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.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com.

Language politics has always been inherently interdisciplinary, as highlighted by the range of disciplines contributing to and represented in the field — and linguistics and political science are not always the primary ones. The scope of the field is further enlarged by the two different ways that the phrase ‘language politics’ can be parsed: the language of politics versus the politics of language. The language of politics traces its contemporary roots to George Orwell’s celebrated and still relevant novel, 1984. The study of the manipulation of politics and political attitudes through language, i.e., through choice of words, labels and metaphors as well as grammatical and syntactical structures (e.g., passive versus active voice), gained momentum beginning in the 1980s — appropriate timing given its Orwellian roots — when the linguist George Lakoff promoted the notion of ‘framing.’ How political issues are ‘framed’ often determines the parameters of political debate in the public sphere. Dalits throughout South Asia, including the Himalaya, raised their voice in the public sphere by rejecting Mahatma Gandhi’s paternalistic framing of them as Harijan and the more pejorative label of ‘Untouchables’ in favor of the agonistic term, ‘oppressed’ (dalit). The framing of local activity against big commercial logging in the Garhwal Himalaya in the 1970s as an environmental movement — the Chipko andolan — spread the now renowned ‘tree-hugging’ trope far beyond the western mountains of the Himalaya (Rangan 2000; DeLoach, Bruner...
and Gossett 2002). In effect, Lakoff ignited the study of the language of politics in a number of disciplines, including enthusiasm for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in linguistics. Political science was a laggard in embracing the linguistic turn, despite political communication having a long pedigree in the discipline dating back to Harold Laswell, most famous for defining politics as ‘who gets what, when and how’ in the 1930s.

Political science has also lagged behind other disciplines in the study of the politics of language, a field which has come to be populated primarily by applied linguists and sociolinguists under the rubric of Language Policy and Planning (LPP). Thomas Ricento’s (2016) four-volume anthology of LPP, published in the series Critical Concepts in Linguistics, attests to the growing prominence of the field. The origins of LPP can be traced back to the post-World-War-II decolonization period with the emergence of newly independent, dubbed ‘developing’, countries. The seminal LPP volume Language Problems of Developing Nations, edited by Joshua Fishman, Charles Ferguson and Jyotirindra Das Gupta, appeared in 1968. The choice of language(s) to use in education and administration, among other sectors, in these new nations was typically perceived as a problem needing to be solved by rational planning using ‘technical tools for choosing among several alternatives’ (Rubin and Jernudd 1971: xiv). Linguists were enlisted for corpus development; they were often joined by other social scientists for the more politically fraught status development in the language planning process. The few political scientists who ventured into the field (see Sonntag 1996 for a list) tended to recommend monolingual language policies or a dual language policy which retained the former colonial language along with a dominant ‘native’ language. These language policy recommendations were for the most part informed by modernization theory, the mantra of which was that modern nations functioned more efficiently and engendered national loyalty when they adopted policies that promoted societal and individual monolingualism.

The growing critique of modernization theory in the 1970s affected the LPP field, with critical sociolinguistics taking the lead over the more traditional disciplines (Ricento 2000). Critical sociolinguists undertook and published in-depth, nuanced case studies of the politics surrounding language policy choices (see, e.g., Phillipson, Skutnabb-Kangas and
Africa 1986; Tollefson 1986). Many of these were descriptive rather than theoretically-driven, for there was no common theoretical approach in the LPP field to replace modernization theory, despite some dabbling in post-structuralism (Clayton 1999). Recently, the study of the politics of language has been invigorated by political theory, in particular by normative theorists who focus on multiculturalism. In 2003, in the Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, Will Kymlicka and Alan Patten announced that ‘political theorists in the last few years have started to take an interest in issues of language policy’ (Kymlicka and Patten 2003a: 3). That same year, they published an edited volume, Language Rights and Political Theory (2003b), launching a prominent intervention into the LPP field by a subfield of political science that heretofore had been absent. Political scientists other than normative theorists have also recently been developing theoretical frameworks for analyzing language politics (see, e.g., Sonntag and Cardinal 2015) that resonate with efforts by LPP scholars (see, e.g., Tollefson 1991).

The present volume reflects and contributes to this burgeoning, interdisciplinary discussion of both theoretical approaches and nuanced case studies in the study of language politics. While the contributors come from an array of traditional disciplines — linguistics, political science, anthropology, geography — all work, and some were trained, in disciplinary interstices. Most are emerging scholars, embarking on research careers that will continue to bridge disciplines. The book is also grounded in the multidisciplinary nature of area studies, focusing on the Himalaya, a transborder region offering a rich bounty of case studies. The contributors all presented, or had planned to present, papers at the 5th Himalayan Studies Conference in Boulder, Colorado, 1–4 September 2017. In their Himalayan case studies, the locations of which are depicted on the map in Figure 0.1, the contributors focus on the second parsing of language politics, the politics of language, but they also draw upon the language of politics, or more precisely how language politics is framed by different agents.

A distinctive feature of this book is that all of the contributions address the politics of language contact. This welcome feature brings to the scholarly discussion on language politics a more nuanced understanding of language(s) and their relation to power than is often found in traditional social science analyses. For example, in recent
Fig. 0.1 Map of the Himalaya region: areas discussed in this volume highlighted in blue. Created by Meredith Reba, CC BY.
Introduction

Econometric analyses of the politics of language, political scientists and economists (e.g., Ginsburg and Weber 2011; Laitin and Ramachandran 2016) have latched onto ‘language distance,’ originally proposed by the linguist Joseph Greenberg (1956), as an independent variable with little understanding of the concept’s limitations in multilingual environments. In contrast, the focus on language contact in this volume allows for the rich, contextual analyses that area studies afford. In the context of South Asia, the concept of language contact is attuned to Murray Emeneau’s (1956) ground-breaking article on India as a linguistic area, published in the same issue of the journal, Language, as Greenberg’s language-distance article. The insights that interdisciplinary, area-studies scholars can bring to the study of the language politics are significant, as this volume clearly demonstrates.

In the formulation adopted in this book, language contact is a historical constant. However, the multilingualism that language contact generates — whether individual or societal multilingualism — is always contingent (see also Heugh and Stroud 2018). This contingency is primarily dependent on the power dynamics among those in contact. Hence the notion of language contact neither compels a rigid categorization of languages as objects, as they are treated in many social science analyses of language politics (e.g., Liu 2015), nor does it dissolve the category of language as is common among postmodernist renditions (e.g., Makoni and Pennycook 2005; Wee 2011). The first contribution to this volume, ‘Language Contact and the Politics of Recognition Amongst Tibetans in China: The rTa’u-speaking “Horpa” of Khams’ by Tunzhi (Sonam Lhundrop), Hiroyuki Suzuki and Gerald Roche, begins by developing the notion of language contact along two dimensions: a horizontal dimension (associated more with linguistics) and a vertical dimension (which brings into focus power dynamics). The authors argue that both dimensions in concert make up the politics of language contact. They then proceed to demonstrate how a rigid categorization of the rTa’u language spoken in the eastern stretches of Tibet can impede a politics of recognition as expatiated by political theorists who expound on multiculturalism. They also warn against the postmodern inclination of dismissing rTa’u as a language, concluding that this would equally impede the politics of recognition for its speakers. According to their analysis, recognition entails not only the politics of language but the language of politics, that is, how rTa’u is labeled in public and academic discourse.
While the authors of this first contribution draw on political theory in their case study of the politics of language contact in the Himalaya, I take a historical-institutionalist approach developed in comparative politics in my chapter, the second in this collection, entitled ‘What Happened to the Ahom Language? Language Politics in Assam.’ In this contribution I analyze the language shift from a Tai-Kadai language to Indo-Aryan Assamese in the precolonial Ahom kingdom in Northeastern India. While the power dynamics of language shift, a well-established concept in the LPP field (see, e.g., Fishman 1964), usually entails speakers of a subordinate language abandoning their language for the dominant language (see the other chapters in this volume), in the Ahom case those in power abandoned their language in preference of another language in the kingdom’s multilingual environment. I employ the concepts of state tradition and language regime to analyze how and why, in the Ahom kingdom, language shift defied the expected trajectory of power dynamics, in which those in power impose their language on their subordinates. Like the first chapter in this book, my contribution problematizes a rigid, genealogical classification of languages. By analyzing the politics of language contact in a historical context, I also expose the implicit assumptions about power and language that tend to adhere to studies of language politics bound to the nation-state model. Throughout the collection, the contributors’ focus on the constant of language contact confirms the contingency of the nation-state’s monolingual model. This shifts our understanding of the politics of language away from positing monolingualism as the norm, toward multilingualism as both the individual and societal default — what Kathleen Heugh and Christopher Stroud (2018: 1) call a ‘southern lens [...] for understanding multilingualism.’

In the book’s third chapter, entitled ‘Transforming Language to Script: Constructing Linguistic Authority through Language Contact in Schools in Nepal,’ Uma Pradhan examines the power dynamics — which she conceptualizes as ‘linguistic authority’ drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework — of language contact in education in contemporary Nepal. Nepal’s new policy of MultiLingual Education (MLE) is generating new sites and types of language contact, as Pradhan outlines in her description of the adoption of multilingual textbooks in a school in the southern Tarai region. In the following chapter, entitled
Introduction

‘The Significance of Place in Ethnolinguistic Vitality: Spatial Variations Across the Kaike-Speaking Diaspora of Nepal,’ Maya Daurio discusses another prominent feature of the politics of language contact in Nepal: mobility and internal migration. Daurio’s case study focuses on the rural-urban dynamics of Kaike speakers in and from the Dolpa region in western Nepal. In addition to a spatial dynamic, Daurio employs a temporal one, showing how the politics of language contact has changed for Kaike speakers over the decades since Jim Fisher’s (1986) original anthropological work in the same area.

In their contribution, ‘Speaking Chone, Speaking “Shallow”: Dual Linguistic Hegemonies in China’s Tibetan Frontier,’ Bendi Tso and Mark Turin use prolonged language contact between Chone Tibetan and other Tibetan languages, as well as Chinese, as a backdrop to introduce other key concepts in the politics of language. They problematize the concept of ‘linguistic hegemony’ to demonstrate that the usual binary of dominant versus subordinate/minority language common in research on language politics and particularly in the Language Policy and Planning (LPP) field (see, e.g., Wright 2004) is more complicated in the context of language contact. They develop the notion of ‘dual hegemonies’ to capture the complex hierarchy of languages in the border region where Tibet interfaces with non-Tibetan populations, particularly with Han Chinese. The language hierarchies they expose are hegemonic in that they are established through coercion and consent — through language policies and ideologies. Their focus on language policy as well as language ideology provides for a more robust analysis than Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) studies (see Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000) which tend to be limited to ideological representations in documents and other public discourse. Conceiving of language policy as the institutionalization, and not only the representation, of language ideology (Sonntag and Cardinal 2015: 8) enables the authors to analyze the role of language practices stemming from language policies, such as adult literacy programs, in the hegemonic establishment of language hierarchy. The authors of the first chapter of this volume make a similar point about language hierarchies: relying only on a critical analysis of their ideological construction often misses how speakers of the subordinate language(s) consent to and actively seek recognition rather than reject hegemony. These two contributions — the first and the last of
the book, and both on the politics of language contact in Tibet — suggest that the counter-hegemonic agency that critical sociolinguists (e.g., Canagarajah 1999; Pennycook 1995) tend to impute to non-dominant language speakers can be quite ephemeral.

The endurance of established language hierarchies is a theme addressed throughout the volume. Uma Pradhan’s analysis in her chapter suggests that an upheaval or reversal of the historically prevailing language hierarchy in Nepal is unlikely, despite the opening — what I would call a ‘critical juncture’ — provided by Nepal’s new MLE policy. Only when established language hierarchies are disrupted because of a significant change in the power dynamics — which, according to Uma Pradhan and others (e.g., Turin 2006), hasn’t yet happened in Nepal, notwithstanding its new political regime — is it likely that a new language hierarchy will emerge. In the case study that I present of the Ahom kingdom’s shift from a Tai-Kadai language to Indo-Aryan Assamese, the critical juncture marked the expansion of the ranks of the elite hierarchy to include Assamese speakers, causing Assamese to be valued over the Ahom language. Focusing on the local level in her case study in a relatively isolated rural area in Nepal, Maya Daurio demonstrates that power dynamics can change and evolve to alter a local language hierarchy. Uma Pradhan’s analysis also indicates that there is space at the local level for negotiating linguistic authority, albeit within the context of the prevailing linguistic hierarchy implicit in Nepal’s national framework for education.

While the focus of Maya Daurio’s study is the linguistic vitality of Kaike — much improved in recent decades from what Jim Fisher (1986) worried was a dying language — all of the contributions in this book at least touch upon the theme of language vitality and language loss. Perhaps the most dramatic case of language loss among those covered in this volume is that of the Ahom language in upper Assam, providing a fitting title for my case study: ‘What Happened to the Ahom Language?’ Unlike the other cases of language loss discussed in this book, Ahom was not a subordinate or bottom-of-the-hierarchy language. I explain the loss in terms of, in effect, the erosion of state traditions that had fostered a non-territorially-demarcated multilingual environment with a very high degree of language contact. Incorporation in territorially-defined modern ‘nation-states’ with their ‘monoglot nationalism’ — as
Tunzhi (Sonam Lhundrop), Hiroyuki Suzuki and Gerald Roche put it in their contribution to this collection — has been the bane of linguistic diversity. This is amply demonstrated by the two contributions on Tibet in this volume which highlight the impending language loss of rTa’u and Chone Tibetan. As the authors of the first chapter note, Tibet is ‘typically viewed as linguistically homogeneous,’ leading to a somewhat simplistic view of language politics in Tibet as that of a Tibetan language endangered by Chinese linguistic hegemony. Such a narrow reading belittles, albeit most likely unintentionally, a serious concern over the loss of internal Tibetan linguistic diversity.

In Nepal, where the nation-state was ‘imagined’ fairly early (in the eighteenth century), language loss — although not language contact — was somewhat impeded by the relative lack of infrastructure in a predominantly rural environment, at least until the era of bikas (modernity/development), which started in the 1950s. More recently, fitting Nepal’s linguistic diversity into discrete, identifiable ‘languages’ that can be preserved and even revitalized has been a formidable undertaking in the Nepalese nation-state’s transition from a monolingual to at least a nominally multilingual language regime (see Sonntag 1995). The hope is that this new regime will stem language loss, but as Uma Pradhan points out, in Nepal’s new MLE, identifying the languages to be saved involves ‘transform[ing] language to script,’ as the title of her contribution to this book indicates. In the context of Nepali linguistic hegemony, she demonstrates that this transformation results in a heavy dose of Nepali inserted into the local Tharu language to make the newly written Tharu in the textbooks rāmro (good). According to Pradhan, what connotes ‘good’ language in this case is the visual impact of language contact between dominant (e.g., Nepali) and subordinate (e.g., Tharu) written languages.

The complex relation between the spoken and written forms of language contact is an important element in language politics, as is well demonstrated in this volume. One aspect of the relationship on which several contributions expound is linguistic purity. Tunzhi (Sonam Lhundrop), Hiroyuki Suzuki and Gerald Roche observe that written Tibetan serves as the benchmark of purity and authenticity for Tibetans, hence the source of loanwords in the hierarchically subordinate rTa’u language whose speakers seek recognition as Tibetan. But such borrowing
also marks the rTa’u as not an authentic Tibetan language, further impeding its speakers’ claims to be Tibetan. In their chapter, Bendi Tso and Mark Turin explain that Chone Tibetan speakers attribute what they perceive as their language’s ‘shallowness’ to the high number of Chinese loan words. In contrast, Amdo Tibetan, standardized in written form by the Chinese government for use in schools and administration, is perceived to be more authentically Tibetan. Both of the chapters on the politics of language contact in Tibet in this book demonstrate how linguistic purity reinforces and reflects linguistic hierarchy. Uma Pradhan’s research suggests that incorporating loan words from the dominant language can help elevate the status of the subordinate language. In this case, Nepali loan words help ‘sanitize’ Tharu.

The power of the written standard language over spoken language is a common theme in this book, as the above examples suggest. As Uma Pradhan observes in her chapter, “‘Writing’ [...] became a way to prevent a language from being labelled as a dialect of another language.’ In my contribution, I note that an important aspect of the critical juncture marking the shift from Tai-Kadai Ahom to Indo-Aryan Assamese was when court chronicles started to be written in Assamese by new entrants into the ruling hierarchy who were literate in Assamese. Yet the relationship between written and spoken language(s) is often muddled or overlooked by scholars of language politics. Political scientists tend to conflate the written and spoken language (e.g., Laitin and Ramachandran 2016) and LPP scholars tend to wall off their discipline from literary studies where written language is the focus. The chapters in this volume help overcome these deficits in the study of language politics by, as Pradhan puts it, ‘drawing attention to the often-overlooked dynamics of written language contact’ and contributing to a further broadening of the field of language politics through a more interdisciplinary lens.

This book also addresses the relationship between language and ethnicity, a topic which tends to be overdetermined in scholarship on language politics (May 2008: 8). The contributions demonstrate that this relationship, like the multilingualism generated by language contact, is temporally and spatially contingent. Maya Daurio’s chapter illustrates the spatial contingency of ethnolinguistic identity: diasporic Kaike speakers tend to identify their language as a marker of their
ethnicity more so than those who remain in the Tichurong Valley in Dolpa. Furthermore, both diasporic and valley-dwelling Kaike speakers identify Kaike as their language and not their ethnicity. Instead they identify ethnically as Tarali — which Daurio points out can also cover non-Kaike-speaking Tichurong residents. Identification with their larger ethnic group, the Magars of Nepal, is even less common, particularly for Tichurong residents. When Kaike speakers do identify as Magar, it is primarily for instrumental reasons. The temporal contingency of the relation between language and ethnic identity is highlighted in the first two chapters of the volume. Tunzhi (Sonam Lhundrop), Hiroyuki Suzuki and Gerald Roche analyze the exonyms used for rTa’u speakers which historically identify them as non-Tibetan. Yet rTa’u speakers self-identify as Tibetans. This self-identification, argue the authors, should be recognized and respected, no matter that rTa’u can be linguistically classified as a non-Tibetan language. As Mark Turin (2018: 265) has contended, ‘There is no reason that communities should be expected to define or categorize themselves based upon externally imposed linguistic criteria that have a lot to say about grammar but nothing to say about belonging.’ In my chapter, I argue that the Ahom were not an ethnic group, and linguistic identity was not a meaningful identifier of belonging in precolonial Assam, despite the intensity of ethnolinguistic identity in Assam today. The ‘essentializing link between language and identity,’ as Tunzhi (Sonam Lhundrop), Hiroyuki Suzuki and Gerald Roche put it in their contribution, is a colonial and modern nation-state construct. Most states engaged in nation-building have attempted to link national identity to a single language, resulting in language policies that promoted monolingualism. This clearly was the case in Nepal, as Uma Pradhan demonstrates in her contribution. Only recently has the Nepali state entertained demands for mother-tongue education, legalizing multilingual education practices of the type that Pradhan details in her chapter. Her analysis indicates that the process of transforming the mother tongue of Tharus into a Tharu language to be used in schools belies a simple equation between language and ethnicity.

The scholarly enterprise of mapping ethnicities onto languages or languages onto ethnicities is not the straightforward, objective activity that is often assumed in studies of ethnolinguistic politics, particularly those that negatively correlate ethnolinguistic diversity within a nation.
with poor national economic performance (e.g., Easterly and Levine 1997; Liu 2015). Situating their case study in a key transborder region, Bendi Tso and Mark Turin demonstrate the limitations of confining analyses of the relationship between language and ethnicity to the national context. According to their research, Chone Tibetans tend to evaluate their language in terms of both the Tibetan ethnolinguistic context and the Chinese national context. Both contexts devalue Chone Tibetan, a politics of language that can best be understood by focusing on language contact, as exemplified throughout this volume. This lack of isomorphism between language and ethnicity — so apparent in the Himalaya — should be the starting point, the basic assumption, of scholarly analyses of language politics. As Mark Turin (2018: 264) argues, scholarly ‘thinking that fuses ethnicity together with language’ is not only sloppy but potentially ‘dangerous’ to adducing the politics of language by neglecting the role of language contact in group identity (see also Wee 2018). Recent work on language politics elsewhere (see, e.g., Albaugh and de Luna 2018 on Africa) similarly challenges the assumption of the universality of a one-to-one correspondence between language and ethnicity — an assumption that emanates from the historical experience of the West/North. In this regard, this volume, based in interdisciplinary area studies, makes an important contribution to the study of language politics beyond the Himalaya. To quote Turin (2018: 263) again, ‘the collapsing of ethnicity and language into one category [is] a “political act”.

The themes of language contact, language and ethnicity, written and spoken forms of language, purity and authenticity, linguistic hegemony and hierarchy, and language vitality and language loss that are addressed in the contributions to this book in the context of Himalayan area studies are crucial to advancing our understanding of language politics. The interdisciplinary nature of the volume is a vital ingredient to this advancement, in both the Himalaya and beyond.
References


