</i>	+K+M-P-L+R	<i>aba chete</i>	+K+M+P-L+R
<i>adjing tikti</i>	+K+M-P-L-R	<i>aba tikti</i>	+K+M+P-L-R
<i>ama chete</i>	+K-M-P-L+R	<i>ani chete</i>	+K-M+P-L+R
<i>ama tikti</i>	+K-M-P-L-R	<i>ani tikti</i>	+K-M+P-L-R

(+/- P= patrilineality, +/-L = laterality).

The second ascending generation maintains distinctions based on sex, lineality, and relative age but does not make distinctions based on side of family. It is possible to componentially represent these meanings as:

<i>gammu</i>	+K-M+L	<i>goppo</i>	+K+M+L
<i>gammu chete</i>	+K-M-L+R	<i>goppo chete</i>	+K+M-L+R
<i>gammu tikti</i>	+K-M-L-R	<i>goppo tikti</i>	+K+M-L-R

An analysis of the Jirel kinship terminology demonstrates the patrilineal basis of Jirel social organization, especially in the first ascending generation kin terms, as well as the theme of seniority. This cultural value is evident in other aspect of Jirel life. Inheritance is based on seniority, as is the relative prestige of various ethnic groups.

The Jirels consider themselves lower on the prestige scale than the Sunwars, Rais, and Limbus. According to one origin myth that these groups have in common, the Jirels were descended from the youngest of

the five Kiranti princes. The other ethnic groups are believed to be the descendants of the elder brothers among the princes and are therefore higher on the prestige scale.

### **Millet Beer and its Distillate (*Chang* and *Raksi*) Domain**

*Chang* and *raksi* are alcoholic beverages produced in the area. *Chang* is made from a millet mash that is allowed to ferment after roasting for a brief period, and *raksi* is distilled from the *chang*. Almost all of Jirel social life involves the consumption of *chang* or *raksi*, or if possible both of them. These two home-brewed alcoholic drinks are produced in virtually every household, and served under virtually any pretext. These drinks are as ubiquitous as are kin relations. The lexicons of kinship and *chang/raksi* are secondary to the social lives they contextualize. Although they are secondary, they are of significant importance in the lives of the Jirels.

These drinks are not unique to the Jirels. Commercially produced *raksi* is served in some of the better restaurants in Kathmandu, and one or the other of these alcoholic beverages are probably common to most, if not all, of the Nepali ethnic groups. These products occupy a place of some importance in the Jiri valley and virtually every family makes and serves them during almost every social occasion. For example, *chang* is brewed for important ritual events, such as funerals and marriages. For marriages a special *chang* is used that is made from the best ingredients, and only the strained and decanted liquid is used, without diluting it with water.

The Jirel people often list several feast days on which *chang* and *raksi* are consumed. These include, but are not limited to, *Dashain*, *Tihar*, *Mageshangrante*, and *Chite Dashain*. All of the Jirels we talked to, however, insisted that *chang* is appropriate almost any time; you do not necessarily need a festival to drink it.

*Chang* has some ritual significance, especially at one of the four days of the Hindu Festival of *Tihar*, or Autumn Festival, which is devoted to *Kaghi* (crow). *Tihar* also defines one of the few periods in which ritual requires abstinence from *chang*: on the "cow day" of *Tihar*, the Jirel people do not drink *chang*. On that day men have to perform *puja* and must abstain from drinking. They can, and do, drink as much *chang* as they want after the ritual duties are completed. *Chang* also has special significance in the clan god worship rites and in the *Phombo* curing rituals (see Sidky et al., "Jirel Religion: A Preliminary Look at the Rites and Rituals of the Jirels of Eastern Nepal," and "*Phombos*: A Look at Traditional Healers Among the Jirels of Eastern Nepal," in this volume).

*Chang* and *raksi* are brewed in almost every home, and we saw no kitchen that did not include the specialized pots or other equipment

necessary for their production. Furthermore, families gain some prominence in the valley for the quality of drink they brew. For the most part, it is the women who make *chang*, and there are no larger inter-family *chang* making undertakings. It is one of the staples produced in the Jirel kitchen to be used in many social gatherings.

Given the obvious importance of *chang* and *raksi* production and consumption in Jirel culture, it is no surprise to find a specialized vocabulary that refers to the technologies and processes in their production.

The basic vocabulary in the *chang-raksi* making processes is relatively limited. It contains a few words that refer to the items that are involved in the production and reference to witchcraft (see Table-2. *Raksi* and *Chang* Vocabulary).

**Table-2**  
**Raksi and Chang Vocabulary**

JIREL WORD	GLOSS
<i>karai</i>	a pan use to fry the millet.
<i>sa</i>	a roxi still
<i>dabi</i>	a long paddle like object used to stir and spread things.
<i>boksi,</i>	a witch
<i>min</i>	yeast

*Chang* and *raksi* are made through a simple process that begins with sun-dried millet and ends with a blessing.

**A Recipe for *Chang* and *Raksi*:**

1. Dry the harvested millet in the sun.
2. Fry the dried millet in a *karai*
3. In a *sa*, boil water and add the fried millet to this, stir with a *dab*, keep heated until the water is gone; then cover the *sa*.
4. To cool spread the millet on a mat using a *dabi*.
5. Grind *min* to dust and spread it on the millet and mix; put the millet-*min* mixture in a basket; cover with a thick cloth and let stand for 2 days and 1 night.
6. With a piece of cloth set on fire using a piece of charcoal the millet is blessed with smoke to prevent spoilage which is caused by a *boksi*, or witch, (see Sidky et al., "*Phombos: A Look at Traditional Healers among the Jirels of Eastern Nepal*," in this volume).

7. Put the millet in a drum and ferment for about one month.
8. Squeeze the fermented mash through a cloth: the decanted liquid is *chang*.
9. The strained and decanted liquid may be diluted with water.

*Chang* may be further distilled into *raksi*. Interestingly, *raksi* has no corresponding ritual restrictions or uses, and it is commonly served to any guests at any time. It is often offered as a gift from the family of the groom to the bride's family prior to the marriage. *Raksi* has become a significant part of the cash economy, being sold at the markets, which have sprung up along the Lamosangu-Jiri Road (see Hamill et al., "Some Socio-cultural Consequences of Transportation Development in the Jiri Valley, Nepal," in this volume).

*Raksi* is made from *chang* through a simple process. The *chang* is distilled four of five times (counting marks are painted on the still after each step to keep track). When the drink reaches the desired alcohol content, it is bottled for immediate or future use, or for sale at the local market.

### Macro-Environmental Domain

One of the recurring themes found to be significant in Jirel culture was their conceptualization of environmental zones. For example, the Jirel conceptualize the classification of birds in terms of altitude (see Hamill et al., "Preliminary Ethnosemantics of the Avifauna Vocabulary in Jirel," in this volume). Another example is that people describe their work in terms of where they conduct their subsistence activities, whether it is done in the fields, mountain slopes, valley floor, along the rivers, in the forests, etc. It is clear that the referential range of macro-environmental lexemes is extensive. The need for further in-depth work and analysis in this area is necessary to give us a better insight into how the Jirels understand and organize the world around them.

**Table-3**  
**Macro Environmental Zones**

JIREL WORD	GLOSS
<i>himal</i>	mountain
<i>chyangma</i>	forest
<i>shing</i>	land
<i>khamba</i>	home
<i>chu</i>	water

**Kitchen Domain (Objects used in the Kitchen)**

In an analysis of Jirel living space it became apparent that the interior of a homestead and more specifically the kitchen area constituted an important cognitive domain. Consultants consistently evidenced a large vocabulary in labeling both space(s) and the utensils appropriately used there (see Table 4. Jirel Household Terms). A typical Jirel house is a single room building with a centrally located hearth, used for heat, illumination, cooking, and around which all social interactions take place. There is also a designated sleeping area, just as there is always a storage area. Additionally, some homes also have a *puja* room where clan god rites and ancestor worship ritual are performed.

**Table 4**  
**Jirel Household Terms**

JIREL WORD	GLOSS
Spaces	
<i>kotha</i>	the kitchen area in the home
<i>thaap</i>	hearth area
Utensils	
<i>silaau</i>	mortar and pestal grinder
<i>derma</i>	metal plate upon which meals are served
<i>dabi</i>	a long stick used to stir or spread grains
<i>dekchi</i>	metal pot about the size of a saucepan w/out handle
<i>karai</i>	cooking pot shaped something like a wok
<i>odaan</i>	circular iron ring supported on three legs. the fire is built under the ring and the pots are put on it.
<i>lotta</i>	teapot
<i>daraj</i>	shelf
<i>chapati</i>	circular woven mat (about 70 cm. in diameter) that people sit on
<i>chhum</i>	large wooden cylinder (about 80 cm. high, 40 cm. outside diameter, 10 cm. inside diameter) used to pound grain such as rice, millet, corn, and wheat.
<i>chumbal</i>	the hammer that goes with the <i>chhum</i> . it is over 1.5 m long, about 8 cm. in diameter with an area of reduced diameter for the hands.
<i>deauri</i>	metal bowl used for baby food



<i>cha-cha</i>	spoon
<i>rangjung</i>	a conical basket like a <i>doko</i> but with closed weave used to carry fine grained material like millet (about 1M tall and 40 cm. in diameter at the top)
<i>doko</i>	conical basket like a <i>rangjung</i> but with open weave used to coarse grained material (about 1m. tall and 40 cm. in diameter at the top)
<i>namon</i>	the harness that goes with a <i>doko</i> or <i>rangjung</i> ; it fits over the forehead and around the basket
<i>khora</i>	metal bowl
<i>gari</i>	metal ewer
<i>saman</i>	utensils in general
<i>dodu</i>	ladle
<i>thumbal</i>	tubular object used to store salt
<i>tumlet</i>	canteen
<i>jarkeen</i>	plastic jug (perhaps borrowed from "jerry can")
<i>chhapani</i>	colander
<i>todum</i>	the woven part of a <i>roxi</i> still
<i>bata</i>	the brass part of a <i>roxi</i> still
<i>sa</i>	large metal pot (about 1 m. in diameter) used in brewing <i>chang</i> )
<i>dhibri</i>	tripod lamp
<i>kitti</i>	kettle (may be borrowed)
<i>thue</i>	knife ( <i>khukuri</i> in Nepali)
<i>miling</i>	tightly woven rectangular basket used for drying grain

### Suggestions for Further Research

As a beginning in understanding of Jirel cultural meanings, an in-depth investigation of all aspects their language is necessary. Such information could tell us, for example, how features such as relative age and sex merge with other aspects of Jirel culture. It could also give further insights into the articulation of kinship terminology with kin interaction and clan relationships. Similarly, an analysis of the *chang/raksi* lexicon and its interrelationship with kinship, religion, and a growing cash economy will contribute greatly to our understanding of Jirel culture. The in-home kitchen utensil lexicon is in contrast to the domains associated with the outside world, which we have partially described under the macro-environmental

domain. Further and much more detailed research must be done on the organization of these domains and their articulation within Jirel culture.

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