The Comprehension of Spoken Ladakhi

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The Ladakhi language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan subfamily of Chinese. It is spoken by most of the people residing in the two districts of present Ladakh, which is situated in the north of India. This language is spoken in Leh, Nubra, Nyomo and Zanskar and it has three main dialects- Upper Ladakhi, Central Ladakhi and Lower Ladakhi. Prior to Ladakh's annexation by the princely State of Jammu and Kashmir in the year 1834, Ladakh was a kingdom, having local rulers, popularly addressed as Gyalpo or King. Ladakh's royal family connects its genealogical roots to the first king of Tibet, gNya-khris-bstan po. One of his descendents was Skyid-de nyi-ma-mgon, the ruler of Western Tibet. He divided Ladakh, Guge, Purang and Zanskar among his three sons. The eldest son, dPal-gyi mgon (1000-1025) received Ladakh and became its first ruler. The social hierarchy that emerged placed the king unquestionably at the top. Next came the Jo or lords. In addition to them, ministers of the successive kings known as Kalon (prime minister) Lonpo (minister) also gained prominence as Skutak or nobility in their respective villages or localities. These powerful families would gain prime lands in their respective localities and the tenants to work it. Hence, a number of families emerged in the region with the status of nobility and by virtue of their superiority status in the community exercised executive and financial authority over the local population, with an influence still present today. Next to the royalty is Mangrigs or the Mi-mangs (commoners). Then comes the Rigs-ngan or low class families such as Gara, (smith) Mon (carpenter) and Beda (musicians). Among the Rigs-ngan families, Gara and Mon would carry settled life in the villages owning land, while the Beda, the wondering musicians, did not (Today, however, these people live a settled life). In addition to the Buddhist, in Ladakhi society, one finds a sizeable Muslim population throughout upper, middle, and lower class Ladakhi families. In the 21st century Ladakh is at the crossroads of change. Its social and cultural makeup is fast changing. Similarly on a linguistic line, a great change is visible on account of influences of dominant modern languages like Hindi, Urdu and English. In the proposed paper I will analyze the comprehension of spoken Ladakhi in the context of its present usage in the speech of younger generations of Ladakhis who have had little access a traditional society.