

## Language Documentation and Language Endangerment in Nepal

Michael Noonan

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

<http://www.uwm.edu/~noonan>

### (1) BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT NEPAL

*Size:* 140,800 sq.km., slightly larger than Greece; about the same size as the US state of Iowa.

*Population:* 27,000,000 [2004 est.]

### (2) LANGUAGES

*Absolute numbers:* at least 140 languages

*Number of indigenous languages:* at least 115 are spoken exclusively or primarily in Nepal.

*Number of speakers:* Of the 115 indigenous languages, over half are spoken by populations under 1000; only about 30 are spoken by populations of over 10,000.

*Classification:* a list of languages, identified by phylum and sub-phylum, is provided at the end of this handout. 109 of the 140 languages listed there are Tibeto-Burman; most of the remainder are Indo-European.

*National language:* Nepali, an Indo-European language, of which about half the population are native speakers.

### (3) LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION

Of the 115 indigenous languages, only about 35 can be said to have any significant documentation: a grammar, a grammar sketch of more than a few pages, a dictionary, a substantial word-list, a set of analyzed texts.

### (4) LANGUAGE PRESERVATION/ENDANGERMENT

Of the 115 indigenous languages, almost all should be considered *endangered*.

- Virtually the entire population is effectively bilingual in Nepali.
- In much of Nepal, ethnic identity can be maintained even by those who do not speak the ethnic language [Noonan 1996].
- Encouraging figures from the last census indicating an increase in number of speakers claiming a language other than Nepali as their native language chart a rise in *ethnic consciousness* rather than an real increase in use of these languages.

*For example:* · In the 2001 census, 9814 people claimed to be Chantyal.

· 5912 claimed the Chantyal language as their mother tongue.

· However, at most 2000 people live in villages where Chantyal is spoken [Noonan 1996].

- On the contrary, a growing body of evidence indicates a shift toward Nepali:
  - In many ethnic communities, children are routinely addressed in Nepali.
  - Even where adults continue to address children in the ethnic language, children may converse among themselves in Nepali.
  - Prior to the 1990 constitution, only Nepali, English, and Sanskrit were permitted as the languages of schooling. Since then, ethnic languages are legal in schooling, but only one ethnic-language school was established, and it didn't last long.



- Even ethnic activists send their children to English or Nepali medium schools [see, for example, Gellner 1997].
- With few exceptions, Nepali [or English] is used in personal correspondence, even among ethnic activists [Noonan 2005, *to appear*].
- The economic travails of Nepal combined with ecological degradation in many districts have resulted in the depopulation of many villages in the countryside, disrupting traditional social life. The Maoist rebellion has accelerated this process.

#### (5) LINGUISTIC CONVERGENCE

*Language shift* leading to *language death* has been the focus of many studies and is predicted to affect the majority of Nepal's languages in the next few decades.

*Linguistic convergence*, by which we mean the loss of distinctive characteristics of one language through convergence toward the grammatical and semantic categories of another, is in many respects a more insidious process since the languages survive, but lose their distinctiveness.

- This process is not always obvious from grammatical descriptions because many linguists are *selective* in describing only structures that are deemed to be 'typical' of the language. Forms documenting influence from Nepali [or, elsewhere, other dominant languages] are disregarded. [Noonan 2003].

This mode of convergence is known, technically, as *metatypy* [Ross 2001]: the Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal have been undergoing metatypy, converging on the linguistic type of Nepali.

#### (6) LANGUAGE AND THE NEPALESE STATE

Prior to 1955, Nepal had effectively been closed off to the outside world. At that time the literacy rate was 5.3%. [The current rate is 53.7% for persons over the age of six.]

Prior to the establishment of the new constitution in 1990, indigenous languages other than Nepali were effectively banished from the public sphere, and only Nepali was permitted in education, in broadcasting and, to a significant degree, in the print media. [English and Sanskrit had been long established in education, though in different spheres.]

The new constitution recognizes "the right of every citizen to develop and promote their languages, script and culture" [Article 18], and the government has recognized twelve minority languages to be used on a regular basis on the national broadcast media. Other than these radio and television broadcasts, however, very few concrete steps have been taken to promote the use of minority languages in the country.

- Recent court decisions have prohibited the use of languages other than Nepali at the local government level.
- As noted, the use of indigenous languages other than Nepali in the schools, while technically legal, has not resulted in any indigenous-language schools other than one short-lived Newari-medium school.
- Sanskrit education continues to be subsidized at all levels of education.

#### (7) ETHNIC IDENTITY, ETHNIC CONSCIOUSNESS, AND LANGUAGE

In traditional cultures *ethnic identity*, as a component of one's social identity, may be asserted to a greater or lesser extent dependent on contingent factors, in particular its instrumental value in gaining some economic or political advantage. It is, moreover, a much more flexible concept than modern-day nationalists and ethnic activists would like to admit, with boundaries that may be fluid rather than static and where ethnic identities may be multiple or overlapping.

Further, the language one speaks may or may not be a *determinant* of, or even a *major component* of, one's ethnic identity. Indeed language shifts are a perennial feature of human affairs, as the examination of the history of virtually any inhabited region of the planet will demonstrate.

Over the last two centuries, we have witnessed a phenomenon, most prominently in the West and then increasingly in the rest of the planet, of politicizing ethnicity, thereby transforming ethnic identity into something I will refer to as *ethnic consciousness*. Ethnic consciousness manifests itself in attempts to 'define' the ethnic group, establishing what it means to be a member of the group; in this way, ideas like language, dress, religion, history are used to 'define' the group, and thus become both conscious and politicized – subject to debate both within the community itself and in the larger political arena.

The ideology that underlies this rise in ethnic consciousness accords language a central role: a proper ethnic group, this ideology maintains, should have its own language, and the group should have rights with regard to its language.

In Nepal, *ethnic consciousness* has been slow to develop, largely because of widespread poverty and illiteracy, but also because few Nepalis had contact with the outside world until fairly recently.

In Nepal, *economic issues* are still primary: most speakers don't see a connection between their economic status and the status of their ethnic languages.

- Bilingualism in Nepali is sufficiently widespread among ethnics so that few could claim lack of access to economic resources on the basis of language alone.
- Language issues have therefore not been politicized to any significant degree, despite the efforts of a few activists.
- One interesting exception is compulsory Sanskrit education, which is seen to unfairly privilege certain castes and ethnicities: Sanskrit education was once compulsory from the 4<sup>th</sup> grade on, but has recently been made an optional subject.

As a consequence, there has been relatively little attention paid to language issues, even by ethnic activists, either on the national level or within the ethnic communities.

#### (8) LITERACY AND ELECTRONIC TECHNOLOGY

Other than Nepali, only a handful of indigenous languages have evolved *literary forms* known to and used by ethnics, even ethnic activists [Noonan 2005].

- Few either have or have agreed on a *standardized grammar* and *vocabulary* that would be acceptable to a majority of speakers.
- For many languages, even the choice of *script* has been a source of discord; e.g. various Tamang activists have supported three different scripts: Devanagari, Tibetan, and a simplified version of the Tibetan script; among Gurungs four scripts have figured in recent discussions: Devanagari, Tibetan, an indigenous adaption of the Devanagari, and Roman, the latter advocated by some ex-Gurkha soldiers.

Apart from a handful of languages with long established traditions of literacy [e.g. Newari], ethnic languages have not been used to any extent in paper *publication*.

So far, *electronic technology* [the web, electronic recordings in any medium] has not been used to support ethnic languages.

#### (9) CONCLUSIONS

*Ethnic consciousness* has come late to Nepal and has come during a period of economic and political turmoil.

Most of the country's languages are spoken by small populations and should be considered *endangered*.

Most have been inadequately *documented*; many have not been documented at all.

There is very little *political will* to effect much change in all this, either from the center or from the ethnic communities themselves.

*Linguistic convergence* toward Nepali is advanced for many languages.

## Languages of Nepal

This list excludes languages of very recent emigrees.

### TIBETO-BURMAN

#### *Dhimal Complex:*

Dhimal

Toto

#### *Ghale Complex:*

Kutang Ghale

Northern Ghale

Southern Ghale

#### *Hayu-Chepang:*

Bhujel/Gharti

Chepang

Hayu/Wayu/Wayo

Kaike

#### *Kham-Magar:*

##### *Kham Complex:*

Gamale

Maikoti

Nisi

Sheshi

Takale

Raji

Eastern Magar

Western Magar

#### *Kiranti:*

Athpare/Athpariya

Bahing/Rumdali

Bantawa

Belhare/Belhariya

Camling/Rodong

Chatthare Limbu

Chintang

Chourase/Umbule

Chulung

Cukwa

Dumi

Dungmali

Jerung

Khaling

Khotang

Koi/Koyu

Kulung

Lambichong

Limbu

Lingkhim

Eastern Lorung/Lohorong

Western Lorung/Lohorong

Lumba-Yakkha

Eastern Mewahang

Western Mewahang

Moinba

Mugali

Nacering

Phangduwali

Pongyong

Puma

Raute

Sam/Saam

Sangpang

Sotang

Sunwar

Surel

Thulung

Tilung

Waling

Yakkha

Yamphe

Yamphu

Lepcha/Rong

Meche/Bodo

#### *Newari Complex*

Bhaktapur

Citlang

Dolakha

Kathmandu-Patan

Pahari

Phri

#### *Tamangic:*

Chantyal

Gurung

Manange/Manangba

Nar-Phu

Seke/Tangbe/Panchgaunle

#### *Tamang Complex:*

Eastern Tamang

East Gorkha Tamang

Northwest Tamang

Southwest Tamang

Western Tamang

Thakali

#### *Tibetan Complex:*

Bhotia/Dangali/Phoke Dangar

Dolpa/Dolpo

Dura

Glo Skad/Lhoba/Loba

Helambu Sherpa/Yolmo

Humla

Jirel

Kag/Baragaunle

Kagate/Syuwa

Kyerung

Lhasa Tibetan/Zang

Lhomi

Mugu/Mugal [≠Mugali]

Naapa/Nawa Sherpa

Nubri

Sherpa

Thudam

Tichurong

Tseku

Tsum

Walungge

Zhar

#### *Western Himalayish:*

Barhamu/Baraam/Bhramu

Byangsi

Chaudangsi

Darmiya/Darimiya

Rangkas

Rawat

Thangmi/Thami

### INDO-EUROPEAN

Abadhi/Awadhi/Baiswari/Kojali

Baghdi

Bengali

Bhojpuri

Bote/Kushar

Danwar

Darai

Gangai

Hindi

Kayort

Kumhale/Kumal

Maithili

Majhi

Marwari

Musasa

Nepali/Gorkhali/Khas Kura

Palpa

Rajbansi/Tajpuri/Koce

Sonha

#### *Tharu Complex:*

Chitwan Tharu

Dangaura Tharu

Deokhuri Tharu

Kathoriya Tharu

Khocila Tharu

Mahotari Tharu

Rana Tharu

Urdu

### AUSTRO-ASIATIC [MUNDA]

Mundari

Santali/Satar/Hor

### DRAVIDIAN

Kurux/Dhangar/Jhangar

### ISOLATE

Kusunda

Total: 140

Sino-Tibetan: 109

## Some References

- Gellner, David. 1997. 'Ethnicity and nationalism in the world's only Hindu state.' In D. Gellner *et al* eds. *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom*. Amsterdam: Harwood.
- Gellner, David. 2001. 'From group rights to individual rights and back: Nepalese struggles over culture and equality.' In Jane K. Cowan *et al* eds. *Culture and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp177-200.
- Höfer, András. 1979. *Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: a Study of the Muluki Ain of 1854*. Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner.
- Noonan, Michael. 1996. 'The fall and rise and fall of the Chantyal language,' *Southwest Journal of Linguistics* 15/1-2:121-36.
- Noonan, Michael. 2003. 'Recent language contact in the Nepal Himalaya,' in David Bradley, Randy LaPolla, Boyd Michailovsky & Graham Thurgood, eds. *Language Variation: Papers on Variation and Change in the Sinosphere and in the Indosphere in Honour of James A. Matisoff*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Noonan, Michael. 2005. 'Recent adaptations of the Devanagari Script for the Tibeto-Burman Languages of Nepal.' In Peri Bhaskararao, ed. *Indic Scripts: Past and Future*. Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.
- Noonan, Michael. *to appear*. 'The rise of ethnic consciousness and the politicization of language in west-central Nepal.' In Anju Saxena, ed. *Globalization, Technological Advances, and Minority Languages in South Asia*.  
<<http://www.uwm.edu/People/noonan/LundPaper.text.pdf>>
- Ross, Malcolm. 2001. 'Contact-induced change in Oceanic languages in north-west Melanesia.' In Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald & R.M.W. Dixon, eds. *Areal Diffusion and Genetic Inheritance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp123-66.
- Wurm, Stephen. 1991. 'Language death and disappearance: causes and circumstances.' In Robert H. Robins and Eugenius M. Ulhenbeck, eds. *Endangered Languages*. Oxford/New York: Berg. Pp1-18.