

Language Endangerment in the Himalayan Chain. The impact of Nepali on the Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal, India and Bhutan

Jean Robert Oppenort

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The topic of this presentation is the current language endangerment in the Himalayan Chain, in particular with respect to the impact of Nepali on the unwritten Tibeto-Burman languages in India, Nepal and Bhutan. We will look at the various factors in the past and present that make people favour Nepali — a major regional language — at the expense of their own mother tongue. We will also look at what can be done in practice to reverse the trend of language loss in the Himalayan region.

An irrecoverable loss of unique world views

In 2008 I collaborated with Christopher Mosely, Stuart Blackburn and Udaya Narayan Singh and many other regional editors to produce the third edition of the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. UNESCO launched the electronic version of the new edition of its Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger on 19 February 2009. This interactive digital tool provides updated data about thousands of endangered languages around the world.

There are approximately 6,500 languages in the world, half of which are not surveyed or have not been adequately been studied according to the online Ethnologue catalogue, and many of which are dying at an exceptional scale. According to the third Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (2009), there are currently 2,500 endangered languages around the world. This puts 38 per cent of the World's linguistic richness at peril. This is a worrying situation. As UNESCO so rightly declares on its own web site:

Every language reflects a unique world-view with its own value systems, philosophy and particular cultural features. The extinction of a language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural knowledge embodied in it for centuries, including historical, spiritual and ecological knowledge that may be essential for the survival of not only its speakers, but also countless others.

The global situation is reflected in India and the Himalayan Chain, where more than 280 languages out of the 500+ languages spoken today are in danger of vanishing for good from the face of this earth. India, Nepal and Bhutan, which put together constitute less than 2.5 per cent of the world's land area and are home to 11.5% of the endangered languages in the world, form one of the most endangered linguistic patchworks in the world.

The data from the Atlas show that 60 out of the 280 languages spoken in India and the Himalayan Chain are severely or critically endangered, whereas ten languages are considered to be extinct. Even though the situation in India, Nepal and Bhutan seems slightly better than average in the world, where more than half of the languages are decidedly endangered or extinct, it should be kept in mind that as reliable data for many of the smaller languages, concerning both their health and their number of speakers, are not always available for the various parts of the World, the given classifications should be treated as provisional.

The Tibeto-Burman languages of the Himalayan region

The Himalayan region forms one of the most intricate ethnological and linguistic mosaics in the world. This vast area is home to Indo-Aryan languages — a branch of the Indo-European language

family — the most widespread and best-documented language family with nine languages in the world top 15 languages in number of speakers. After the Indo-European language family, Sino-Tibetan — or rather ‘Tibeto-Burman’ — is the most populous family in the world, containing close to a billion speakers. Except for Chinese, most of the Tibeto-Burman languages have rather small numbers of speakers, are unwritten and poorly documented. The greater Himalayan region is also home to several Dravidian and a few Daic languages.

The Himalayan region constitutes the region where the majority of endangered languages in the subcontinent can be found, and Tibeto-Burman languages form the majority of languages under threat. Even though much on the conditions of language loss in Himalayas has yet to be learnt, it must be kept in mind that the endangered languages are not in any sense inferior or backward, but they are merely losing the uneven confrontation with more dominant cultures and their languages.

More than half of the languages under threat in India are Tibeto-Burman languages in northeast India, mostly in Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, and about one dozen Tibeto-Burman languages in the western Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

In Nepal, the bulk of Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken by small populations and considered endangered. We list more than 40 unsafe or definitively endangered languages, more than a dozen severely or critically endangered languages and one extinct language. The smallest and most endangered Tibeto-Burman languages have very few speakers and are on the verge of extinction.

In Bhutan, none of its native Tibeto-Burman languages is considered to be safe. Even Dzongkha, which is the official national language of Bhutan, is marginalised by the extensive use of English throughout Bhutan and by Nepali, which is spoken in much of southern Bhutan.

The success of Nepali

Even though there are several reasons for endangerment of the language communities — for instance, Raji and Raute, living in Bheri and Seti districts in western Nepal and the submontane region of the central Himalayas in Uttarakhand are examples of fully undocumented languages that are severely endangered because their hunter-gatherer lifestyle is under threat as the original forest habitat is destroyed. Landslides almost wiped out completely the two villages where the Kohi or ‘Koyu’ Rai of Eastern Nepal are located (Toba, Toba & Rai 2001 - the current language endangerment situation in the Himalayan region is largely the result of cultural assimilation, which is a process by which the culture of a minority group is gradually influenced by a more dominant culture. One of the dominant cultures undermining linguistic diversity in the central Himalayas is modern Nepali culture.

Nepali, an Eastern Pahāḍī language, is the official language of the country of Nepal, where it is the mother tongue for more than 11 million people for the most part living in the western part of the country and in the Terai belt in the south. Nepali is also the dominant language for media, trade, public domain and education in the country and the lingua franca for communication among different language groups throughout Nepal. In India, Nepali is one of 22 scheduled languages and the mother tongue for more than 2.8 million speakers (Census 2001). Nepali is an official language and lingua franca of the state of Sikkim, an officially recognised language in the state of West-Bengal and spoken in the state of Assam. In Bhutan, about one third of the population speaks Nepali.

Nepali

Many decades of state neglect, the simultaneous cultivation of a national identity based on Nepali and marginalisation and oppression of indigenous groups are at the basis of present decline of minority languages in Nepal.

The spread of Nepali

The spread and success of Nepali started with the unification of Nepal by Pṛtvī Nārāyaṇ Śāh in the latter half of the 18th century, when Nepali — or ‘Khas Kurā’, Gorkhālī or ‘Parbate’ — became the

national language of the newly formed kingdom. Retired soldiers were given land in subjugated indigenous areas and came as colonists to settle in the newly acquired areas. With the expansion of the kingdom, the area where Nepali was spoken expanded from west to east.

After the Gorkhā conquest, some of the larger Tibeto-Burman language groups such as the Gurung and Magar settled outside their traditional homeland, from eastern Nepal to southern Bhutan and northeastern India. Outside their traditional area, these groups adopted Nepali as their native tongue.

From the unification in 1768, through the Rana (since 1857) and Panchayat (since 1962) periods and up to as recent as 1990, the government of Nepal promoted monolingualism by pursuing a 'one nation, one language' policy and suppressed the rights of linguistic minorities. Only Nepali was permitted in education and broadcasts.

In 1990, Nepal won its democracy after the People's Movement brought an end to absolute monarchy. The new constitution acknowledged the multilingual character of the state. Article 18 of the constitution allowed communities the fundamental right to promote their own language and to use it as the medium of instruction at the primary level. Twelve minority languages could be used on a regular basis on the national broadcast media. The right to primary education in the mother tongue was granted, but remained largely unimplemented.

A period of economic and political turmoil followed the advent of democracy. The Nepalese Civil War, which was a conflict between government forces and Maoist rebels that lasted from 1996 until 2006, further deteriorated the language situation, as the wealthy elites from the villages fled to Kathmandu and other cities, causing further local impoverishment.

After the 2006 Democracy Movement (or People's Movement 2) against the monarchy and the adoption of an Interim Constitution in 2007, linguistic minority groups have been given additional rights to use their mother tongue in local organisations and government offices. The seventh amendment of the interim constitution currently proposes that a President, Prime Minister or any government official can take oath in their mother tongues.

An uneven situation

Speakers of indigenous languages nowadays find themselves in an uneven situation of diglossia. In contrast to Nepali, which use is very widespread as it is the dominant language for media, trade, public domain and education and the lingua franca throughout the entire country of Nepal, the indigenous languages are mostly used in the home domain, between members of the same linguistic community and confined to the area where they live. The speakers of minority languages belong to one particular group and in general, outsiders do not speak these languages. Because the members of language groups acquire knowledge of Nepali in school or through work, they usually speak their own minority language and Nepali. Unlike Nepali, which is taught at school, the indigenous languages are mostly unwritten. They only exist in memory.

Since most speakers of minority languages are bilingual, even those languages that are not definitely endangered are victim to gradual process of linguistic convergence toward Nepali. These languages survive, but they are losing their distinctiveness as they borrow vocabulary and morphological and syntactic features.

In recent years, improvements in transport and communication and economic forces have even further eroded local language and culture. Massive waves of migration have accelerated the loss of indigenous languages. Individuals moving to the urban areas (where people of different ethnicity live together) in search for work or for the purpose of education, or families that migrate to the Terai in search of land, often find their mother tongue less relevant to their needs and they rapidly shift to Nepali. As Toba, Toba and Rai (2001: 14) note, '... those who came from the hill areas gradually lose their mother tongue and are bilingual only during a transitional period. In many, if not most cases, parents do not teach their mother tongue to their children with the consequence that these children grow up as monolingual Nepali speakers.' Spouses from different linguistic communities

who settle outside the indigenous area also usually end up speaking Nepali. Sometimes, these indigenous people have had strong negative attitude towards their mother tongue, which they consider not useful for the serious side of life and also less prestigious than Nepali, and therefore do not teach it to their children.

India

According to the 2001 Census, Nepali is the 16th of out the 22 scheduled languages of India in terms of number of speakers' strength, with more than 2.8 million mother tongue speakers. Nepali is an official language and lingua franca of the state of Sikkim (with more than three hundred thousand speakers), an officially recognised language in the state of West-Bengal (with more than a million of speakers) and also widely spoken in the state of Assam (with more than half a million of speakers). In India too, Nepali is spreading at the expense of Tibeto-Burman languages, both native and imported.

According to van Driem (2001: 906), Nepalese colonists driven by overpopulation in eastern Nepal, the demographic upheavals in the wake of the Gorkhā conquest and the pull of employment opportunities in the tea gardens, began to settle in Darjeeling at the end of the XIXth and beginning of the XXth century. Only a few decades later, Nepalese settlers started flooding the valleys of Sikkim proper.

Sikkim, which lost sovereignty in 1975 when it was incorporated into India, is the only state with an ethnic Nepalese majority. According to the 2001 Census, Nepali is spoken by 60 percent of the Sikkimese population. The indigenous Tibeto-Burman population groups of the former kingdom of Sikkim, the native Lepcha (or 'Róng tribe) and the Dränjop (or Bhoṭiyā of Dränjo 'Sikkim'), constitute a minority of less than 10 per cent.

In contrast to many Tibeto-Burman languages, which have no script of their own, the Lepcha have their own indigenous script and a literary tradition that dates back some three hundred years. Lepcha is one of the eleven official languages of Sikkim that is taught in schools (at the lower level) and used in the media. Nevertheless, Lepcha has already effectively been lost everywhere in favour of Nepali. The total number of Lepcha mother tongue speakers across India is somewhere between 4,000 individuals (van Driem 2001), 29,854 (Plaisier 2006) and 50,629 (Census 2001). Lepcha is a definitively endangered language. The Lepcha frequently have to converse with other ethnic Lepcha who have already lost the ancestral mother tongue in a language other than Lepcha.

Besides more than 2.8 million mother tongue speakers, the Indian 2001 Census gives also gives data on some 100,000 people mainly living in Sikkim and West-Bengal who returned a Nepalese language as their mother tongue: 37,265 speakers of Limbu, 18,342 speakers of Sherpa, 17,494 speakers of Tamang and 14,378 speakers of Rai languages. Even though the Census defines mother tongue as the language in which the mother was talking to the person in his/her childhood, it remains unclear how many people still speak this mother tongue. The so-called 'mother tongue' may actually refer to the ancestral language of the ethnic group to which the people belong, rather than the language they speak at home. In other words, the given census data should be double-checked, since some of the large Tibeto-Burman language groups from Nepal who have settled outside their traditional homeland, from eastern Nepal to southern Bhutan and northeastern India, are most likely to have adopted Nepali or some other major regional language as their native tongue.

Bhutan

The national language of Bhutan, Dzongkha, is one of the two Tibeto-Burman languages that now have official national status, the other one being Burmese in Burma. In comparison with Sikkim and Nepal, the linguistic situation in Bhutan is relatively stable. Yet Nepali is also spreading at the expense of Tibeto-Burman. Even Dzongkha is marginalised by the extensive use of English throughout Bhutan and by Nepali. The most endangered language in Bhutan is Lhokpu, which is threatened by linguistic assimilation to the surrounding communities of Nepali colonists in southwestern Bhutan.

Healthy multilingualism to reverse the trend

We have looked at the past and present pull and push factors that make people favour Nepali at the expense of their own mother tongue. In the case of the many Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Nepal, for instance, the indigenous language is only spoken in the home domain, and the more prestigious Nepali language influences the indigenous language. Speakers of Lepcha often speak with a language other than Lepcha with other ethnic Lepcha. People moving to the urban areas in search for work or education rapidly shift to national languages, and do not teach their mother tongue to their children. What can we do now to reverse the trend of language loss?

To begin with, we must also acknowledge that even though major languages such as Nepali, Hindi, Bengali and English constitute a threat to the minority languages in the Indian subcontinent and the Himalayan Chain, these important languages also enable speakers of smaller languages to communicate beyond local levels. Knowing a major language is therefore of vital importance to many small, poor and rural communities, just as knowing English is essential to communicate internationally. Monolingualism therefore is not an option.

Instead we should promote a healthy bilingualism, which values both the mother tongue and a lingua franca, and as such does not necessarily lead to language loss. A healthy bilingualism should not only be promoted through education (at the primary level), but also at home given that people mistakenly think that children can learn to speak only one language well, whereas the opposite is actually true. Schools can develop a child's usage of both languages (listen, speak, engage in folklore and literature) and raise its self-esteem. Classes for adults who never learned about their language can foster positive language attitudes, which are needed for passing on the language to one's children. However, language-teaching programs require good learning materials (respecting of the world view of the indigenous people) and good mother tongue teachers. The state and the dominant cultures must also acknowledge and support the cultural and linguistic rights of minority groups, and introduce the minority languages in the public sphere and media. Article 30 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was ratified by the Government of India, Nepal and Bhutan, states that no indigenous child should be denied the right to use his or her language and practise his or her culture. This article applies to any child and any language.

The case of Lepcha of Sikkim clearly shows that official state support and education alone is not enough, and that only the community can save its own language by passing it on to their children. Linguists can play an important role in sparking renewed interest in a language and encourage people to preserve their language, as the members of the Himalayan Languages Project have regularly noticed. As such, linguistic research can not only provide documentation of endangered languages for the scholarly community, but also benefit the language communities. I would like to call upon the entire linguistic community, also those present here today, to start doing fieldwork immediately and assist in this much needed effort to preserve our world's linguistic heritage.

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