Munda is the name of a group of tribal speeches mainly spoken in the forests of Central India. It forms the Western branch of the Austroasiatic family. The Munda languages are ten in number and usually classified into the following sub-branches:

1. Northwestern Munda, consisting of Korku and its dialect Mowasi;
2. Northern Munda, consisting of Kherwari, i.e. Santali, Mundari, and their dialects;
3. Central Munda, consisting of Kharia (Kheria) and Juang;
4. Southern Munda, consisting of Saora (= Sora), Parengi (= Gorum), Gutob, Bonda (= Remo), and Dikey (= Gta').

Of the Southern Munda languages (SM) mentioned above, the last three, i.e. Dikey, Bonda and Gutob, are spoken in the extreme south of the Koraput district of Orissa. They are the southernmost Munda tongues.

These three SM languages have many traits in common that are absent in the remaining Munda tongues. I propose, therefore, to divide Munda into two major groups, namely, Lower Munda, consisting of the three southernmost SM tongues Dikey, Bonda and Gutob, and Upper Munda, comprising the rest of Munda. It is particularly to be noted that the remaining SM tongues, Parengi and Saora agree, with Upper Munda in many important features, in contradistinction to Dikey, Bonda and Gutob.

Among the major differences between Lower Munda and Upper Munda, the most prominent one is the use in the Upper Munda languages of a pronominal element indicating the number and person of the object. Mostly it is incorporated in the verb. While this morphological feature occurs in all Upper Munda languages, including Parengi and Saora of Southern Munda, it
is absent in Lower Munda. Outside the Kherwari group, however, the synthetic formations have become less and less obscured. Kha.ria has become entirely analytical, the object being indicated by a case-suffix only, without any trace of an object marker incorporated with the verbal form. In the Central Munda language Juang, and in Saora and Parengi of Southern Munda, the use of an object marker in the verb form has become restricted to the first and second persons, whereas an object in the third person is only indicated by a case suffix, as in Kha.ria. When the object is a first or second person, the case suffix is used in addition to the incorporated object marker. In Korku, on the other hand, the objects markers are incorporated only when the object is a third person animate, a case suffix then being added to the noun.

The position of the object in the sentence has become more or less fixed in all the Munda languages, the normal word order being subject-object-verb. While the absence of the pronominal object markers in verb forms constitutes a major distinction between Lower Munda and Upper Munda, we do not know yet the exact distribution of another trait, viz. the incorporation of the abridged forms of noun-objects with verbs, which is found in some Munda languages. Cf. Bo. gui-t3m – ‘to wash one’s mouth’ (Bo. tumz ‘mouth’), So (Ramamurti) anin ium-vo-t-a-n ‘he is catching fish’ (So. a-yd-an ‘fish’), par-7i-dar-in-ten ‘he brought and gave me cooked rice’ (So. par-7 ‘to bring’, ti- ‘to give’, daraj-on ‘cooked rice’), etc. It now seems clear that Lower Munda has no pronominal object markers in the verbs or anywhere else. Instead of them it uses a prefix of an archaic nature to mark the accusative case, a feature not found outside Lower Munda except in Parengi. The prefix is used, both in Lower Munda and in Parengi, to mark a pronominal object, while noun-objects usually take postpositions. In Bonda, however, the prefix is used to mark both pronominal and nominal objects, e.g. Bo. a-gu anturc be ‘leave the child, please’ (gu ‘child’).

Another distinctive morphological feature of Lower Munda is the genitive marker. The noun case suffix is here -n, contrasting with -a/-a’ in Upper Munda (including Parengi and Saora). In combination with kinship terms or words for parts of the body the pronominal elements of the first and second persons are usually prefixed in Lower Munda but suffixed in Upper Munda. Cf. Di. pe-y-ya ‘your mother’ (pe- ‘your’, honorific) as against Pa. ay-an-nom ‘your mother’ (-nom ‘your’), So. bab-na ‘my head’, Ju. kovitti-n ‘my elbow’, Kh. apa-nom ‘your father’, bokob-nai ‘my head’, Ho apu-m ‘your father’, Kw. mes-em ‘your (sing.) elder sister’, Kor. apu-nj ‘my father’, pipni-

2 Abbreviations: As. = Asuri; Bh. = Birhor; Bo. = Bonda; Di. = Didey (Gta?); Gu. = Gutob (Gadaba); Ju. = Juang; Kh. = Kheria, Kheria; Ko. = Korku; Kor. = Koraku; Kw. = Erga Korwa; Mo. = Mowasi; Mu. = Mundari; Pa. = Parengi (Gorum); Sa. = Santali; SM = South Munda; So. = Saora, Sora, Savara.