

Personal Pronouns in Yakkha: A Comparative Study

Kusum Shrestha¹

<kusum.797523@cdl.tu.edu.np>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.3126/kp.v5i5.95215>

ABSTRACT

This paper compares the personal and possessive pronoun systems of two varieties of the Yakkha language – Marek Yakkha (MY) and Tumok Yakkha (TY) – both belonging to the Greater Eastern Kiranti branch of Sino-Tibetan. The analysis draws on primary elicited data from native speakers of Marek Yakkha and on secondary data from Schackow (2015) for Tumok Yakkha. The study shows that while both varieties share core Kiranti features such as a three-way number distinction (singular, dual, and plural) and nonsingular marking through <-ci/-tsi>, they differ significantly in clusivity marking, phonological shape, and morphological elaboration. Marek Yakkha preserves a fuller distinction between dual inclusive and exclusive forms, whereas Tumok Yakkha neutralizes this contrast. In the possessive domain, both varieties show irregular paradigms distinct from their personal pronouns and employ the genitive clitic=ga, but they diverge in prefixal patterns and form complexity. Overall, the findings provide evidence that Marek Yakkha constitutes a distinct linguistic variety within the Yakkha cluster, reflecting both shared inheritance and independent developments.

Keywords: Personal pronouns, possessive pronouns, Kiranti languages, inclusive–exclusive

INTRODUCTION

Yakkha, a Tibeto-Burman language, belongs to the Greater Eastern branch of Kiranti spoken in Eastern Nepal (Bradley 1997; Matisoff 2003). Within Eastern Kiranti, there are two groups, which are the various Limbu dialects on the one hand and the so-called Greater Yakkha group, with Chintang, Belhare, Athpare, Chiling, and Yakkha, on the other hand (Bickel, 1997a). The Yakkha region is located in Koshi Pradesh, in the south of the Sankhuwa Sabha district and in the north of the Dhankuta district. Within the region in Eastern Nepal, commonly known as Kirat ('Kiranti area'), the Yakkha region belongs to the Pallo Kirant 'Far Kiranti area,' located to the east of the Arun river (Schackow, 2015; Rai, 2024; Rai, 2025).

Marek Yakkha is a recently identified language, claimed to be distinct from other Yakkha. A study indicates Nepal's languages have increased; the Language Commission identified eight more, including Rana Tharu, Nar Phu, Chum (Syar), Poike, Serake (Seke), Marek-Yakkha, and Nawa Sherpa (NSO, 2021). The term "Marek" refers both to the people and the place where the language is spoken, while "Yakkha" refers to the ethnic group as well as their language. Ethnologue lists this language as "Lumba-Yakkha" (Yadav & Rai, 2078), though "Lumba" represents only one subgroup of Marek Yakkha speakers and does not constitute a distinct linguistic variety. According to native speakers, the language is known as Dashmakhya Yakkha. As it is predominantly spoken in Marek village, this study adopts the term "Marek Yakkha" following Yadav and Rai (2078).

¹ Ms. Shrestha is a MA thesis year student at Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

Pronouns are standalone forms, unlike affixes, that serve as substitutes for noun phrases within a clause. They typically exhibit all the distributional characteristics of noun phrases. Inflectional changes usually do not change the core meaning of the concept; instead, they provide contextual details such as place, time, or participant reference to the root concept (Payne, 1999).

Personal pronouns are central to understanding the morphosyntactic structure of the Kiranti languages, as they encode distinctions of person, number, and clusivity and interact closely with verbal agreement morphology (Schackow, 2015; Opgenort, 2005). So, this paper tries to compare the personal pronoun distinction among the Yakkha (Tumok variety) and the Marek Yakkha languages typologically². As Regmi (2013), Thokar (2015), Rai (2009), and Rai (2010) mention two types of pronouns, Yakkha presents two categories of pronouns, *viz.* personal pronouns and pro-forms. The pro-forms include demonstrative pronouns, interrogative pronouns, reflexive pronouns, possessive pronouns, and reciprocal pronouns. However, in this article, only personal pronouns are analyzed. “First person” refers to the speaker. “Second person” refers to the hearer. First and second persons are sometimes collectively referred to as speech act participants. “Third person” usually refers to any non-speech act participants (Payne 1999, p. 44). The pronouns in both systems distinguish person, number, and clusivity. The first- and second-person pronouns show a three-way number distinction: singular, dual, and plural. In Tumok Yakkha, the morpheme *-ci* indicates dual number in the first and second person pronouns, while in Marek Yakkha, the corresponding form is *-tsi*. For plural, *-ni* is used in both varieties. In the third person, *-ci* (Tumok) and *-tsi* (Marek) mark nonsingular. The latest census (2021) records the Yakkha speakers as 21,090 and the Marek as 2,725.

In Yakkha, personal pronouns are used to refer to discourse participants and can function as independent noun phrases (in any participant role) or as heads of noun phrases. However, their modification options are limited: relative clauses and demonstratives cannot modify pronouns. Possible modifiers include quantifiers and numerals, but these follow the pronominal head, contrasting with noun phrases with nominal heads, which are typically head-final. Like other noun phrases in Yakkha, pronouns are often optional and may be dropped.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The data of this study were gathered from the native speakers of Marek Yakkha. The methods used in collecting the data were based on direct elicitation from the appropriate speakers. For this, a questionnaire had been prepared to administer among the speakers. Also, for the data of Tumok Yakkha, the secondary materials were used for cross-linguistic or typological implications. For this, Schackow (2015) was taken to provide insights to analyze the data.

FINDINGS

The pronouns distinguish person, number, and clusivity. The personal pronouns exhibit three persons (1st, 2nd, and 3rd), three numbers (singular, dual, and plural) distinctions, and clusivity (exclusive and inclusive). An overview of personal pronouns is given below in Table 1.

² The basic framework of the analysis is the functional-typological grammar developed mainly by Talmy Givón (2001).

Table 1:

List of the personal pronouns between Yakkah (Tumok) and Marek Yakkha

Pronoun	Yakkha (Tumok)	Marek Yakkha
1SG	<i>ka</i>	<i>aŋga</i>
1DU.INCL	<i>kanciŋ</i>	<i>atsiŋ</i>
1DU.EXCL	<i>kanciŋ</i>	<i>aŋtsiŋ</i>
1PL.INCL	<i>kaniŋ</i>	<i>aniŋ</i>
1PL.EXCL	<i>kaniŋ</i>	<i>aniŋ</i>
2SG	<i>nda</i>	<i>(uŋ)k^han</i>
2DU	<i>njiŋda</i>	<i>(uŋ)k^hatsin</i>
2PL	<i>nniŋda</i>	<i>(uŋ)k^hanin</i>
3SG	<i>uŋ</i>	<i>uk^hun</i>
3PL	<i>uŋci</i>	<i>uk^hutsin</i>

First person

The first Person in both Tumok Yakkha and Marek Yakkha shares a distinction in terms of 1SG, 1DU.INCL, 1DU. EXCL, 1PL.INCL, 1PL.EXCL. The first-person pronouns in both languages are presented in Table 2.

Table 2:

List of the first person pronouns between Yakkah (Tumok) and Marek Yakkha

Pronoun	Yakkha (Tumok)	Marek Yakkha
1SG	<i>ka</i>	<i>aŋga</i>
1DU.INCL	<i>kanciŋ</i>	<i>atsiŋ</i>
1DU.EXCL	<i>kanciŋ</i>	<i>aŋtsiŋ</i>
1PL.INCL	<i>kaniŋ</i>	<i>aniŋ</i>

Both dual inclusive and exclusive pronouns (<*kanciŋ*>) are the same; the clusivity is neutralized in TY. In MY dual inclusive and exclusive pronouns are different. <*atsiŋ*> is dual inclusive, and <*aŋtsiŋ*> is dual exclusive. In both, they do not mark in clusivity in the plural pronoun. <*kaniŋ*> is the plural form of TY, and <*aniŋ*> is the plural form of MY. Forms differ only phonologically. Marek Yakkha preserves a richer clusivity distinction in the dual, whereas Tumok simplifies the paradigm by collapsing inclusive and exclusive forms.

Second Person

The second-person pronouns in both Yakkah (Tumok) and Marek Yakkha languages are presented in Table 3.

Table 3:

List of the second-person pronouns in Yakkha (Tumok) and Marek (Yakkha)

Pronoun	Yakkha (Tumok)	Marek Yakkha
2SG	<i>nda</i>	<i>(uŋ)k^han</i>
2DU	<i>njiŋda</i>	<i>(uŋ)k^hatsin</i>
2PL	<i>nniŋda</i>	<i>(uŋ)k^hanin</i>

There are two second-person pronouns in MY, such as *uŋk^han* and *k^han*, *uŋk^hatsin* and *k^hatsin*, *uŋk^hanin* and *k^hanin*. MY shows two parallel sets across all numbers: forms with a prefix *uŋ-*, forms without it. Here, both sets share the same meaning. However, in TY, there are no different forms, for example, SG, DU, PL: *nda*, *njiŋda*, *nniŋda*. The nasal in the prefix assimilates to the first consonant of the noun it modifies, according to its place of articulation. The optional *uŋ-* prefix in MY may represent a grammaticalized demonstrative origin or politeness. Whereas Tumok Yakkha exhibits a more conservative and uniform morphological structure.

Third person

The second-person pronouns in both TY and MY are presented in (4).

Table 3:

List of the second-person pronouns in Yakkha (Tumok) and Marek (Yakkha)

Pronoun	Yakkha (Tumok)	Marek Yakkha
3SG	<i>uŋ</i>	<i>uk^hun</i>
3PL	<i>uŋci</i>	<i>uk^hutsin</i>

The third person singular pronoun in TY is <*uŋ*>, and the plural is <*uŋci*>. Likewise, singular is <*uk^hun*> and plural is <*uk^hutsin*> in MY. Neither language marks dual for third person. MY forms are more phonologically complex, with *-k^hu-* medial consonants. TY forms are shorter and simpler. Both varieties use <*-ci* / *-tsi*> for nonsingular marking. The MY third-person forms may reflect further morphological elaboration, a retention of older forms, or a shift influenced by neighboring Kiranti languages.

Possessive Pronouns and Nominal Possessive Inflection

Kiranti languages generally have possessive person markers that are at least in some persons distinct from regular personal pronouns, but the languages vary as to whether these markers are themselves pronominal stems or prefixes. In general, pronouns differ from prefixes in that they can be inflected for case and head a dependent NP. Prefixes cannot be inflected for case, they strictly subcategorize for nominal stems, and they cannot occur without such a stem; prefixes can also be phrasal, and then they subcategorize for phrases instead of stems. Orthogonal to this distinction, pronouns and prefixes can be free or bound about morphophonological interaction with their host (Bickel & Nichols 2006). These two variables (stem vs. prefix; phonologically free vs. bound) probably reflect various stages of historical developments of free pronouns into bound agreement markers.

The possessive pronouns modify a head noun, indicating the possessor of the thing that is referred to by the noun in both MY and TY (5, a and b). Since the head noun can be omitted when its reference has been established already, the possessive pronoun can also be the sole

element in a phrase (see (6a and b)) in both. The example of TY is taken from Schackow (2015).

- 5) a. aŋ-ka kot^su sid-i-s-na (MY)
 1SG.POSS-GEN dog die(3SG)-PST-NMLZ.SG
 My dog died.
- b. ak-ka kucuma sy-a-ma-na (TY)
 1.SG.POSS-GEN dog die(3SG)-PST-PRF-NMLZ.SG
 'My dog has died.'
- 6) a. ak-ka-t^sa sid-i-s-na (MY)
 1SG.POSS-GEN-ADD die(3SG)-PST-NMLZ.SG
 Mine also died.
- b. ak-ka-ca sy-a-ma-na
 1SG.POSS-GEN-ADD die(3SG)-PST-PRF-NMLZ.SG
 'Mine has died too.'

The possessive pronouns resemble the personal pronouns to some degree, but they are sufficiently different and irregular so that they establish a separate paradigm. Except for the third-person nonsingular form, the roots all look slightly different from the corresponding personal pronouns. In both Marek-Yakkha (MY) and Tumok-Yakkha (TY), possessive pronouns modify a head noun, marking the possessor of the referent. The head noun may be omitted when contextually recoverable, leaving the possessive pronoun as the sole element in the phrase, as demonstrated in (6a-b). The TY example is adapted from Schackow (2015). The following tables (Table 6a-b) summarize the forms in Tumok-Yakkha (TY) and Marek-Yakkha (MY). Capital /N/ represents a nasal segment that assimilates to the following consonant.

Table 4:

Personal and Possessive Pronouns, Possessive Inflection in TY

	Personal pronoun	possessive pronoun	possessive prefix
1SG	<i>ka</i>	<i>akka</i>	<i>a-</i>
1DU.EXCL	<i>kanciŋ</i>	<i>anciŋga</i>	<i>anciŋ-</i>
1PL.EXCL	<i>kaniŋ</i>	<i>aniŋga</i>	<i>aniŋ-</i>
1DU.INCL	<i>kanciŋ</i>	<i>enciŋga</i>	<i>enciŋ-</i>
1PL.INCL	<i>kaniŋ</i>	<i>eŋga</i>	<i>en-</i>
2SG	<i>nda</i>	<i>ŋga</i>	<i>N-</i>
2DU	<i>njiŋda</i>	<i>njiŋga</i>	<i>njiŋ-</i>
2PL	<i>nniŋda</i>	<i>nniŋga</i>	<i>nniŋ-</i>
3SG	<i>uŋ</i>	<i>ukka</i>	<i>u-~o-</i>
3NSG	<i>uŋci</i>	<i>uŋciga</i>	<i>uŋci</i>

Table 5*Personal and Possessive Pronouns, Possessive Inflection in MY*

Personal pronoun	Possessive pronoun	Possessive prefix
1SG <i>an̩ga</i>	<i>an̩ka</i>	<i>an̩-</i>
1DU.EXCL <i>at̩ʲiŋ</i>	<i>at̩ʲiŋga</i>	<i>at̩ʲiŋ-</i>
1PL.EXCL <i>an̩t̩ʲiŋ</i>	<i>an̩t̩ʲiŋga</i>	<i>an̩t̩ʲiŋ-</i>
1DU.INCL <i>aniŋ</i>	<i>aniŋga</i>	<i>aniŋ-</i>
1PL.INCL <i>aniŋ</i>	<i>aniŋga</i>	<i>aniŋ-</i>
2SG <i>(uŋ)kʰan</i>	<i>uŋkʰan̩ga</i>	<i>uŋkʰan̩-</i>
2DU <i>(uŋ)kʰatsin</i>	<i>uŋkʰat̩ʲiŋga</i>	<i>uŋkʰat̩ʲiŋ-</i>
2PL <i>(uŋ)kʰanin</i>	<i>uŋkʰaniŋga</i>	<i>uŋkʰaniŋ-</i>
3SG <i>ukʰun</i>	<i>ukʰun̩ga</i>	<i>ukʰun̩-</i>
3PL <i>ukʰut̩ʲin</i>	<i>ukʰut̩ʲiŋga</i>	<i>ukʰut̩ʲiŋ-</i>

Morphological properties

The possessive pronouns in both varieties are similar but not identical to the corresponding personal pronouns. Except for the third-person nonsingular forms, the possessive roots deviate slightly from personal pronoun forms and thus constitute an independent paradigm. All possessive pronouns obligatorily host the genitive enclitic =ga.

A notable difference from the personal pronoun system is that the possessive paradigm distinguishes number and person, including clusivity, whereas the personal pronouns do not encode clusivity. The inclusive forms, therefore, are innovations or retained distinctions not present in the free personal pronouns.

CONCLUSION

This study compares the personal and possessive pronoun systems of Marek Yakkha and Tumok Yakkha and shows both shared Kiranti features and important typological differences. Both varieties display a three-way number distinction of singular, dual, and plural, and use characteristic nonsingular markers. Pronouns in both systems can function as independent noun phrases, though they allow limited internal modification. A key difference lies in clusivity. Tumok Yakkha neutralizes the inclusive and exclusive contrast in the dual, while Marek Yakkha maintains distinct forms, suggesting a more conservative system. The second person paradigms also differ, as Marek Yakkha exhibits a double series with and without a prefix, whereas Tumok Yakkha does not. The possessive systems further highlight structural differences. Although both varieties form possessives with a genitive clitic, their roots do not directly align with personal pronouns, indicating a separate morphological system. Possessive prefixes show regular nasal assimilation and encode person, number, and clusivity more consistently than personal pronouns. Overall, these patterns suggest that Marek Yakkha has developed distinct phonological and morphological features despite its historical relation to Tumok Yakkha. The findings support treating it as a separate linguistic variety within the Yakkha cluster and emphasize the importance of documenting such emerging linguistic identities within the Kiranti language group.

REFERENCES

- Bickel, B. (1997). *Aspect, mood, and time in Belhare: Studies in the semantics–pragmatics interface of a Himalayan language*. Summer Institute of Linguistics and the University of Texas at Arlington.
- Bickel, B., & Nichols, J. (2006). Oceania, the Pacific Rim, and the theory of linguistic areas. In Y. Matras, A. McMahon, & N. Vincent (Eds.), *Linguistic areas* (pp. 537–592). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bradley, D. (1997). Tibeto-Burman languages and classification. In D. Bradley (Ed.), *Papers in Southeast Asian linguistics No. 14: Tibeto-Burman languages of the Himalayas* (pp. 1–71). Pacific Linguistics.
- Givón, T. (2001). *Syntax: An introduction* (Vols. 1–2). John Benjamins.
- Matisoff, J. A. (2003). *Handbook of Proto-Tibeto-Burman: System and philosophy of Sino-Tibetan reconstruction*. University of California Press.
- Opgenort, J. (2005). *A grammar of Wambule: Grammar, lexicon, texts, and cultural survey of a Kiranti tribe of eastern Nepal*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Payne, T. E. (1999). *Describing morphosyntax: A guide for field linguists*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rai, T. M. (2009). Morphosyntax of Koyee nominals: An introductory outline. *Nepalese Linguistics*, 24(1), 263–272.
- Rai, T. M. (2010). Strategies of pronominalization in Koyee. *Nepalese Linguistics*, 25(1), 167–175.
- Rai, T. M. (2015). *A grammar of Koyee* (Doctoral dissertation, Tribhuvan University).
- Rai, T. M. (2024). Unraveling the relationship among the Kirati languages. *Nepalese Linguistics*, 38(1), 91–98. <https://doi.org/10.3126/nl.v38i1.71561>
- Rai, T. M. (2025). Autonyms of the Kirat Rai linguistic communities: Decoding roots, meanings, and identity. *Kirat Pragya*, 4(1), 157–169. <https://doi.org/10.3126/kp.v4i1.79051>
- Regmi, D. R. (2013). *Yakkha grammar* (Unpublished M.A. thesis). Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University.
- Schackow, D. (2015). *A grammar of Yakkha*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- Thokar, B. (2015). *A grammatical sketch of Chintang* (Unpublished M.A. thesis). Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University.
- Yadav, P., & Rai, I. (2078 B.S.). *Yakkha bhāṣāko sthiti adhyayan (A sociolinguistic survey of the Yakkha language)*. Language Commission, Government of Nepal.