

## Meeting Point

### Interview

By Otto Stern (OSt)

This interview – given on May 24, 2016 – presents

#### **Atilla Atasoy (23), Bachelor in Linguistics, on an aspect of Dzongkha**

This is an interview with somebody who never has set foot in Bhutan, but yet has a very special access to Bhutan through the Dzongkha language. Atilla Atasoy, member of the Swiss Study Foundation and holder of the Suyana-Foundation Scholarship, is a Bachelor student of Linguistics at Bern University. He studies and works in the Institute of Language Sciences, with Prof Dr George van Driem (specialist in Himalayan Languages) occupying the chair in Historical Linguistics. Atilla just finished his Bachelor's thesis titled "*Towards a description of the autolalic future in Dzongkha - An interview-based qualitative study*."

**OSt:** Who are you, and where are you from?



**Atilla:** My parents originate from Turkey, but I grew up in Wattwil, St.Gallen; I did my Matura (high-school diploma) centred on Physics and Applied Mathematics – because, originally, I wanted to become a nuclear physicist – but I quickly realized that I was not top in Maths. I've always been interested in languages,

because I grew up bilingual, Turkish, at home only, and (Swiss) German. My fascination for languages started when learning French at school; it was so much easier for me as a bilingual! So in 2013, I came to study Linguistics at Bern University and wrote my thesis on Dzongkha in the spring semester 2016.

I'm fascinated by Dzongkha because – similar to Latin in Europe for centuries – the written form is classical Tibetan, Chökê, but the spoken varieties are quite different and distant from it, like e.g. early French from Latin. Similarly, in Europe, the writing was in Latin for many centuries, but the spoken varieties developed further and further away from it, until the writing in different languages, as e.g. Italian, Spanish and French, was standardized. The written form of Dzongkha is not yet at this point, but efforts to modernise it, i.e. to bring it closer to the spoken variety, is on its way. Spoken Dzongkha then, although being the official language, is not yet studied in all details, and the possibility to contribute a little detail, in my case the so called "*autolalic future*", was a real challenge and a great opportunity to me.

In order to do so, I planned to conduct interviews with speakers of Dzongkha as part of the field work for my thesis, and with the generous help of Marianne Frei, President of SSB, and Mr. Karma Tshering of Gaselô, former News speaker for the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), I found very interesting interview partners, some of them here in Switzerland, others on internet as chat partners. I had planned to interview one or two persons and, thanks to Marianne, I was overwhelmed with eight interview partners, plus those on chat. It was the first time in my life I spoke to people I didn't know at all in a faraway country, and I quickly recognized how proud they were of their national language. They were also very amazed that somebody in Switzerland was interested in their language. All this gives a Bachelor's student the feeling of doing something useful in his work!

**OSt:** And what is this *autolalic future*?

**Atilla:** To summarize, the form is "*-geno*" which is a suffix of the verb. Following the explanation of Prof van Driem, it expresses one's own intention of doing something in the future and is only uttered to oneself. But I felt that this explanation could not be complete, and I wanted to find out what's its real everyday use. Here is an example from my thesis:

Sentences with the *autolalic future* describe commands by the speaker towards the group he or she is in ("*we*"), or fixed plans towards oneself ("*I*"). In such sentences, the verb is marked with *-geno*. The following examples are commonly used sentences with the *autolalic future*:

*D'i tama nga d'a pchêgeno.* "I will deal with that later."

*Ngace tama beskop tawa jogeno.* "Later on we will go and watch a movie."



To make statements with the autolalic future though, the speaker must be of equal or higher social rank than the people, who hear the sentence.

**OST:** How did you get interested in doing this particular study?

**Atila:** Before my studies at Bern University I had never heard a word of Dzongkha, and I also had no knowledge of Bhutan. My fascination for Dzongkha and other languages of the Himalayas results solely from the lectures of Prof Dr George van Driem, who is one of the most important researchers in Tibeto-Burman languages and he coined the alternative term "Transhimalayan Languages". He knows the Dzongkha Development Commission (DDC) very well; he did research for the DDC, and his Grammar of Dzongkha was written on request of DDC.

Bhutan as a country is comparable in size to Switzerland, but with many less inhabitants (about 770'000) 19 indigenous languages are spoken on its territory! I thought Switzerland was unique with four official languages, so the much more complicated linguistic situation of Bhutan challenged my linguistic mind. In a course of Prof van Driem on the languages of the Himalayas and especially on Dzongkha, I got hooked on this topic.

I wrote my thesis in the first half of 2016, and on May 13 I handed it in. It is a qualitative study based on interviews to find out how Dzongkha speakers use the "autolalic future". The interviews were pre-structured, but I left room for a free discussion on the question of use of this linguistic form; and I realised that the Bhutanese are very cautious in their judgments, especially on a topic of their national language!



**OST:** Where did the interviews take place?

**Atila:** Three interviews, with the participants of the Hotel Management Project in Scuol, I did at the HWZ University of Applied Sciences in Zürich; two students from the Judiciary Program at the University of St. Gallen, HSG, preferred to

do the interviews over Skype; one person I met at her host family in Canton Aargau, one in Basel, and one in Bhutan over Facebook.

In addition I was in a chat on Facebook (in written conversation) with about 20 Dzongkha speakers in Bhutan. This group discussion was done in English. Unfortunately, after half a year of learning Dzongkha, I was not able to lead the interviews in Dzongkha yet. I do understand quite a few things, and I can also read it. I know the grammatical structure of the language too, but to speak Dzongkha I would need a stay in Bhutan!

**OST:** And what do you know about Bhutan?

**Atila:** Unfortunately I didn't have a chance to go there yet, but I hope there will be a chance after my studies! I know Bhutan only from the linguistic point of view. I know the names of the Dzongkhags and certain places where my professor did particular studies. I also roughly know the history of Bhutan, mostly also from the linguistic point of view – e.g. that Dzongkha became officially the national language in 1961 – and I have an idea of some cultural aspects.

**OST:** What surprised you most in dealing with Bhutan?

**Atila:** The biggest surprise was the fact that many Bhutanese know four to five languages, and still think they know little! I had interview partners who know Dzongkha, Hindi, Nepali, and of course English and now are even learning German while studying in Switzerland! And, when asked about their languages, they mentioned all these, and – in typical Bhutanese understatement – they added, "I'm sorry, but that's all I know"!

Another thing that astonished me much is that in 1999 only, Bhutan got open to new technologies, and today, just two decades later, everybody is on Facebook, everybody has a Smart Phone and many of them have a Tablet; they taught me that on Facebook you can communicate with a camera! Interview partners over 50 years old are always online with Skype and Facebook; internet speed seems to be better than in Australia, and so on. In this regard they caught up with the most technologically developed countries! But one of my interview partners stressed also the problematic side of this development: "We caught up fast but there are also negative side effects to this, we prefer to go our own pace."

**OST:** Do you have plans for future steps in Linguistics?



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**Atila:** There will be one big step coming up – unfortunately away from Bhutan and the Himalayas: I plan to do my Master’s in Clinical Linguistics. I got into a Master Program with stays in Finland, Germany and the Netherlands, the European Master in Clinical Linguistics. My

dream was always Clinical Linguistics, i.e. Neurolinguistics or Psycholinguistics. It was only thanks to the interesting courses about the Himalayan languages by Prof van Driem that I got on the Bhutan track!

**OSr:** Thank you for this interesting interview!

## **And don't forget!**

*Under the heading “Meeting Point” the SSB Newsletter regularly features interviews with Bhutanese and Swiss people working, studying and visiting in the respective host country. It will give insight in the experiences and activities of Bhutanese and Swiss people in contact.*

*Contributions to this rubric from members of SSB and BSS, as well as the circle of readers of the Newsletter are most welcome!*

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