



LANGUAGE SNAPSHOTS

Kumaoni (Uttarakhand, India) – Language Snapshot

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of Kumaoni, a Central Pahari language chiefly spoken in the state of Uttarakhand in northern India. According to the last linguistic census in 2011, there are 2,081,057 speakers of Kumaoni, the vast majority of whom are bilingual, with the younger generation also largely competent in Hindi. Based on the author's fieldwork observations, Kumaoni is being actively transmitted to the younger generation in rural areas, but its vitality is diminished in cities and towns. The language of education in government schools is Hindi, and in private schools it is Hindi and English. The language holds no official status and remains absent from the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Existing documentation is largely limited to the mid-twentieth century scholarship. Corpus-based and discourse-level work remains to be undertaken.

Keywords: Kumaoni; Central Pahari; Indo-Aryan; Uttarakhand; language documentation; language vitality; dialect variation; bilingualism

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 OPEN ACCESS

Language Name: Kumaoni, कुमाँनी

Dialects: Kuamiyya, Soryali, Sirali, Askoti, Khasparjiya, Chaugarkhiya, Gangoli, Danpuriya, Pachchai, Phaldakotiya Rau-Chaubansi, Johari (?)

Language Family: Indo-Aryan, Central Pahari

ISO 639-3 Code: kfy

Glottolog Code: kuma1273

Ethnologue Link: <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/kfy/>

Population: 2,081,057

Location: 29.6634° N, 79.8669° E

Language vitality: Unsafe (UNESCO)

1. OVERVIEW

The Kumaon region is a group of six districts located in the eastern part of Uttarakhand, India. It is situated south of China, north of Uttar Pradesh, and west of Nepal (see [Figure 1](#)). Kumaoni people today call themselves *Pahari*, an umbrella term for people residing in the mountains. Earlier references to the area and its language have used different names: “Kumāūn” (Grierson 1916; Meissner 1985), “Kumaon” (Randhawa 1970), and “Kemaon” (McClelland 1835).

The Union Province that later became Uttar Pradesh included Kumaon before Indian independence. In 2000, the newly established state was granted the name Uttarakhand (*uttar* ‘north,’ *anchal* ‘zone’) since it had a less separatist connotation than the planned name Uttarakhand (*uttar* ‘north,’ *khand* ‘segment’).



Figure 1: Map of Uttarakhand (Kumaon division highlighted in blue).

On January 1, 2007, however, Uttaranchal changed its name to Uttarakhand in response to the requests of activists. Kumaoni was first documented in the seventeenth century through the preserved revenue records of King Baj Bahadur Chand that were discovered in the Kumaon area (Joshi & Negi 1994: 271), strengthening the case for Kumaoni to be granted co-official status alongside Hindi and Sanskrit. Currently, Kumaoni and Garhwali are classified as regional languages, while Hindi and Sanskrit remain the only official languages of the state (Government of Uttarakhand 2010).

According to the Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India (2018), there were 2.08 million speakers who reported that Kumaoni was their mother tongue—a figure that, read in isolation, might suggest a language of modest reach. Yet this number acquires a different weight in light of the fact that it accounts for half of the estimated population of the Kumaon Division, 4.5 million, pointing to a linguistic community that remains very much alive and self-identifying. The administrative architecture of Indian language enumeration has, since the reorganization of census categories, folded Kumaoni into the Hindi mother tongue—a move that, whatever its logistical justifications, effectively dissolves the language's distinctiveness within official records. Kumaoni's continued exclusion from India's Eighth Schedule of the Constitution means it is denied the institutional privileges such as standardization, state patronage, and use in education that scheduled languages receive as a matter of course.

Kumaoni is embedded in a multilingual setting where several languages interact in everyday use. In most parts of Uttarakhand, Hindi is the dominant language used in education, administration, and wider communication, and its influence is clearly visible in speakers' shifting language practices, especially among younger generations. In the first author's observations, Kumaoni is often restricted to informal domains, while Hindi is preferred in formal and semi-formal contexts. Kumaoni comes into close contact with Garhwali to the west, and although the two share considerable structural similarity, speakers consistently maintain a distinction between them in terms of identity and usage. Recently, English has become more visible in urban centres and private schooling contexts, contributing further to the changing linguistic repertoire of Kumaoni speakers.

2. OFFICIAL STATUS

Kumaoni continues to be spoken in rural regions, where it is being passed down to younger people. Nevertheless, even there, the younger generation exhibits a preference for more influential languages such as Hindi and English. The preservation of Kumaoni is most effectively upheld within the home as opposed to the workplace and social circles. Kumaoni is written in the Devanagari script, though literacy in the language remains limited given the absence of formal instruction.

A recent development is the inclusion of Kumaoni books in government schools within the Kumaon districts, specifically targeting children aged 5 to 10 years. The textbooks represent a variety of literary genres, such as folktales, poems, diary entries, and dramas, all composed in the Kumaoni language. In 2010, the Member of Parliament from Pauri Garhwal, Satpal Maharaj, introduced a private member's bill to include Kumaoni and Garhwali in the Eighth Schedule so that the languages would receive state patronage and official recognition (Maharaj 2010). This kind of legal status and institutional support could significantly aid language preservation efforts.

3. MEDIA AND COMMUNITY-BASED LANGUAGE TRANSMISSION

The Kumaon-based community radio station has successfully cultivated a Kumaoni audience since it first began broadcasting in the language in March 2010.¹ The station, Kumaon Vani, airs programs about agriculture, festivals, politics, and the weather, actively encouraging local audience participation in Kumaoni.

Achal, a literary publication of the Kumaon region, commenced circulation in 1938. The trajectory of Kumaoni print media bears the marks of historical disruption in the form of wartime resource constraints that effectively stalled what had been a nascent publishing culture in the 1940s. What has emerged in its place is not an institutionalized press but something more organic: a cluster of grassroots periodicals sustained by efforts of community language activists who also serve as publishers without any official state support. Among the currently active titles, *Dudboli* occupies a distinct position as a literary magazine oriented explicitly towards language revitalization. It publishes Kumaoni short stories and poems written by local creative writers. *Pahru*, a socio-cultural monthly, draws its readership through its grounding in regional life and local perspective. *Adali Kushali* serves a somewhat different function, focusing on community literary and cultural information. Taken together, these publications showcase what sociolinguists would recognize as the informal or vernacular domain, spaces where a language is practiced and transmitted not through schooling but through readership, circulation, and everyday cultural participation. As noted by the first author during fieldwork in 2018–2020, they are sustained by donations from like-minded people.

4. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The significant anthropological literature on Kumaoni people emphasizes the environment, agriculture, mobility, trade, customs, rituals, and social practices (Agrawal 2005; Agrawal & Yadama 1997; Bawa 1967; Conklin 1961; Sanwal 1966, 1969).

In his *Linguistic Survey of India Volume IX, Part IV*, Grierson (1916) assigned the status of “language” to Kumaoni and Garhwali, while classifying their variants as “dialects”. Since then, these dialects have been categorized into four distinct geographic groups. Central Kumaoni is the standard variety that includes the Khasparjiya dialect spoken in the district of Almora. Other dialects spoken in the same region are Chaugarkhiya and Pachchai. Nepali has significantly influenced the Eastern Kumaoni dialects Soriyali, Sirali, Askoti, and Kumaiyya that are commonly spoken near Nepal’s border region. In Kumaon’s Southeastern region, Rau Chaubansi and Phaldakotiya are spoken in and around Nainital. Gangoli and Danpuriya are spoken in Kumaon’s central eastern region. Although Johari is commonly found in the high Himalayan area, its status as a Kumaoni dialect remains uncertain (hence the question mark in the table above). This dialect seems to exhibit significant Tibetan influence in light of the economic ties speakers historically had with Tibetan people, though this remains to be verified.

Grierson (1916) proposed that Kumaoni has a Darad-Khas substrate in his account of the language’s origins. The Darad-Khas refers to two early population groups associated with the Himalayan belt: the Dards, attested in classical sources as inhabitants of the upper Indus region (present day Jammu and Kashmir, India), and the Khas or Khasiya, a hill community whose presence stretched across what is now

1 This information is based on the author’s fieldwork conducted in the Kumaon region between 2018 and 2020.

Uttarakhand and Nepal. The Khas in particular were thought to have introduced an early Indo-Aryan speech variety into the hills of the region, with traces surviving in some of Kumaoni's more archaic morphological features.

However, later scholarship has revised that position. The modern view traces Kumaoni's grammatical and phonological character to Sauraseni Prakrit, a Middle Indo-Aryan vernacular of the northwestern plains, widely regarded as the ancestor of many North Indian languages. This places it within the Northern Indo-Aryan or Pahari continuum, a group of closely related hill languages spanning Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and western Nepal. This lineage reflects historical patterns of migration and cultural exchange between the plains and the Himalayan regions (Lohani, Rawat & Bhatt 2014: 3).

Devidutt Sharma (1984, 1994) was among the first linguists to study Kumaoni and its varieties systematically, conducting a phonological study of the language's segmental inventory. Pant (2018) documented the syntax of Kumaoni. One of the most comprehensive lexicographic resources, the Hindi-Kumaoni-English dictionary, was compiled by Sher Singh Bisht (1994). Bisht's (2014) monograph on Kumaoni language and literature provides a non-technical overview of the language's phonology and syntax. Apte & Pattanayak (1967) produced a descriptive grammar of Kumaoni, and Upreti (1976) provides an overview of Kumaoni's historical development along with a brief summary of its grammar.

5. CURRENT RESEARCH

There are some recent studies of Kumaoni variation and sociolinguistics. Prakash (2007) examines language loyalty and language shift among Kumaoni speakers in Delhi in his doctoral dissertation, documenting the transition patterns from Kumaoni to Hindi in urban settings. Kandpal (2011) offers a comparison of the Kumaoni varieties spoken in Uttarakhand, neatly outlining the linguistic diversity within the language. Prasad (2020) examines the Kumaoni adaptation of borrowed Sanskrit words, enhancing our comprehension of lexical borrowing patterns and their current usage.

Compounding in Kumaoni has also received recent attention. Kumaoni shares with other Indo-Aryan languages a head-final compounding template, where the rightmost constituent carries both the grammatical category and the primary semantic weight of the whole. The lexical sources feeding into this template are varied—native Kumaoni stock sits alongside borrowings from Sanskrit, Hindi, Persian, and English. A third category of compound is used when the two constituents come from different source languages. The borrowing process in Kumaoni is far from passive. When foreign words enter the language, they are reshaped to conform to its sound system and grammatical logic. English 'pencil sharpener' *pensil ʃapnə(r)*, for instance, emerges as *pɪlsənkɔr* in Kumaoni, with the original sounds compressed, reordered, and fitted to native phonological patterns. A comparable process is visible in the Hindi *puṣā-paṭʰə* 'an act of worship', which surfaces as *pu-paṭʰə* in Kumaoni, with vowel length and syllable boundaries systematically shifted. So there is an active process of linguistic domestication, where outside material is taken in and remade on Kumaoni's terms. Not all borrowings follow this pattern though. While some compounds are reanalyzed in the process of transfer, others cross the Hindi-Kumaoni boundary with their internal structure intact (Adhikari 2023).

Despite this body of work, the language remains inadequately documented. Largely absent from the existing literature are corpus-based descriptions of naturally occurring speech across registers, systematic accounts of discourse pragmatics, and sociolinguistic analyses of dialect variation. Given the rapid


changes currently affecting Kumaoni, including growing bilingualism and the progressive restriction of the language's use to informal domains, updated and expanded documentation would be a valuable contribution to the field.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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