

Language Contact and Convergence in Tibeto-Burman Languages of Uttarakhand: A Layered Perspective

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Abstract

Languages naturally interact and influence one another when they come into contact, often leading to structural and lexical convergence. Historically, every language has undergone a degree of transformation due to such interactions, with some changes being subtle and others resulting in the emergence of entirely new linguistic forms. The Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages of Uttarakhand, spoken primarily in the high-altitude border regions, exhibit varying degrees of linguistic convergence due to their prolonged contact with Indo-Aryan languages such as Kumauni, Garhwali, and Hindi.

This study examines the impact of sustained language contact on the structure of TB languages in Uttarakhand, conceptualizing their evolution as a *layered cake*—where different linguistic elements have been gained, lost, or restructured over time. The research aims to identify and analyse these accumulated *tiers* of naturalized foreign elements, focusing on lexical borrowing, phonetic adaptation, syntactic influence, and grammatical restructuring. Through a comparative analysis of specific TB languages—such as Jad and Raji—this study seeks to discern patterns of convergence and divergence, shedding light on the mechanisms that drive language change in multilingual settings.

By drawing on historical linguistic data, fieldwork observations, and sociolinguistic analysis, this research contributes to a broader understanding of language contact phenomena in the Himalayan region. The findings will offer insights into the adaptive strategies of minority languages in response to linguistic dominance and cultural integration, furthering discussions on language preservation and shift in contact zones.

Key words: Language Contact, Language Convergence, Raji, Jad, Uttarakhand.

1. Introduction

On November 9, 2000, the state of Uttaranchal, the 27th state of India, was carved out of Uttar Pradesh. In January 2007, the state was renamed Uttarakhand, meaning "northern region," which reflects the area's traditional designation. Following its formation, Hindi and Sanskrit were established as the official languages of the state. The state of Uttarakhand is divided into two socio-cultural regions:

- Kumaun, and
- Garhwal.

In the Kumaun region, several dialects are spoken under the cover term *Kumauni*. Similarly, *Garhwali*, with its own dialectal variations, is spoken in the Garhwal region. In addition to these major linguistic groups, the state is home to five Scheduled Tribes—

- Jaunsari,
- Bhotia,
- Buksha,
- Tharu, and
- Raji.

Smaller groups such as the Jad (Rongpa), Darma, Chaudansh, and Byansh also inhabit the region and are typically classified under the broader label *Bhotia*. Each of these communities speaks a distinct language. While Kumauni, Garhwali, and Hindi belong to the Indo-Aryan language family, the languages spoken by the Scheduled Tribes and smaller ethnic groups predominantly belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family.

Language contact in Uttarakhand has had a profound impact on the linguistic identities of its communities. Prolonged interaction with dominant languages has led to a noticeable shift among many communities toward these more widely spoken tongues. In UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (2010)¹, three major regional languages—Rongpa, Garhwali, and Kumauni—are classified as *vulnerable*. In addition, four languages—Byangsi, Darma, Jad, and Jaunsari—are listed as *definitely endangered*. Bangani and Raji are categorized as *critically endangered* and *severely endangered*, respectively, while Tolcha is considered *extinct*.

Hindi currently serves as the lingua franca across the region, functioning as the principal medium for intergroup communication. In most social domains, speakers of Garhwali and Kumauni predominantly use Hindi or a hybridized form of their native language that incorporates significant Hindi lexical influence. Other smaller Indo-Aryan languages spoken in the region include Bangani, Jaunpuri, Marcha, Bawari, and Rawalti.

This paper aims to examine the processes of linguistic convergence in two Tibeto-Burman languages of Uttarakhand—*Jad* and *Raji*—with a particular focus on the outcomes of sustained contact with dominant Indo-Aryan languages, especially Kumauni, Hindi and Garhwali. It explores key mechanisms of contact-induced change, including code-mixing, borrowing, relexification, and grammatical restructuring. Through a comparative analysis of structural and sociolinguistic features, the study investigates how prolonged interaction has influenced the lexicon, syntax, phonology, and language use patterns within these endangered speech communities. By comparing these two distinct linguistic ecologies, the research highlights broader patterns and implications of language contact in marginalized and multilingual settings.

2. Jad Community: An Introduction

Several tribal communities inhabit the north-western region of Uttarakhand, among which the Jad community holds a distinct place. The term *Jad* is an exonym—used by outsiders to refer both to the community and their language—while the community members refer to themselves as *Rongba* or *Rongpa*. In official records and common discourse, they are generally categorized under the broader label *Bhotia*. As per *The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1967* and *Act 29 of 2000*, the Jads are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe.

The Bhotias constitute one of the major ethnic groups of the central Himalayan region. They are a transhumant community of semi-Mongoloid people of Tibetan origin (Fuchs, 1988). Owing to their close racial and cultural affinity with Tibetans, the Bhotia-inhabited regions are often referred to as *Bod* or *Bhot*. Within this broader category, the Jads are one of the most prominent sub-groups.

Historically, the Jads inhabited the Nilang and Jadong valleys along the banks of the Jad Ganga River—a tributary of the Bhagirathi—near the Tibetan border, and it is likely that their name derives from this river. Following the Indo-China War of 1962, the Indian Army relocated them to Bagori and Veerpur

¹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark>

Dunda villages in Uttarkashi district for security reasons (Naithini, 1986). Today, they practice seasonal migration, living in Bagori during the summer (May–September) and moving to Dunda in winter (September–April). Some families have also migrated to Chorpani near Rishikesh to safeguard livestock, access fodder, and trade woollen goods.

Although not enumerated separately in the Census of India and instead grouped under the broader Bhotia category, local records indicate a much larger population than earlier estimates. Ethnologue (2019), citing Roland Breton (1977/1997), placed their number at about 300, but by 2016, Bagori alone had around 1,009 registered voters and a total population of about 2,500 across 400 families, according to village head Bhawan Singh Rana².

Traditionally nomadic cattle herders and shepherds (Chatterjee, 1976), the Jads gradually established permanent settlements and took up agriculture in their original valleys. Until the 1962 border closure, they maintained active trans-Himalayan trade with Tibet through high-altitude routes such as Thang-La (5,050 m) and Tang-Choke-La (5,400 m), exchanging cotton, grain, oilseeds, metals, and sugar for salt, wool, and borax.

Today, the Jads continue to graze sheep and goats in the upper Jahnvi (Jad Ganga) valley during the summer, when alpine vegetation is abundant. While their livelihood has diversified—spanning agriculture, trade, business, and labour—their primary economic activity remains animal husbandry. Yak rearing, once common, is now limited to a few households. Wool from sheep and goats is still used to make rugs and other woollen garments, a skill particularly mastered by Jad women. In Bagori, some households also own apple orchards. However, these traditional occupations have largely declined among the younger generation, many of whom are engaged in menial jobs or have entered government service, indicating a shift towards mainstream livelihoods.

Religiously, the Jads were originally followers of Tibetan Buddhism. However, due to acculturation and proximity to predominantly Hindu populations, they now exhibit practices from both religions. They celebrate the Buddhist New Year (Losar) and display prayer flags, while also worshipping Hindu deities and engaging in Hindu rituals. Despite these influences, they maintain that they are ethnically distinct from Tibetans. Their *kul devta* (family deity) legends often resemble those found in the Hindu epic Mahabharata. This syncretism is also reflected in their medicinal traditions, with herbs and flowers believed to carry mythological associations from both Buddhist and Hindu origins. Members of the community possess skills in medicine, and other traditional practices. In times of bereavement, Buddhist priests are consulted, and funeral timings are determined using the Buddhist calendar. Marriage rituals also reflect a blend of both religious traditions. Inter-group marriages occur among Jads in Uttarkashi, Chamoli, and Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh). Occasionally, they marry into Garhwali Rajput, Nepali, or other local communities. Internally, the Jad community is divided into two groups—one considers itself socially superior and does not intermarry with the group it perceives as lower. Notably, while all Jads are classified as Scheduled Tribes in government records, during this study, it was observed that members of the self-perceived ‘higher’ group tend to reserve the label of ‘Scheduled Tribe’ for those they consider socially inferior.

² As told to Ajay Kumar Singh, RP, SPPEL -during the field work.

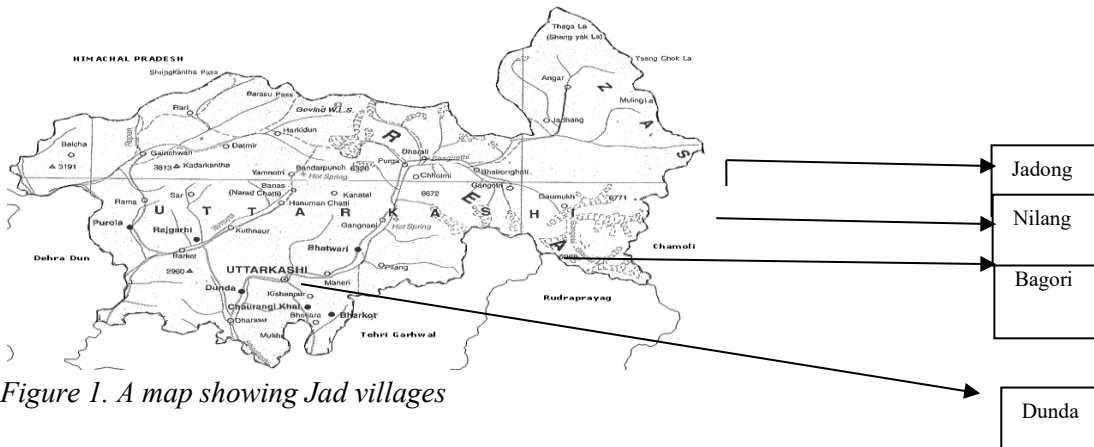


Figure 1. A map showing Jad villages

Source: <http://www.eindiatourism.com/uttaranchal-india-maps/uttarkashi-uttaranchal-india-maps1.html> (markings by the field researcher)³

2.1 Jad Language and its contact background

As mentioned earlier, the language spoken by the Jad community is commonly referred to as Jad or Jaar (ISO 639-3: *jda*), and it belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. The language is known by several alternate names, including Jadh, Rongpa, Rongba, Rongma, and Bhotia, terms that are also used interchangeably to describe the community itself. This multiplicity of names reflects both external nomenclature (exonyms) and internal variation, as well as broader ethnolinguistic classifications in the Himalayan region.

Traditionally, the community possessed a rich oral literature, including songs sung during weddings and religious ceremonies, as well as narrative folktales and ritual chants. However, much of this oral heritage has been lost in recent decades. Elders in the community report that many traditional songs are no longer remembered or performed. While older speakers continue to use Jad fluently—especially in private and intra-generational conversations—the speech of younger community members is typically a heavily code-mixed variety, interspersed with Garhwali and Hindi lexical and grammatical elements. This points to an ongoing process of language shift toward the dominant regional languages.

This geographic mobility, combined with prolonged contact with speakers of other languages, has further contributed to the erosion of linguistic vitality. Without urgent intervention and community-driven revitalization efforts, the Jad language faces the possibility of further decline in both fluency and cultural function. Currently, the Jad language is in a state of endangerment, primarily due to intense contact with dominant regional languages such as Garhwali and Hindi, the latter being widely used in education, administration, and media. The Jad language is oral and lacks a writing system, which further limits its transmission, especially among the younger generation.

3. Raji: Ethnic and Linguistic Overview

The Raji tribal community, also known as Banrawats, Banmanus or Banrajis, first came into documented attention in 1823 through G.W. Traill, then Commissioner of Kumaun. Ethnically, they are believed to be descendants of the prehistoric Kiratas, early Himalayan settlers predating the Nagas and Khasas (Majumdar, 1944), though no informant in the present study confirmed knowledge of this origin. Physically, Rajis show mixed Aryan, Dravidian, and Mongoloid traits, with Driem (2002) classifying

³ Ajay Kumar Singh

them as indigenous South Asian Mongoloids. A culturally affiliated Raji-Raute group also exists across the border in Nepal, divided into four regional clusters (Reinhard, 1974).

Traditionally animist, the Rajis today identify as Hindu, yet maintain a belief system centred around spirits and ancestors (*ama/bubu*), often viewed with fear rather than reverence. Ritual life is minimal, with only birth, marriage, and death formally marked. Marriage customs involve bride-price and a shift toward nuclear family structures, while gender roles, though formally patriarchal, see women as central to economic survival. Women primarily sustain the household through daily wage labour such as stone quarrying and grass cutting, as male participation is severely impacted by alcohol dependency.

Until recently, the Rajis led a nomadic, food-gathering life, living in caves and relying on hunting and fishing (Majumdar, 1944; Bora, 1988). Sedentarization has now set in, with communities settled in ten remote hamlets across Pithoragarh and Champawat districts. Access to education remains limited—no informant was found to have completed higher education—and economic mobility is constrained by poor infrastructure, isolation, and lack of viable skill development. Customs like leaving the dead in forests, though once practiced, are now largely abandoned.

Linguistically, Raji is a highly endangered Tibeto-Burman language with only 732 speakers reported in the 2011 Census. It is spoken in isolated hamlets such as Kimkhola, Bhogtirua, Chipltara, and others. Grierson (1909) called Raji *janggali*, and classified it under Tibeto-Burman family, a view echoed by Chatterji (1926). However, scholars like S.R. Sharma and D.D. Sharma suggest a substratum of Munda elements. Rastogi (2002, 2012) notes strong Indo-Aryan influence—particularly from Kumauni and Hindi—on Raji's grammar and vocabulary. Processes such as borrowing, code-mixing, and relexification have led to extensive lexical and structural convergence, threatening the native speech form.

3.1 Contact History of the Kumaun Rajis

The linguistic and cultural profile of the Rajis cannot be understood in isolation from their long history of contact and migration. In my view, the first major movement of Rajis into present-day Uttarakhand occurred well before the eighteenth century, when a group of hunter-gatherers crossed over from Nepal through dense forest routes. In Nepal, Raji communities continue to live in districts such as Surkhet, Baitadi, Kanchanpur, Kailali, and Bardia. Unlike their Indian counterparts, some Raute groups in Nepal still maintain a nomadic lifestyle. At the time of their initial migration, Rajis lived in caves and subsisted entirely on forest-based practices.

Historical and linguistic evidence also suggests earlier contact with Austro-Asiatic groups. Scholars such as Rev. Sten Konow and S.R. Sharma have highlighted the presence of Munda elements in Himalayan languages, including Raji. Though no Austro-Asiatic languages are currently spoken in this region, certain linguistic features point to a Munda substratum, likely absorbed in an earlier period.

Following Indian independence, the government made efforts to settle the Rajis and classify them as a 'primitive tribe.' In 1982, about twenty Raji individuals moved to Khirdwari in search of food and livelihood. During my fieldwork in 2022, Laxmi Rajbaa from Khirdwari recalled how they were provided with farming land and limited financial assistance to build homes. However, due to the inaccessibility of the hamlet, several families later relocated to Chakarpur, marking a second wave of migration. This movement has had lasting effects on the Raji language and cultural practices, intensifying their contact with Indo-Aryan languages and accelerating language shift.

The geographic proximity of Uttarakhand to Nepal, separated only by the Kali River, has contributed to sustained cross-border interaction. Nepali, an Indo-Aryan language, is widely spoken in this region, and many Rajis are fluent in it. Inter-marriage between Indian Rajis and Nepali Raji-Raute women is also common. Thus, the region represents a unique contact zone where Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages coexist, layered over remnants of an earlier Austro-Asiatic presence.

Even in terms of material culture, elements like stone bead jewellery and wooden utensils reflect ongoing ties with the Nepali Raji-Raute population. These markers of cultural continuity underscore a shared history that traverses both political and linguistic borders. Meanwhile, the mixed physical features of the community—ranging from Aryan to Mongoloid traits—further reinforce the idea of prolonged contact and inter-group interaction over centuries.

4. Methodology

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in Uttarkashi district (for Jad) and Pithoragarh and Champawat districts (for Raji) in Uttarakhand. Data was collected using a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and elicitation sessions with native speakers. In the Jad-speaking region, the primary field sites included Bagori and Veerpur Dunda, with supplementary information gathered in Chorpani, where some families migrate seasonally. For Raji, fieldwork was carried out in Kimkhola, Bhogtirua, Madanbori, and a recently settled area near Chakarpur. Respondents ranged from elders with fluency in traditional speech to younger speakers exhibiting significant contact-induced variation.

The study focused on:

- Lexical borrowing from Hindi, Garhwali, and Kumauni
- Code-mixed utterances across speech domains (e.g., home, marketplace, schools)
- Grammatical restructuring or simplification influenced by dominant languages

Audio recordings were made with informed consent and later transcribed and analysed using a combination of qualitative linguistic analysis and comparative lexical and morphosyntactic comparison.

5. Contact Induced Changes

5.1 Contact-Induced Gain

This occurs when a language adopts new forms or patterns from another language. Such changes can include borrowing words (loanwords), grammatical structures, or phonetic elements. No aspect of a language's structure is entirely immune to linguistic influence from neighbouring speakers, particularly those from politically dominant communities. However, the lexicon is especially susceptible to influence, particularly in cases where speakers lack words for concepts that do not exist in their cultural experience. For instance, the Raji people historically had no need for words such as *farm*, *cow*, or *plough*, as these concepts were absent from their traditional way of life. Raji has borrowed many such words from Kumauni, Nepali, Hindi, Santali, and English but along with these terms they are replacing their native words.

A comparative lexical survey of 276 core vocabulary items in Raji revealed that 119 (approximately 43%) are loanwords from Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi, Kumauni, or Nepali. Several native

words have been replaced by Kumauni/Hindi/ Nepali loans and have resulted in the loss of native speech form. Thus, the process of ‘relexification’⁴ (Hill & Hill 1977) can be clearly seen in Raji. For example-

English	Raji	Kumauni
Uncle	<i>dukkəija</i>	<i>kəkka</i>
Back	<i>bəwi</i>	<i>puʃʃʰi</i>
Mother	<i>ja</i>	<i>ija</i>
Father	<i>ba/bubu</i>	<i>babu</i>

Raji has numerical expressions only up to six and beyond that it has loans with little or no phonetic modification. It has also borrowed many nominals and verb forms from the dominant language. Names of days and months are also Indo Aryan loans. Except for the red and black other colour names are borrowed from Kumauni or Hindi. Apart from these kinship terms, names of body parts, expression for flora and fauna, household artifacts, adjectives, conjunctions have also been heavily borrowed. Retroflex sounds in Raji, such as /ʈ/, /ɖ/, and /ʂ/, are largely restricted to Indo-Aryan loanwords and do not appear to contrast phonemically with native alveolar or dental stops, indicating partial phonological convergence. For example- *jaɽo*, *boɖo*, *laɖo*, *dʰaɽe*. La polla (2006) also found the same development in other Tibeto - Burman languages of Indo-sphere.

In contrast, Jad exhibits signs of lexical convergence without extensive structural erosion. While contact with Garhwali, Hindi, and English has led to borrowing—particularly in domains previously absent in Jad culture (e.g., names of vegetables, religious terms, cultural traditions)—these remain largely surface-level additions. For example-

English	Jad	Garhwali- Hindi
School	<i>isku:l</i>	<i>isku:l</i>
Book	<i>kitab</i>	<i>kitab</i>
Receipt	<i>rəsɪd</i>	<i>rəsɪd</i>
Apple	<i>ʃeu</i>	<i>seb</i>
to enter new house ceremony	<i>gorpʊʃi</i>	<i>gorpʊʃi</i>

They have expressions for certain things but instead of using their own word now they have started using Garhwali words, for example-

English	Jad	Garhwali -Hindi
Root	<i>paton</i>	<i>jəɽ</i>
Four o'clock	<i>zi</i>	<i>ɕʰar</i>
Money	<i>ɳol</i>	<i>pəsa</i>
Mistake	<i>tsʰofuŋ</i>	<i>gələti</i>

It is interesting to note that Adjectives perform predicating function in this language. The modifier comes after the modified nouns, but due to areal influence non-numeral quantifiers like - **maŋbo** (more), **boŋte** (many/much), **tsɪɖzi** (some) are sometimes added before the modified item. For citation-

⁴ The replacement of native lexicon with the dominant language.

<i>di</i>	<i>pã</i>	<i>ɾɨbo</i>	<i>duk</i>
this	Tree	tall	COP

This is a tall tree/ This tree is tall.

Whereas-

<i>maŋbo</i>	<i>lep</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>tɔŋ</i>
much/ many	Talk	NEG	speak

Do not speak too much.

A common strategy for connecting two sentences in a narrative is known as **tail-head linkage**. Jad speakers use the word /tɛ/ for this purpose, which is a borrowed form of Hindi/ **təb**/. See the following example-

<i>hei</i>	<i>ro</i>	<i>lep</i>	<i>fa</i>	<i>ŋa:</i>	<i>rɛ</i>	<i>hɔləŋ</i>	<i>na</i>	<i>lakəpa</i>	<i>tu:</i>
there	LOC	reach	CVB	1SG	POSS	face	and	hand	wash
<i>tɛ</i>	<i>ŋa:</i>	<i>ɖaŋsa</i>	<i>naŋ du</i>	<i>put</i>	<i>tɛ</i>	<i>ŋa:</i>	<i>təktʰa</i>	<i>tsha</i>	
then	1SG	house	Inside	go	then	1SG	flour	sieved	
<i>urã</i>	<i>hei</i>	<i>fe</i>	<i>kolkol</i>	<i>dʒo</i>					
And	3SG	GEN	Balls	made					

‘After reaching there I washed my hands and face then went inside the room and then I sieved the flour and made balls with it.’

5.2 Contact-Induced Loss

This phenomenon occurs when a language loses specific forms or patterns under the influence of another language. It often takes place during language shift, as speakers gradually abandon features of their native language, resulting in linguistic attrition or simplification.

In Raji, the loss of nasalization and glottalization can be observed in present-day usage. There are seven vowel sounds in Raji. All vowels have nasal counterparts irrespective of their proximity to nasal consonants but except in /hã/ nasalization is not phonemic in present speech form. The use of glottal sounds was prominent in the hamlet of Altodi speakers (1998, 2001) but it was rarely heard at other hamlets during later field work. In his article D.D. Sharma (p. 147) had also mentioned about this feature which is probably lost with times.

5.3 Loss or Gain of a Pattern

This refers to structural changes in syntax or grammar due to linguistic influence or internal evolution. Traditionally, Raji speakers predominantly used the Verb-Object-Subject (VOS) word order. However, contemporary usage has become more flexible, now allowing multiple word orders such as VOS, Subject-Object-Verb (SOV), and Object-Verb-Subject (OVS). The introduction of SOV and OVS orders alongside the traditionally dominant VOS may reflect influence from neighbouring Indo-Aryan languages, where SOV is the default word order, as well as increasing bilingualism among Raji speakers. Additionally, in certain cases, the subject (S) is dropped altogether, reflecting a shift in syntactic patterns influenced by language contact and evolving speech habits.

5.4 Hybridization

In Raji a loan pronominal phrase ‘*əi ke bad*’ meaning ‘*after this*’ is used at the beginning of a sentence to introduce a new event. Subsequently, the Raji particle ‘*pəi*’ marks continuity in the discourse. For example-

əi ke bad bʰitəRi kəmra ya bi ye pəi na
 this GEN after inside Room LOC come PART SEQ 1SG

‘After this, I went inside the room.’

Jad has created several hybrid expressions, such as –

English	Jad	
Mustard Oil	<i>sərso fe mergu</i>	Hindi + Jad
To drink tea	<i>ca tʰugən</i>	Garhwali+ Jad

6. Key Comparative Features

Feature	Jad Language	Raji Language
Dominant Contact Language(s)	Hindi, Garhwali	Hindi, Kumaoni
Lexical Borrowing	Moderate (ritual, modern terms)	High (daily vocabulary)
Phonological Change	Some evidence	Significant loss of TB features
Syntactic Influence	Present (e.g., auxiliaries)	High (word order, case changes)
Code-Mixing (Youth)	Frequent	Very Frequent
Literacy in Mother Tongue	Low	Very Low
Language Vitality	Threatened	Nearly Endangered

7. Conclusion

The contact histories of the Jad and Raji communities reveal fundamentally different sociolinguistic trajectories, despite both speaking Tibeto-Burman languages within the multilingual landscape of Uttarakhand. Although both languages are endangered and situated in Indo-Aryan-dominated ecologies, the nature and extent of contact-induced convergence differ significantly.

The Raji, a historically nomadic hunter-gatherer community, experienced layered contact over time— with Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and Indo-Aryan groups. Comparative lexical data (e.g., 84-item lists showing 24 Austro-Asiatic, 52 Tibeto-Burman, and 50 Indo-Aryan cognates) reveal extensive borrowing and hybridization. This sustained interaction has influenced not only the lexicon but also core grammatical structures, indicating deep structural convergence. Raji thus exemplifies a case of intensive language contact, resulting in a stratified linguistic system wherein multiple layers of influence obscure straightforward genealogical classification.

In contrast, the Jad language retains a robust underlying grammatical framework and preserves much of its native vocabulary across key domains. This points to a scenario of moderate contact with limited structural borrowing—characteristic of a mixed language that maintains its core identity while incorporating lexical elements from other sources.

In sum, Raji exhibits significant structural convergence and relexification due to prolonged, multi-source contact, whereas Jad demonstrates a more contained convergence, preserving its linguistic integrity despite exposure to multiple languages. These divergent outcomes highlight how geography, social isolation, cultural practices, and intensity of contact collectively shape the course of linguistic change and convergence.

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