The Politics of Language Contact in the Himalaya

Edited by Selma K. Sonntag and Mark Turin

This book brings together linguistic theory and empirical studies addressing human rights, multilingual education, language ecology and endangered languages. It is essential reading for students, practitioners, language activists and scholars working on language planning, multilingual education, endangered languages and language politics. This is indeed an interdisciplinary book that is testimony to why lesser-known languages matter in the Himalaya and beyond.

—Prof. Nirmal Man Tuladhar, Chair, Social Science Baha

Although this book was written for a specialist audience of advanced scholars and doctoral students, the authors successfully link these specific cases to broader issues in sociolinguistics, language policy and planning, and political science. Hence this book will be of interest to scholars working on other contexts besides the Himalayan region; I am very pleased to see such a complex and interesting analysis of the politics of language contact.

—Prof. James Tollefson, University of Washington

This highly original and timely collection brings together case studies from salient areas of the Himalayan region to explore the politics of language contact. Promoting a linguistically and historically grounded perspective, The Politics of Language Contact in the Himalaya offers nuanced insights into language and its relation to power in this geopolitically complex region. Edited by respected scholars in the field, the collection comprises five new research contributions by established and early-career researchers who have been significantly engaged in the Himalayan region. Grounded in a commitment to theoretically informed area studies, and covering Tibet (China), Assam (India), and Nepal, each case study is situated within contemporary debates in sociolinguistics, political science, and language policy and planning. Bridging disciplines and transcending nation-states, the volume offers a unique contribution to the study of language contact and its political implications.

The Politics of Language Contact in the Himalaya is essential reading for researchers in the fields of language policy and planning, applied linguistics, and language and literary education. The detailed introduction and concluding commentary make the collection accessible to all social scientists concerned with questions of language, and the volume as a whole will be of interest to scholars in anthropology, sociolinguistics, political science and Asian studies.

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6. Concluding Thoughts on Language Shift and Linguistic Diversity in the Himalaya

The Case of Nepal

Mark Turin

Location: The Greater Himalayan Region.
Topic: Language.
Status: It’s complicated.

The process of building nations has involved the reimagining, recreating and repositioning of the language or languages that are spoken within, and sometimes across, national borders. Across the Himalaya, speech communities hailing from genetically unrelated languages have been in contact with one another across large periods of modern history — for reasons of trade, political alliance and interethnic ritual practice. However, prolonged language contact and even cohabitation did not historically result in large-scale language shift. Rather, the move from plurilingual spoken realities to more homogenous and increasingly monolingual linguistic identities is a central and even coercive feature of modern nation-building, and not an accidental byproduct of its success. Moreover, as the contributions in this volume show, the container of the ‘nation-state’ is not always the sole category to consider.

Nation-building projects can not only objectify languages through documentation, but may also inhibit the spread of some speech forms in the name of elevating a favored vernacular to the status of national
or official language. We should recall that all projects involving ethnic categorization and linguistic classification are fraught with taxonomic, political and ideological problems, often compressing complex and highly local ethnolinguistic identities into standardized checkboxes. The tensions between competing frameworks of recognition are well-documented across the states that make up the Greater Himalayan Region (cf. Shneiderman 2015), and these intersect with ongoing national enumerative instruments such as decadal censuses and modern linguistic surveys in curious, and often complex, ways.

The Greater Himalayan Region extends for 3,500 km from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, sustaining over 150 million people and is home to great linguistic diversity, including many of Asia’s most endangered languages. Often described as one of the ten biodiversity ‘mega centers’ of the world, the area could also be thought of as a linguistic and cultural ‘mega center’, being home to one-sixth of all human languages (Turin 2007). Yet, despite this variety, many of the region’s speech communities — variously understood as communities of subjects, citizens or even stateless individuals — are rapidly shifting from speaking traditionally unwritten and increasingly endangered vernaculars to regional, national and even international languages of prestige that carry with them the promise of economic benefit and political access. Communities that were once multilingual are becoming functionally bilingual and, in some cases, even monolingual, with the move from oral speech forms to written languages often that of replacement rather than of addition. At the same time, we must recognize that in hierarchically organized polities — whether these are stratified by caste, class or ethnicity — elites often have the privilege of remaining functionally and comfortably monolingual in the official, national language, while non-elite communities are more commonly and necessarily multilingual, switching register or shifting language entirely in order to access state services.

As we learn from the five contributions that together form this collection, language shift across the Himalaya is complex, uneven and highly specific, as attentive to grand historical processes as it is to granular local conditions. Language shift has been variously understood, but is commonly characterized as a process in which both langue and parole are systematically simplified. Individuals move from functioning
as full speakers of a given language with complete grammatical and pragmatic command to being ‘semi-speakers’ with reduced verbal dexterity. Eventually, all competence drains away, leaving only a residual smattering of specialized vocabulary (often, but not always, food words, kinship terminology, or elements of ritual vocabulary), combined with a strong sense of attachment to a heritage identity as a former speaker.

For example, in the case of the Ahom in what is now Northeastern India, so insightfully outlined by Selma K. Sonntag in the second chapter, language shift from the Tai-Kadai language to Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language, occurred in the precolonial seventeenth century, creating a ‘rupture in the language regime.’ This move was both ‘reified under the colonial language regime’ and even helped to set ‘the stage for post-colonial linguistic nationalism in Assam.’ For contemporary self-identified Ahom who are now working to revitalize (and in the process, inevitably reimagine) their ancestral language, language shift is located in the past, and understood to be a historical rather than modern-day process. Similarly, language shift in Northern Pakistan is no recent phenomenon. Since the Pashtun invasion of Swat and Bajaur in the fifteenth century, Pashto has spread at the expense of more traditional languages, such as Domaakí and Gawri (Weinreich 2010).

By contrast, in the Tibetan cultural zone that extends across and beyond the borders of the People’s Republic of China, Tibetan-speaking communities are responding to multiple and overlapping linguistic pressures that threaten the viability of the many regional Tibetan variants. Such processes include state-sponsored Sinification (within China at least) that positions Mandarin as the expected language of upward mobility and access; national language policies of India and Nepal that prioritize English, Hindi and Nepali respectively, where many Tibetan communities are resident and within which they have to operate; and current language standardization campaigns that position central, Lhasa Tibetan or other dominant regional variants as the optimal (and in some cases the only) acceptable form of the Tibetan language. As Tunzhi (Sonam Lhundrop), Horoyuki Suzuki and Gerald Roche detail in their contribution, and as Bendi Tso and I document in the case of Chone, there is a pervading sense across the Tibetan-speaking realm that while all variants of Tibetan are putatively equal, some are more equal than others.
While the contributors all focus on communities who are visible to the state — sometimes, arguably, too legible — as co-editors of the volume, we have asked ourselves whether stateless peoples engage in or are swept up by language shift in the same way as state citizens are. We may spare a thought for the Rohingya in particular, 700,000 of whom have been forced to escape violence in Myanmar by fleeing to Bangladesh while thousands have been massacred in villages before they could flee. The Rohingya language, although part of the Indo-Aryan sub-branch of the greater Indo-European language family and related to the Chittagonian language spoken in the southern-most corner of Bangladesh, is not mutually intelligible with Bengali, and most Rohingya do not speak Burmese fluently, the lingua franca of Myanmar. Excluded from full participation in the Burmese state on the basis of ancestry, religion and culture, and not officially recognized as one of Burma’s ‘major national ethnic races’, the plight of the Rohingya has given Myanmar the dubious honor of being the nation with the world’s highest percentage of non-citizens in its population (cf. Bialystok 2011).

Other nations in the Himalayan region have also used culture and language as tools for social exclusion and political disenfranchisement. We need look no further than the case of the Lhotshampa of Bhutan — a nation missing from this edited collection and therefore worth noting in these concluding remarks — for a compelling illustration for how language became instrumentalized as a way to dispossess a people. In his powerfully titled Unbecoming Citizens, Michael Hutt documents Bhutan’s demotion of the Nepali language that started in 1989. Until 1964, Hindi was the medium of instruction in schools across Bhutan, in part due to the absence of suitable curriculum in any other language, but also on account of a shortage of Bhutanese teachers. As a consequence, a large number of Hindi-speaking (and writing) Indian teachers were employed in Bhutan’s government schools (Hutt 2003: 138). In 1964, English took the place of Hindi as the medium of instruction, and Bhutanese teachers were to trained to replace Indians as the pedagogical staff in the nation’s schools. While Hutt is careful to describe Bhutan’s language policy of the 1960s as ‘pragmatic’ (2003: 179), he draws attention to a growing sense of unease in Bhutan about the government’s avowed, public and deepening commitment to Dzongkha on the one hand, and its chance of ‘ever becoming a fully-fledged national language on the other’ (2003: 180).
Over time, Hutt presents Bhutan’s otherwise ‘easy-going attitude to language matters’ as becoming distinctly ‘less compromising’ (2003: 183), particularly as the prevalence of Nepali continued to rise. Even though the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) continues to this day to broadcast in Nepali, and Kuensel, the national newspaper, is still committed to printing a Nepali-language edition, the teaching of Nepali was discontinued at the beginning of the school year in 1989, and ‘all curricular materials were removed from Bhutanese schools’ at the same time (Hutt 2003: 183).

While linguist George van Driem does not dispute the fact that the Nepali language was eliminated from Bhutan’s schools by 1990, he offers a very different interpretation of the intent and reasoning behind this change in national language policy, offering three reasons why the new measure was ‘not directly connected with the southern problem’ (1994: 101). First, he argues, the use of Nepali in the south of Bhutan was ‘counter-productive to the advancement of the national language’; second, Nepali was being unfairly privileged over other ‘originally allochthonous’ languages, a position not enjoyed by any other tongue and thus a situation which required balancing; and finally, given Bhutan’s limited resources, the strategic priority for the nation had to be the development of modern curricula content in Dzongkha and English over Nepali, a process in which he himself participated (van Driem 1994: 101–2).

This period of modern Bhutanese history remains complex and contested, and the issue of whether Nepali was ever truly a medium of instruction or simply a subject in schools in Bhutan’s southern belt remains unresolved. More germane to the current discussion, however, is that speaking Nepali, and a specific variant of Nepali in particular, became a diagnostic marker of identity and group membership for Lhotshampa. The vocabulary differences between modern Nepali as spoken in Nepal and the variant spoken in Bhutan were deemed to be significant enough that they served as the basis for a linguistic test

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1 Hutt reports allegations of some schools disposing of their books by burning them in bonfires (2003: 185).
2 Euphemistically referred to as the ‘southern problem’, van Driem is referring the forced exodus and expulsion of tens of thousands of ethnic Nepalis from the primarily southern districts of Bhutan by the state in response to growing concerns about preserving the country’s unique national, cultural, linguistic and religious identity.
to ascertain whether individuals claiming political asylum in Europe were indeed credible Lhotshampa from Bhutan (people of Nepalese ancestry who grew up in Bhutan) or citizens of Nepal dissembling as Bhutanese refugees in order to game the system and find safe passage to the European Union. Linguistic assessments — albeit of aptitude rather than critical examinations of dialect variation — are used by nations as part of their ‘naturalization’ test for aspiring citizens. In such instances, nation-states require that candidates demonstrate a communicative competence in the national language, with the ability to speak a certain language serving as a gatekeeping device to determine and grant membership of a nation.

Documenting, analyzing and historicizing patterns of language shift — alongside the changing linguistic identities that can result — are familiar territory for social scientists. Michael Noonan, writing about Chantyal-speaking villages in western Nepal, suggested that their ‘relative isolation and poverty’ might contribute to ‘the retention of the language’ (1996: 130). While outmigration may even prolong isolation for those left behind, immigration brings individuals together in unexpected ways, sometimes creating new speech forms and often elevating regional tongues to the status of lingua franca or Verkehrsprache. As documented in Daurio’s contribution to this volume, the entire Himalayan region is undergoing a period of profound social, economic and political upheaval — including but not limited to rapid urbanization, massive transformations in traditional livelihood practices and responses to ecological pressures and natural disasters. Languages and linguistic identities are also in flux, as ‘language shifts are inextricably tied to shifts in the political economy in which speech situations are located’ Urciuoli (1995: 530).

In a post-conflict era that has intersected with a national reconstruction project following the catastrophic earthquakes that rocked the country in April and May 2015, the newly minted Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal is grappling with the political complexity of contemporary language policy. Constitutions are powerful and aspirational framing documents, helping to ‘constitute’ the basis of the polity in which people live. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal recognizes all languages autochthonous to the nation as ‘mother tongues’ but elevates Nepali to the level of official language of the nation:
All languages spoken as the mother tongues in Nepal are the languages of the nation, and the Nepali language in the Devanagari script shall be the official language of Nepal. In addition to the Nepali Language, a province shall select one or more additional languages that is spoken by the majority of people in that province as the language of official business, as provided for by provincial law.

We may ask what this really means. Is the framing of this foundational article of Nepal’s constitution an example of fast footwork and intellectual agility on the part of the drafters of the document — an intentional and deliberately scripted ambiguity — or is it rather just a sign of muddled thinking, setting Nepal’s citizens up for a prolonged period of confusion, contestation and legal wrangling about language? One inference is beyond doubt: in Nepal, Nepali remains firmly entrenched as the first among equals, paradoxically the same as — and yet substantively different to — the more than a hundred other languages spoken within Nepal’s borders. This is a compelling demonstration of the ‘tension’ between language shift and language documentation and enumeration in this fast-changing nation, a tension that lies at the heart of all of the contributions to this volume.

Nepal needs a language to talk about language. Enumerating and then classifying people’s mother tongues on a scale from boli to bhasa, spoken to written, or endangered to safe won’t be enough. At both practical and theoretical levels, whether Nepal has 90 or 150 languages is at once beside the point and illustrative of the rigidity of officializing and recognizing frameworks. All Nepalis know that one language is dominant in politics, culture and media. Nepali — that supra-national language — functions as the lingua franca for much of the nation, and boasts millions of fluent speakers across northern India, most of Bhutan and even Cultural Tibet. Nepali is now a language with global reach: heard on the streets of London and the restaurants of New York, as well as in Lhasa and Manipur.

Over time, as language and belonging become reinscribed by each generation, communities may start thinking of their language as a bhasa rather than as a boli. An interesting example provided by the 2011 Census of Nepal is the ‘emergence’ of languages such as Doteli (at around 3.2% of the total population), Baitadeli (around 1%), Achhami and Bajhangi (around 0.1%), which were likely grouped together with Nepali in
earlier decadal enumerations in response to the question of ‘What is your primary language’. Indeed, these speech forms were entirely absent from prior censuses despite accounting for over 5% of the total population. A growing ethnolinguistic awareness of the political utility of distinct linguistic identities, combined with an emergent set of benefits that accord to diverse communities, are likely a major part of the explanation for the sharp increase in the number of languages reported as ‘mother tongue’ in more recent population censuses in Nepal. This newfound strategic visibility is yet another persuasive validation of how, over time, the relationship between language enumeration and language shift is changing. At present, languages such as Doteli, Baitadeli, Achhami and Bajhangi — to mention but a few — are not new additions to Nepal’s already densely packed linguistic environment. Rather, these languages have long ‘existed’ but have only recently been visible to enumerators and strategically valuable to communities of speakers.

Interesting historical trends become apparent from a cursory look at the last three decadal population censuses, from 1991, 2001 and 2011. While the share of the population that report Nepali as their first language has dropped sharply from 51% to 44% between 2001 and 2011 (possibly because languages like Doteli have undergone an internal as well as external transformation from boli to bhasa and are now ‘legible’ to the state in ways that they were not before), the other major language-shares have remained largely stable. Despite the social anxiety and political panic about Hindi and English encroaching upon Nepali, the shares for both are stable or in decline: Hindi has decreased as a ‘mother tongue’ from 0.92% in 1991 to 0.29% in 2011, while English has remained stable at around 0.01%. The moral panic articulated by some over the perceived decline in the use of Nepali may not actually reflect less Nepali ‘use’ but rather a newfound visibility for historically underrepresented languages. National identity politics, then, is as vulnerable to existential and perceived threats as it is to tangible and real ones.

Globalization is regularly, and often uncritically, pilloried as a major threat to linguistic diversity. But in fact, globalization is as much process as it is ideology, certainly when it comes to language. The real forces behind cultural homogenization are unbending beliefs, exchanged through a globalized delivery system, reinforced by the
historical monolingualism prevalent in much of the West and rolled out through imperial adventure and colonization. As a force, globalization is causing realignments in the relationship between language shift and language enumeration through documentary and classificatory projects. Just as there is a campaign to officialize and strengthen English in the United States, led by shrill and reactionary voices who perceive this most globalizing of languages to be under threat, so too the Nepali language has powerful advocates who declare the need to support it with additional protective legislation. And herein lies the irony: the worries of Nepali being eroded or diminished through the encroachment of English or Hindi echo the genuine alarm expressed by speakers of Nepal’s Indigenous (and increasingly endangered) languages, who themselves fear being overwhelmed by Nepali. A language that appears to be vulnerable from one perspective is perceived as hegemonic from another, as is clear from the chapters in this volume that address the complexity of the Tibetan cultural area and its associated linguistic landscape.

As this volume was heading to the press, Nepal was at a pivotal political moment with regard to language. First, in whatever federal reconfiguration lies ahead following the decade-long civil war that raged from 1996–2006 and the catastrophic earthquakes that shattered large swathes of central Nepal in 2015, the polity will have to consider whether languages other than Nepali will be resourced and supported so that communities can live, work and represent themselves in their mother tongues. This question goes beyond the right of accessing legal representation in, for example, Maithili or Nepal Bhasa (Ojha 2017), and lies at the core of Nepal’s understanding of itself as a nation. Will Tamang serve as the medium of instruction in schools in Province No. 3 or only a subject? Will airlines flying to Lukla make safety announcements in Sherpa alongside Nepali and English? Will government websites be translated into and made accessible in some of Nepal’s most widely used native languages that have written traditions? Will ATMs offer users cash in Nepal Bhasa in Bhaktapur, in the same way that cash dispenser in Hawai‘i offer an Ōlelo Hawai‘i language option?

Second, as Nepal’s Language Commission gains momentum in accordance with Article 287 of the Constitution, and exercises its mandate to recommend measures to be adopted for the protection, promotion and development of languages, it would be well advised
to explore how similar processes have played out in New Zealand, Canada, Myanmar and India. Language Commissions and Language Authorities have a unique opportunity to reset language planning in a nation, but need to determine whether their mandate is proscriptive (citizens must...) or descriptive (citizens already do...). Is a one, two or three language formula appropriate and deliverable in Nepal, or are there other options as yet unexplored? Technology is an increasingly important element to consider, certainly for those Nepalis whose use of and interest in mobile and digital tools provides a huge opportunity for nurturing language diversity and supporting language mobilization.

Third, educational policy needs to embrace this digital turn, and focus not only on traditional textbook creation in Nepal’s many mother tongues (as outlined in Pradhan’s contribution) but on multimedia content that can be delivered through e-learning systems to schools in remote districts as so compellingly illustrated by the success of OLE Nepal. Given that the penetration of mobile telephony has been a singular success story for Nepal over the last decade, now is an opportune time to create content to back it up. Nepal’s infrastructure backbone is increasingly digital, and can be used to reflect the nation’s diverse and vibrant multilingualism. Tools of globalization like the internet, so often blamed for homogenizing the world, are also enabling diverse and geographically dislocated language communities to connect across time and place.

Overall, Nepal — like many of regions and nations discussed in earlier chapters of this collection — needs to come to terms with its own multilingualism, both historic and contemporary, and find ways to recognize creative innovation even when these actions are not sanctioned by the state or explicitly contradict national policy. In her recent work on the Kumaun region of North India, Cynthia Groff explores the ways in which the lived multilingual reality quietly subverts national language

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3 Open Learning Exchange Nepal (OLE Nepal) is a social benefit organization dedicated to enhancing education quality and access through the integration of technology in classrooms. Since its inception in 2007, OLE Nepal has pioneered the use of technology in schools and provided open and free access to quality education and innovative learning environments to children. Its education-focused free and open digital library, E-Pustakalaya, provides access to a collection of thousands of books and educational resources, course content and reference materials and has been installed in low power servers and deployed in schools and community libraries across the nation. See http://www.olenepal.org
policies, noting that the ‘Kumauni example demonstrates how local ideologies and perspectives can preserve spaces for minoritized linguistic varieties regardless of official policy: spaces for unofficial mother tongue, unofficial media of instruction, and additive notions of multilingualism’ (2018: 17). Language practice and mobilization in Nepal has long been similarly subversive, whether in the home, the community or the school, and Nepal has never been and likely will never be a monolingual nation in which one language is used exclusively for all interactions — whether in person, in print, online or on air.

Nepal’s celebrated non-colonization by outside forces has helped lay the foundation for the extraordinary diversity of cultural and linguistic expressions to endure, although 100 years of Rana rule and more recent nation-building ideologies have done much to erode this very diversity and uniqueness. Nepal’s multilingualism can help its citizens prepare to live in an ever more connected and interdependent world, particularly in the face of the inevitability of language change and ever-increasing language contact. Across the global north, parents anxiously encourage their children to learn another language in school because their daily lives are so deafeningly monolingual and they see tactical and intellectual benefit in speaking more than one language (Bialystok 2011). Multilingual and culturally diverse Nepal is already ahead of the curve on this, and well positioned to lead a global discussion on language, identity and belonging in education, administration and governance.

Although Nepal (a diverse nation state home to many ethnolinguistic communities) and Sikkim (India’s least populous and second smallest state) differ massively in scale and in their historical trajectories, there is a certain utility in comparing the two because their populations continue to draw on similar narratives of belonging and linguistic association, in large part because of the common geographies and cultural histories that they share. One notable difference between Nepal and Sikkim, however, is in their experience of migration: Nepal has a tradition of ‘sending’ migrants, whereas Sikkim is a state that has accepted and ‘received’ them, even building itself on their labor. In Sikkim, the process of language shift is popularly presented as an unavoidable byproduct of the juggernaut of global progress and development, while in Nepal, the continued vibrancy of minority mother tongues has been associated with their remote and sequestered status. This opposition, at
least in the popular imagination, is fleshed out to the extent that Sikkim is often imagined to be modern, literate, educated, and connected, whereas the ethnolinguistic homeland areas of Nepal — from which many contemporary Sikkimese residents derive their ancestry — are described as remote, backward, and traditional. My point here is not to endorse such descriptions, but to reflect on them for what they tell us about the different and changing language regimes that individuals and communities have been subjected to and participate in, and what these ideological formulations tell us about the different nation-building exercise in Nepal and India. As competence in Sikkim’s traditional mother tongues has declined, their status has begun to shift from spoken vernaculars forming part of a lived ethnic identity to symbolic markers of an ancestral linguistic heritage. I would argue that in the language shift I observed in Sikkim, a growing attachment to the ‘idea’ of a mother tongue is directly related to its decline in use as a speech form.

Monolingualism — the condition of being able to speak only one language — is regularly accompanied by a deep-seated conviction in the value of that language over all others. Across the largest economies of the world, being monolingual is still often the norm, with multilingualism appearing unusual and even somewhat exotic (Turin 2013). This monolingual mindset stands in sharp contrast to the lived reality of most of the Greater Himalayan Region, which throughout its modern history and into the present has been more resolutely multilingual than unilingual. Through this collection of five essays, and Selma Sonntag’s rich introduction, we learn that communities across the Greater Himalayan Region have complex and contingent linguistic identities that are rarely if ever predicated on a sole speech form, even if the states in which they live assume that ideal linguistic identities are homogenous and monolingual. The linguistic future of the Himalayan region is yet to be written, and only time tell whether its historic multilingualism will endure and outlive the narrow ruptures of nationalism.

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