

Diversity and Change in the Languages of Highland Nepal¹

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Linguistic Diversity

Although the population of Nepal numbers only fifteen million², it is extremely diverse. There have been several periods of immigration by a variety of ethnic groups, and the constraints of geography have traditionally conspired to produce small and fairly isolated settlements. As a nation, Nepal can now present a semblance of cultural homogeneity to the outside world, but the Nepalese are still composed to some extent of disparate ethnic and linguistic elements. The nation possesses an official national language, spoken by at least eighty percent of its people. Even so, nearly half of the population still speaks an enormous variety of languages as its mother-tongues. Nearly sixty years ago, the great scholar of Indo-Aryan linguistics, Professor R.L. Turner, observed:

In a population of under six millions in all there are spoken at least scores...of languages, all mutually unintelligible, and some broken up again into numerous and often very different dialects. Even within the limits of a single valley there may be a village the inhabitants of which speak a language completely unintelligible to their neighbours a mile or two away. (1928:63)

Very few studies have been made of the more obscure Nepalese languages. In fact, so little is known about some of them that there is very little agreement about which language family should claim them. This diversity is decreasing appreciably as the political and cultural unification of the country proceeds, and the linguistic and literary research which is conducted in the academic institutions of Nepal concerns itself primarily with the national language, Nepali. As a consequence, however,

...there have been a number of studies which view the Nepalese world from a monocultural-linguistic perspective for the simple reason that this is easier to do. (Bista 1982:1-2).

The "bicultural-linguistic perspective" is also attacked by another Nepali writer:

It would be a happy but over-simplified generalization to talk of two languages, two peoples, or even two cultures of Nepal — the language and culture of the conquerors (i.e. the Gorkhas) and the language and culture of the subjugated peoples Such a neat segmentation...is not very helpful for examining the complex ethnic, cultural and linguistic situation in Nepal. (Malla 1979:135).

Ethnic Diversity

Very few of the many ethnic groups and "tribes" of highland Nepal can claim to be autochthonous in the regions they now inhabit. It is generally accepted, for instance, that the people who traditionally speak Nepali as their mother-tongue, and who have come to dominate the recent history of Nepal, came into the region from the south and west within the past thousand years. The theory is probably borne out by the fact that the closely-linked processes of Sanskritisation and "Nepalisation" have reached a rather more advanced stage in the west of the kingdom than they have in the east³.

The early Indo-Aryan immigrants were preceded by people who spoke Tibeto-Burman languages. The first wave of immigration probably involved those who now speak languages classified as "pronominalized"⁴, including the Rai groups, the Limbu and certain strata now incorporated among the Newars⁵. The second wave of immigration from the north involved speakers of "Non-pronominalized" Tibeto-Burman languages such as Gurung, Magar and Tamang, and the third and most recent arrivals were the smaller groups of Tibetan peoples, such as the Sherpa. It is very difficult to establish dates for any of the early movements, but it is likely that the Kathmandu Valley was inhabited mainly by speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages prior to the rise of the Licchavi dynasty in the fifth century A.D., as more than 80% of the area's place-names were then non-Sanskritic⁶.

The indigenous peoples of the Nepalese hills might have been of Austro-Asiatic stock; Brian Hodgson⁷ thought that they were the ancestors of the "broken tribes" such as Bayu (or Hayu) the Chepang, and speakers of languages such as Jhangad and Kusunda. Very little scholarly attention has been paid to these peoples since Hodgson's papers were first published, and so it is difficult to assess their claim to antiquity.

The classification of minority ethnic groups and their languages still causes problems. Although many of them seem once to have inhabited specific "homeland" areas, migration within Nepal has complicated the picture greatly. Sizeable "enclaves" of minorities such as Newars now live in towns far from "homelands" such as the Kathmandu Valley. The anthropologist Walter Frank proposed an interesting classification of such groups, using terminology culled from Nepali, but his identification of two groups of hill-peoples, "Parbatiya" (Indo-Aryans)

and Tibeto-Burmese), seems simplistic.⁸ Other scholars have been more circumspect. Bista, for instance, urges caution:

because of the increasing mobility of different groups across geographic boundaries the regional divisions indicate only the stereotypes. (1972: vii).

An Enumeration of Nepalese Languages

Great problems are encountered by anyone who attempts to count the languages of Nepal. The results of the Linguistic Survey of Nepal, conducted in the early 1980s, are as yet unavailable, at least to this researcher, but some sterling preliminary work was carried out earlier by Dr. Subhadra Subba of the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies at Kirtipur⁹. The following list includes all the languages mentioned by the Censuses of 1961, 1971 and 1981, and by Dr. Subba. "Major" languages are those whose mother-tongue speakers are still enumerated by the Nepal Census; each language mentioned is designated as Indo-Aryan (IA), Tibeto-Burman (TB), Austro-Asiatic (AA) and Dravidian (D).

"Major" languages: Nepali (IA 58.3%), Maithili (IA 11.1%), Bhojpuri (IA 9.5%), Tharu (IA 3.6%), Tamang (TB 3.4%), Newari (TB 2.9%), Avadhi (IA 1.6%), Rai-Kiranti (TB 1.5%), Magar (TB 1.4%), Gurung (TB 1.2%), Limbu (TB 0.9%), Bhote Sherpa (TB 0.5%), Rajbansi (IA 0.4%), Danuwar (IA 0.1%), Sunwar (TB 0.07%), Santhali (AA c.0.17%), Thakali (TB 0.03%).

"Minor" languages: Majhi, Kumhale, Darai, Bote, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Marwari, (all IA), Chepang, Dhimal, Pahari¹⁰, Jirel, Lepcha, Meche, Raji, Thami, Byansi, Kham, Tibetan, Bayu¹¹, Loke, Kaike, Lhomi, Rautya (all TB), Jhangad (D), Satar and Kusunda (both AA).

Before reaching an estimated total, it should be remembered that the name "Rai-Kiranti" covers about 17 mutually unintelligible languages, that Avadhi and Bhojpuri might more accurately be treated as dialects of Hindi, and that languages such as Loke and Kaike are probably dialects of Tibetan. On this basis, it can be estimated that 56 languages are currently spoken in Nepal.

The Censuses of Nepal

The primary source for statistical data on the status of Nepalese languages is the Nepal Census. This survey is conducted every 10 years; as well as being a most valuable source of information, it is also an interesting reflection of the Government's attitude to the linguistic diversity of the kingdom.

Two of the most fundamental objectives of the Government of Nepal can be summed up by the terms "internal cohesion" and "external distinction¹²". First, the many communities which inhabit the various regions of Nepal must coalesce to form a cohesive nation. Second, it

must be possible to distinguish this unified and integrated nation from those which adjoin it geographically. National integration is undoubtedly taking place in Nepal, but the kingdom's "internal cohesion" is still compromised to some extent by the existence of disparate ethnic and linguistic groups. Much the same can be said with regard to the objective of "external distinction": because Nepal does not consist of a single mono-cultural community, many of its people, particularly those who live on the country's borders, are indistinguishable from their neighbours in India or Tibet in their appearance, language and customs.

Government policy on language reflects both of these objectives. In Nepal, the inculcation of national feeling does require improvements in the internal communication system, and obviously the establishment of a "single linguistic code" has been an important element of this. I have described the promotion and development of Nepali in some detail elsewhere;¹³ here we are concerned with examining the effects which its ascendancy has had upon certain of the other languages of Nepal. In this context it is important to note the ways in which the Government has altered its presentation of language data in the Censuses. The 1952/4 Census¹⁴ gave figures for mother-tongue speakers of 41 languages, including 6 extremely vague categories of regional dialects. This list was completely revised in 1961, and the Census of that year included data on only 35 languages. This reclassification also produced some dramatic changes in the number of speakers given for certain languages. The number of Hindi-speakers, for instance, dropped from 80,200 to 2,900, while speakers of Bhojpuri increased from 16,300 to 577,400 and Avadhi received its first mention, with 447,100 speakers. It was quite obvious that the importance of Hindi had been greatly de-emphasised, and reattributed to Avadhi and Bhojpuri. These latter are both regarded as dialects of Hindi in India. The issue of national language had aroused some controversy in the Tarai. Resistance to the imposition of Nepali in education, etc. centred largely on Hindi, which was claimed to be the genuine *lingua franca* in the region¹⁵. It is very probable, therefore, that these changes in the Census were in part a response to these circumstances.

The 1971 Census included a more detailed compilation of data on language use, presented for each of the 14 *anchal* and 75 *jilla*. However, only seventeen languages were listed. Many of the languages for which data had been given in previous surveys were completely omitted, presumably being subsumed into the two categories of "local district languages" and "other languages," which together claimed some 4% of the population. This researcher has not yet had sight of the results of the 1981 Census, but preliminary statistics released in the *Nepal Press Digest*¹⁶ suggest that the same language categories have been retained. Languages which are "ignored" by the 1971 and 1981 Censuses fall into two categories. The first consists of languages which a Nepali nationalist would regard as "foreign". Thus, there is no mention of Hindi, Bengali, Urdu or Tibetan, but figures are given for the number of people who speak Bhojpuri, Avadhi and "Bhote Sherpa." This distinguishes them externally from speakers of similar tongues in neighbouring countries. The second category consists of minor Nepalese

languages whose speakers have probably declined in number since 1961. It is felt in some quarters that the exclusion of most minor languages from the Census reflects an unwillingness to represent the country as linguistically fragmented. However, it is also true that diversity of spoken mother-tongues is no longer readily equatable with fragmentation, as Nepali becomes the second language of a steadily-increasing majority.

Nepali as the Lingua Franca

Since at least as early as the seventeenth century, Nepali has been developing into a fully-fledged link-language or *lingua-franca* throughout central and western Nepal, to a slightly lesser extent in the eastern hills, and increasingly in the Tarai and the northernmost mountain regions. Every Nepal Census has stated that Nepali is the mother-tongue of more than half of the population. In 1971, Nepali-speakers were in a clear majority in 8 of the 14 *anchal*, and speakers of any one other language constituted a majority in only two *anchal*. At district level, it becomes evident that mother-tongue speakers of Nepali constitute a minority in 18 of the 75 *jillā*, 16 of these are Tarai districts, in 9 of which speakers of a single other language constituted over 80% of the total population. Only two districts of highland Nepal are populated by a majority whose mother-tongue is not Nepali: they are Rasuwa, where Tamang-speakers were 83% in 1971, and Manang, where the 1971 Census recorded that 50% of the population were speakers of Gurung.

Until recently, the policy of the Nepal Government towards languages other than Nepali seems to have been one of "benign neglect". The only published statement of official policy towards "minority languages" appeared in the *Gorkhāpatra* national newspaper in October 1957:

"The General Policy of the Nepal Government Towards Languages and Dialects Current in Nepal."

1. The policy of the Nepal Government concerning the languages and dialects current in the country is both liberal and democratic.
2. The Government has not adopted, nor does it intend to adopt a policy which suppresses the language of any ethnic group or region, or which is spoken and propagated amongst any community in any part of Nepal. The Government intends that the speakers of all these languages should always retain the appropriate democratic right to further the development of the language or dialect of each Nepalese community or ethnic group.
3. There can be no doubt of the fact that Nepali has long since attained the status of an administrative language, acquiring both universality and strength. Hence, this same language appears in the present circumstances to be a major factor favouring the promotion of national unity and the Government believes that a working knowledge of the language is utterly essential for every Nepalese citizen. Accordingly, the Government has accommodated other

languages, of other regions and ethnic groups, in schools up to primary level. The intention of the Government is that, through the establishment of a Nepali medium up to the middle standard in Upper High Schools, the capabilities of Nepalese citizens and officials will be enhanced in this age of progress and democracy, as a result of their increasing proficiency in Nepali.

4. Mindful of the proportionate value and importance of the local and minority languages and dialects other than Nepali, the Nepal Government has adopted a policy which provides them with all possible aid and encouragement, in order to further their development.
5. The Nepal Government fully hopes and trusts that every Nepalese citizen alive today will heartily support this Government policy which is democratic and an aid to the building of the nation.

Nepali was formally declared to be the national language by Chandra Shamsher in 1905, but there is little evidence of any coherent policy towards the other languages of Nepal until the National Education Plans which followed the political changes of 1950/1. The Ranas' policy seems to have involved intermittent repression, and their attitude to Newari was especially harsh. The intolerance may well have been prompted by a kind of racial or caste prejudice; there are references to minority languages as "the speech of the illiterate" or "the dialects of the jungle" in pre-1950 Nepali literature¹⁷.

It was the imposition of Nepali as medium of education in the early 1960s which caused the Government the greatest problems in the implementation of its language policy¹⁸, both in terms of actual practical difficulties, and also the opposition it aroused, particularly in the Tarai. At about the same time, the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley also reasserted their loyalty to their language. Other than these, few minor languages have had particularly vocal advocates. Newari, and several Tarai languages, have their own distinctive literary traditions, but few of the Tibeto-Burman languages even possess their own scripts.

Although Nepali is very much weaker in the Tarai than in the hill regions, the major Tarai languages do have strong affinities with Nepali, and with each other, by virtue of the fact that they are all Indo-Aryan. There are genuine differences between the Nepalese of the hills and those of the plains, but the fact that the majority of the Tarai population is Hindu, like the elite of Kathmandu, means that integration into the nation brings no great cultural changes. The question of "Sanskritisation" cannot really arise, and changes in language use have occurred slowly throughout most of the Tarai over the past twenty years. It will take decades for Nepali to replace Hindi as the *lingua franca*, if it happens at all, and most languages will co-exist with it for the foreseeable future¹⁹. The situation in the hills and mountains is more complicated, and it is therefore necessary to consider the status of the Tibeto-Burman languages in greater detail.

Tibeto-Burman Languages of the Nepalese Hills

The peoples of the middle-hill regions speak a variety of Tibeto-Burman languages, as well as Nepali. Most of these are vernaculars (*bolicālika bhāṣā*) which lack a written form, and they frequently comprise a number of dialects which may be mutually incomprehensible. Many Tibeto-Burman languages are current in those parts of the country where Nepali has been established as *lingua franca* for the longest time, and their speakers have been more "Nepalised" in linguistic terms than the peoples of the Tarai, as a consequence.

Several attempts have been made to establish a classificatory system for the Tibeto-Burman languages, but agreement among scholars of the subject is not yet unqualified. In 1909, the compilers of the *Linguistic Survey of India* observed,

On the whole it is impossible to classify the Tibeto-Burman dialects satisfactorily. They must have split up into many different forms of speech at a very early period, and there are numerous crossings and intercrossings. (Grierson 1909:10).

Laying aside all such considerations of linguistic affinities or structural characteristics²⁰, these languages may also be grouped together summarily in terms of their current status vis-a-vis bilingualism with Nepali, and the relative "strength" of each language in retaining its mother-tongue speakers. On this basis, it is my contention that the Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal can be divided into four groups:

- (1) Those languages which possess a literary tradition or a religious importance of some antiquity which can ensure a continuing cultural affiliation on the part of their speakers. The only examples are Newari and Tibetan²¹.
- (2) Those languages which are spoken in the remoter districts of the eastern zones of Nepal. Lacking an established literary tradition, although sometimes possessing their own writing systems, they are likely to lose many speakers as the status of Nepali is enhanced by improved communications with the rest of the country. In these eastern regions, however, this process is not far advanced and the gradual spread of bilingualism has not yet caused widespread "displacement" of local languages. Examples are Limbu and the Rai languages.
- (3) Those languages which lack a literary tradition and which are spoken in western regions where Nepali has been dominant for several centuries. Speakers of these languages tend to be fully bilingual, and their mother-tongues often show a marked Nepali influence. Examples are Gurung, Magar, Tamang and Thakali.

- (4) The languages of the so-called "broken tribes" of Nepal²². Their speakers are rapidly decreasing in number. Examples are Bayu and Chepang.

As a general rule, the bilingualism of Tibeto-Burman speakers with Nepali is at its maximum in the west of Nepal and it decreases eastwards, (discounting the Kathmandu Valley, which is linguistically more diverse than other areas). This is clearly linked to the western origins of the national language, and also to the expansion of political control over unified Nepal, which proceeded from west to east. The degree and prevalence of bilingualism is also an indication of the stage which has been reached in the continuing processes of Sanskritisation in any given community.

The large number of Tibeto-Burman languages current in Nepal precludes an assessment of the status of each one in relation to the growing dominance of Nepali. Thus, the current situation with regard to five languages, which are each illustrative of some important trends, is described in the final part of this article.

Newari

Newari was classified by Grierson as a member of the "simple or non-pronominalized" group of Himalayan dialects²³. Its origins are probably very ancient; indeed, the very name *Nepāl* is clearly related to the word *Newār* or *Newā*, and once referred only to the central valley of Kathmandu. Speakers of Newari continue to refer to their language as *Nepāl bhāṣā* and to the Valley as *Nepāl*. Although they are widely regarded as a homogenous and distinct ethnic group within Nepal, the Newar "race" is actually composed of a number of diverse elements who now share a common mother tongue and broad cultural affiliation²⁴. It may be that the term *Newār* was originally used to refer to an inhabitant of the Nepal Valley who would have spoken *Nepāl bhāṣā* as his mother tongue prior to the spread of *Gorkhālī* (Nepali) in the 17th century. Although the character of their language suggests that most of the Newars must have a northern origin, there is a school of thought which ascribes to them a prehistoric homeland in the Dravidian south of India. Whether or not this can be substantiated²⁵ remains to be seen, but the linguistic evidence does suggest a Himalayan origin for the majority.

Mother-tongue speakers of Newari amount to less than 4% of the total population of Nepal and so it would appear to be a typical "minority" language if judged on this purely statistical basis. Yet Newari is unusual among the languages of Nepal, for the majority of its speakers continue to inhabit one distinct region of the country. According to the 1971 Census, approximately 63% of all the Newari speakers of Nepal live in the three *jillā* of the Kathmandu Valley and the central Bagmati *anacal* is home to about 73% of them. Elsewhere in Nepal, there are Newar communities in most market towns, such as Pokhara, Tansen and Dhankuta. Bista observes,

Newars have always travelled for trade and business, while all other groups....migrate in search of land for farming or for other employment. There have been very few Newars living in these outlying districts who have taken to agriculture as their sole occupation, whereas in Kathmandu Valley great numbers of Newars are strictly farmers. (Bista 1972:18).

The Newars have certainly played an important role in Nepalese cultural history and a just claim can undoubtedly be made for the eminence of their literary heritage. Yet Newari is often mis-represented as the "second language" of Nepal, a statement which is simply untrue in a strictly numerical sense, and is a reflection of the "Kathmandu-centric" bias of some observers and the fact that the Newars possess their own literature.

In the Kathmandu Valley, Newari was the language of a culture of unprecedented diversity and eclecticism, to which the distinctive environment of the Valley towns still bears witness. In general, the Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal lack a literate culture; ethnic groups such as the Gurung, Rai or Limbu undoubtedly possess their own traditions, but their cultures are generally of a material and functional nature. The Newars are an exception to this generalisation, for they are the only Tibeto-Burman speaking group of Nepal to have developed both a literate culture and also a material culture which is most notable for its non-functional aspects.

The aesthetic sensibilities of the Newars found their primary expression in material culture such as architecture and sculpture; literature lagged somewhat behind. Despite this, the earliest Newari text, the *Mānavanyāyaśāstra*, dates from 1380 A.D.,²⁶ predating the earliest examples of true literature in Nepali by three centuries. At first, Sanskrit texts were translated into Newari, and a commentary was often added in the same language, but original works soon began to be composed in what is now known as "classical Newari". Its richest genre was poetry, and over 1600 poetic compositions are extant in the language, dating back to 1570 A.D. Quantities of prose and drama were also produced, often influenced by languages such as Maithili. Kamal P. Malla, who has done much to publicise and promote Newari literature in Nepal over the last few years, describes the content of this body of literature as,

a most tangible evidence of the symbiosis between a Tibeto-Burman language and the Indo-Aryan culture. (Malla 1982:4).

At first, Newari language and literature remained quite unaffected by the political unification of Nepal which involved the conquest of each of the Newar kingdoms of the Valley in the latter half of the 18th century. The increasing dominance of the Nepali *lingua-franca* caused the introduction of a large number of loanwords into the spoken language,

and Newari writers adapted many verbs for inclusion in their literary language. There seems to have been little antagonism between speakers of the two languages, and the Shāh kings of the late 18th and early 19th centuries did nothing to suppress Newari or retard the growth of its literature. In 1775, the treaty between Nepal and Tibet was written partly in Newari²⁷ and King Rājendra Vikram Shāh (r.1817-1847) is even said to have penned a drama in Newari²⁸.

Under the Rana regime, however, and particularly whilst Chandra Shamsher was in power, the Nepali speaking élite began to discriminate against speakers of other languages, particularly the Tibeto-Burman vernaculars and, due perhaps to the proximity of the majority of Newars to the capital, especially Newari. In 1905, the French scholar Sylvain Lévi observed,

From generation to generation the Newari language
recedes and gives place to the advantage of the
Parbatiya - the language of the victors.

(Lévi 1905: Vol.1:252)

Many Newars had been writing their language in the *devanāgarī* script since the 17th century and by 1910 the old Newari scripts such as *ranjanā* and *bhūji mola* had effectively died out. The fortunes of the language declined still further under the Ranas; from 1940 to 1945, for instance, writing in Newari was considered virtually a treasonable offence, and many of the foremost Newari poets were sent to jail²⁹. Under other rulers, too, Newari literature was suppressed or heavily censored.

In their retention of their language, the Newars have proved themselves to be a resilient speech community. They have benefitted from their demographic concentration in political and commercial centres throughout the country and they have become the most influential and literate non-Indo-Aryan group of Nepal as a consequence. Bilingualism is extremely widespread among Newari-speakers; they live in close-knit communities and it is significant that most of the Newars who no longer speak their mother-tongue are those who live outside the Valley, isolated from other Newar communities. Under the Ranas, Newars struggled to maintain their literary tradition and the Government allowed the publication of Newari literature from 1946, after pressure from Indian Buddhist societies. From its inception in 1951 until 1965, Radio Nepal even transmitted news broadcasts in Newari. Hence Newari language and literature have experienced something of a revival since 1950; in his Bibliography, Kamal P. Malla (1978) lists some 1000 books published between 1920 and 1977. Several Newars who have become known for their literary compositions in Nepali also write in Newari; the late Cittadhar "Hṛdaya" has 22 books in Newari to his credit and Kedāramān "Vyathit", erstwhile Vice-Chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy, has written 5 books of Newari verse. About 25 literary societies are in existence, the most notable being the *Nepāl Bhāṣā Pariṣad* and *Cvasapasa*,³⁰ and several Newari journals, including at least one daily newspaper, are published regularly in the Valley towns. Between 1952 and 1967, 26 Newari periodicals were registered with the central authorities³¹.

Kamal P. Malla discerns four attitudes current towards Newari: hostility on the part of the academic establishment, indifference on the part of educated Newars, condescension from Nepali speakers, and complacency from the protagonists of the language³². Despite this rather gloomy overview, Newars have begun to reassert their linguistic identity in Nepal. Newari publications are now more widely available in the Valley than at any other time, attempts are being made to revive usage of the old scripts and M.A. classes in Newari were recently (c.1980) inaugurated at Tribhuvan University. Despite long years of neglect and prevalent bilingualism with Nepali, the Newari language will almost certainly be maintained.

Limbu

Although some authors have chosen to classify the Limbu and their language as members of the *Kirāntī* group, which includes over a dozen fairly distinct ethnic and linguistic groups of the eastern hills, the compilers of the Nepal Censuses have distinguished between "Rai-Kiranti" and "Limbu" as if they constituted two separate and homogenous languages. Clearly these classifications conceal a group of languages which are as yet substantially unresearched. In addition, Subba asserts that "the Limbu group of languages consists of two separate languages, namely Chha Thare Limbu and Panch Thare or "proper Limbu". (Subba 1976: 146).

As is the case with most Tibeto-Burman languages, Limbu is exclusively the mother-tongue of members of the ethnic group of the same name. Although they amount to less than 1.5% of the total population of Nepal, the Limbu are a major constituent of the population of the eastern hills. Virtually all of Nepal's Limbu-speakers are resident in Mechi and Koshi zones, and 88% live in the districts of Panchthar, Taplejung, Ilam, Terhathum and Dhankuta.

Traditionally, Limbus have inhabited the region known as *Pallo Kirānt* or "Far Kirānt" and they refer to their homeland as *Limbūwan*. This is a "middle-hill" area, and few Limbus live outside it, only limited migration having taken place in an easterly direction.

The Limbus may once have had a minor literary tradition of their own; (Malla 1979:140) notes that the Rai and the Limbus have an ancient literature of their own including a *Veda*, and (Bista 1972:44) states that books in the Limbu language are "scattered and difficult to find"³³. Certainly, Limbu literature barely survives, if it lives at all.

Most Limbus, however, have not forsaken their own language, and some consciously resist the acquisition of any other; these latter, however, are a minority, and bi-lingualism is increasing. A Limbu's knowledge of Nepali, and the grammatical correctness of the Nepali he is able to speak, is largely related to his economic status; those who are indebted to immigrant Hindu landlords remain subservient and largely illiterate. Two American anthropologists sum up the situation thus:

The lower a Limbu is on the economic scale, the less likely he is to speak Nepali. At this level, Nepali is considered to be the language of the Hindu conqueror and thus to be avoided except when communication is otherwise impossible. Limbu women, unless they are wealthy, speak Nepali less fluently than men. In Terhathum and its environs, conversations among Limbu women were mostly in Limbu, while interactions with members of other castes and ethnic groups tended to be conducted in the crude hill Nepali that most women had to learn to conduct business in the bazaar and marketplace. The women of Terhathum thought of the hill women who spoke no Nepali as backward and less sophisticated than they...

When the Limbu of wealth and rank converse among themselves, their own language is likely to be sprinkled with Nepali sentences and phrases. High-ranking Limbu rapidly lose their native vocabulary, especially words describing cultivation and commerce. (Jones and Jones 1976:42).

It would seem that the wealthy Limbu, who had extricated himself from his subservient position, is more likely to be fluently bi-lingual than the poor tenant farmer, whose attachment to his mother-tongue is linked to a resentment of the immigrant Hindu landlords, who are still seen as intruders in Limbuwan. Clearly, some of the processes which have already reached an advanced stage among the Gurung and Magar of the west are also incipient among the Limbu speech-community. The Limbu are a less important constituent of the "Gurkha" regiments than their western counterparts, and have not migrated in very large numbers away from their homelands. As a consequence, their identification with their homeland is still strong, with a corresponding ethnic and linguistic loyalty. Because the Limbu communities of the east are more nearly intact than those of Tibeto-Burman speakers in the west, they are somewhat less susceptible to changes imposed from the "outside", that is, by the Government. More often, cultural and linguistic integration into the Nepalese nation-state comes as a voluntary response to conditions in which an individual may achieve economic or social advancement, as is the case with speakers of Thakali, a language we shall consider later in this article.

Gurung

The Gurung language can be most closely related with Magar, Tamang and Thakali,³⁴ and it is another Nepalese "hill-language" which can be closely identified with one particular ethnic group. Although the Gurung language is no longer spoken by all those who claim to be Gurungs, there can be very few members of other ethnic groups who are at all familiar with the language. Those who retain Gurung as their mother-tongue, and are prepared to declare the fact to representatives of a

central authority are recorded in the 1981 Census. The number of Gurungs in Nepal who no longer have a working knowledge of their ancestral language is not disclosed.

Traditionally, the Gurungs have inhabited the foothills of the Annapurna, Lamjung and Himal Chuli ranges of the Himalaya, i.e. the middle-hill regions of central Nepal, and their origins are extremely vague, although they quite probably came from the north, as their linguistic and racial features would suggest. The 1971 Census reveals that about three-quarters of the Gurung-speakers of Nepal still inhabit their homeland in the Gandaki *anacal*. Elsewhere, the migration of Gurungs eastwards has resulted in small populations of Gurung-speakers in eight districts outside the Gandaki *anacal*. Those resident in Kathmandu, Ilam, Sankhuwa Sabha, Taplejung and Rupendehi amount to less than 8,000. In Mustang and Manang districts, figures have probably been distorted by returns from speakers of Tibetan languages, who prefer to refer to themselves as "Gurung" rather than use the somewhat derogatory term of "Bhotia"³⁵. Resettlement in nearly-cleared Tarai lands in the Rapti Valley has resulted in the existence of a sizeable Gurung community in Chitwan district.

Donald Messerschmidt, an anthropologist whose study of the Gurungs is a standard work for ethnographers in Nepal, defines three dialects of Gurung. Western Gurung is spoken in the area centring on Kaski district, stretching as far east as the western edge of Lamjung district and Eastern Gurung centres on Lamjung district, stretching as far as western Gorkha district. The third dialect, Ghale, is a language as "radically more different from the true Gurung than either Tamang, Thakali or Manang...all of which are certainly regarded as separate languages" (Messerschmidt 1976:4). In his entertaining "portrait" of an old Gurung lady, the American aidworker Broughton Coburn hints at the differences between these dialects:

At home, Aama speaks Gurung, a Tibeto-Burman tribal language sounding similar to Tibetan, although they are mutually unintelligible. From one valley to the next and from village to village, the dialect varies enough for her to recognize the native village of strangers met on the trail simply from their accent and inflection. The Gurung that live a day's walk to the northwest of Simli and Danda speak a slightly different dialect. The Danda Gurung acknowledge their barbarisms as in fact the same language, but remark that to them it sounds as if they are all perpetually angry. (Cobon 1982:145)

The Gurungs and the Magars came into contact with the Nepali-speaking descendants of the Indo-Aryan Khas who were gaining political ascendancy in the western and central Himalaya at a relatively early stage. The ancestral Gurung kingdom of legend, in the north of Lamjung district, was ruled by a *ghale* king until sometime in the fifteenth

century, when it became a part of the powerful Lamjung kingdom under a "Nepali Rājā". Lamjung was one of the last petty kingdoms to be incorporated into the unified Nepalese state; it was formally annexed by Kathmandu in 1776. Messerschmidt notes the involvement of Gurungs in the cultural and political "mainstream" of Nepalese life prior to this annexation:

Appointment of Gurung and other tribal village headmen in the hills probably dates to an earlier time when the House of Gorkha was locally powerful only in the western hills of its origin. (Messerschmidt 1976:18).

The degree of linguistic and cultural Sanskritisation which has occurred among the Gurungs would seem to bear this out. As early as 1833, Hodgson noted,

The Gurungs are less generally and more recently redeemed from Lamaism and primitive impurity than the Magars. But, though Gurungs and Magars still maintain their own vernacular tongues, Tartar faces and careless manners, yet, what with military service for several generations, under the predominant Khas, and what with the commerce of Khas males with their females, they have acquired the Khas language, though not to the oblivion of their own.... As they have, however, with such grace as they could muster, submitted themselves to the ceremonial law of purity, and to Brahman supremacy, they have been adopted as Hindus. (Hodgson 1833:219-220).

This long-term interaction with the Nepali-speaking population has resulted in an increasing level of bi-lingualism with the national language, and the incorporation of much of its vocabulary into spoken Gurung. These processes, as elsewhere, are closely related to the incorporation of a tribal culture and shamanist/Buddhist religion into the more prevalent Hindu culture of Nepal. Messerschmidt notes,

Buddhism among the Gurungs in general is waning in the face of inroads by Hinduism; it is still strong, however, among the more northerly villages which are isolated from the mainstream of Nepali life and where traditionalism is valued more highly.
(Messerschmidt 1976:6)

Gurungs who have left their native hills tend to adopt another language within only two or three generations, unless they are living among a large Gurung community. One meets hillsmen who claim to be Gurung in and around the Kathmandu Valley, and also further to the east, but very few of them now speak their mother-tongue. Thus the Nepal Censuses give no indication of the number of ethnic Gurungs who are

resident outside their linguistic "homeland". Grierson notes,

...they are gradually being Hinduized, and there is, at the same time, a distinct tendency among them to abandon their old dialect in favour of Khas³⁶. Thus 2721 out of a total of 4502 Gurungs in Sikkim returned their language as Khas at the last census.

(Grierson 1909:182)

Grierson included a sample of Gurung in his *Linguistic Survey*, which he had obtained from the "Nepal Durbar". Although there is no way of judging the extent to which it was a true representation of the spoken Gurung of the time, it is interesting to note that it does contain a large quantity of Nepali vocabulary³⁷.

This may well represent the speech of a Gurung resident in Kathmandu who was familiar with Nepali, but it probably gives a fair impression of the kind of linguistic admixture which is spoken by the modern Hindu Gurung.

The Gurung language possesses little or no written literature, nor does it have its own script. Messerschmidt tells of a "pseudohistory" of the Gurungs, of which several hand-written texts are said to exist in various villages³⁸. A Nepali version of a Gurung "*Vamśāvalī*" has been published³⁹.

The Gurungs and their language have undergone a long process of acculturation into the Nepalese "mainstream" which began at a very early stage, by virtue of the geographical location of most of their number, and because of their renowned military prowess. Consequently, Gurungs play a more active role in governmental bureaucracy than the members of any other Tibeto-Burman ethnic group besides the Newars. There are also a very large number of Gurungs in the Nepalese army, and in the "Gurkha" regiments of the Indian and British armies, and army pensions play an important part in the economy of the central Nepalese hills. Despite these factors, there has been no assertion of the Gurung cultural and linguistic identity which can be even nearly equated with the vocalisation of loyalty to other languages, such as Newari. Lacking a literature, or even a distinct written form, it seems most likely that the Gurung language will continue to co-exist with the *lingua-franca*, Nepali, in the shape of ever increasing bilingualism, and will probably become progressively more "Nepali-ised" over the generations.

Thakali

Thakali is spoken by a small and scattered community who have traditionally inhabited the middle section of the Kali Gandaki valley in Mustang district of Dhaulagiri zone⁴⁰. In the 1971 Census, Thakali was subsumed into the "local district languages" category, but some 5,300 speakers were recorded by the Census of 1981. Ethnically and linguistically, the Thakalis are more closely related to their southern neighbours, the Gurung and Tamang, than to the Tibetan peoples of the northern

reaches of the Kali Gandaki. Their language has 65% cognates with Gurung and 57% with Tamang, but only 28% with Tibetan⁴¹. Traditionally, however, Thakali culture was quite closely allied to that of Tibet, in terms of religious affiliation and even dress and diet. The Thakalis became prosperous by virtue of their advantageous position on an important trans-Himalayan trade-route; they developed great commercial acumen and astute political instincts. Their changing fortunes in the face of the trade restrictions imposed by the Chinese after their annexation of Tibet have been the subject of several anthropological studies⁴². These changes have had profound cultural and linguistic implications; since the 1950s, the acculturation of the Thakalis into the broader spectrum of Nepalese life has occurred with unusual rapidity, due to severed links with the northern culture area.

Since the 1950s, the Thakalis have been increasingly anxious to be considered a part of Nepalese Hindu society. They have striven, with some success, to identify their ethnic origins in the Jumla region of western Nepal,⁴³ and they have even changed their clan names from Tibetan-sounding titles such as Chyoki, Salki, Dhimzen and Bhurki to more "Sanskritic" names such as Gauchan, Tulachan, Sherchan and Bhattachan⁴⁴. Cultural change is also evident in the towns and villages of the Thak Khola; Tibetan dress is no longer worn and the old *lha khang*, Buddhist temples, in towns such as Tukucho and Marpha are in a sorry state of disrepair. The fate of the Thakali language is a predictable corollary to this. Many Thakalis have left their "homeland" to conduct their businesses in the commercial centres of Nepal. Others spend only a few months of each year in the Thak Khola, and the villages seem deserted in winter, as a consequence. Bilingualism with Nepali is therefore very widespread, especially among the young. The Japanese anthropologist Shigeru Iijima reports that Thakalis of Tukucho did not generally converse in their mother tongue, even in 1958, but used the national language in their informal conversations. He states that most teenagers were actually more fluent in Nepali than in Thakali, and that the latter language had become more of a "secret code" which was used among merchants when they were dealing with other ethnic groups⁴⁵.

Hastened by the dislocation of trade and culture, the "Nepalisation" process is clearly discernible among the Thakalis, and proceeds with unusual rapidity. Their circumstances are by no means general to the speakers of other Tibeto-Burman languages; in the Thak Khola, there is much to be gained in economic and political terms from linguistic and cultural absorption into "Greater Nepal".

In the preceding pages, the current status of four Tibeto-Burman languages native to Nepal has been described in some detail. In terms of increasing bilingualism and "Nepalisation", Gurung is quite typical of the "western" members of the group. Much of what has been said about Gurung would also apply to the other Tibeto-Burman languages of the western hills, such as Magar, and equally to Tamang, the most widely-spoken Tibeto-Burman language of Nepal. Similarly, the processes which are at work among the Limbu-speaking community have close parallels among speakers of Rai and Sunwar in the eastern hills. Thakali and

Newari are exceptions to the generalisations which might be made about the status of these languages; Newari, because of its literary tradition, is more resistant to the processes of Nepalisation, and the case of Thakali is a consequence of changes which are confined to the Thak Khola region, although it does have some parallels among the Sherpas of Solu Khumbu.

Before concluding these observations it might be useful briefly to examine the status of the languages which can be identified more closely with Tibetan. These are classed together by compilers of the Nepal Censuses as "Bhote Sherpa". Sherpa is the language spoken by the Sherpas of upper Solu Khumbu; it has 51% cognates with Tibetan but is usually regarded as a language in its own right. There are approximately 20,000 speakers of Sherpa in Nepal; the 1971 Census recorded a figure of 18,400 speakers of "Bhote Sherpa" in the Solu Khumbu district, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics estimated that 14,000 speakers of Sherpa inhabited the same region⁴⁶. The 1981 Census, however, recorded a total of speakers of "Bhote Sherpa" for the whole of Nepal; assuming that most true Sherpas live in Solu Khumbu, it is evident that more of these languages were actually "Bhote", Tibetan, than Sherpa.

In many of the more remote districts of northern Nepal, the Tibetan language and its dialects continue to function as a *lingua franca*. In Mustang district, the north of Dolpa (Dolpo) district, in the Mugu and Humla districts of the Karnali zone where it borders on Tibet, and in most northern regions, knowledge of Nepali is still quite limited. Such sparsely-populated areas maintain a Tibetan culture which remains distinct from that of "Greater Nepal".

Conclusion

This article has described the great linguistic diversity which has existed for centuries throughout highland Nepal, but is now beginning to diminish. Linguistic diversity gave rise to the need for a shared "link-language" which would enable speakers of mutually incomprehensible languages to communicate with one another. The increasing prevalence of Nepali, both as a mother-tongue and a second language, has affected the role and status of different languages in a variety of ways.

Nepali is much stronger in the hills of Nepal than it is in the Tarai. Languages such as Maithili and Hindi will not easily be displaced in lowland Nepal, but among most Tibeto-Burman-speaking communities Nepali is rapidly displacing mother-tongues and influencing the character of other spoken languages. Yet such a generalisation does require qualification. In the eastern hills, there is still some resistance to the acquisition of Nepali from Rais and Limbus, and the determination of a number of educated Newars to revive and maintain their own distinctive culture has assured Newari literature of a future.

The preceding pages do not contain a comprehensive survey or an in-depth socio-linguistic study. Rather, I have attempted to identify the major processes of change in the context of steadily decreasing

linguistic diversity. In conclusion, it could be stated that these changes, although essentially uniform in effect, are taking place to different extents in different speech-communities. End-points vary: in some contexts, Nepali may eventually displace mother-tongues entirely, in others it will remain an essential second language for the foreseeable future.

NOTES

1. This article is a condensed version of the first section of my Ph.D. thesis (Hutt 1984). The remainder of the thesis is to be published by Sterling Publishers (New Delhi) in conjunction with the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in late 1987 under the title *Nepali: A National Language and its Literature*.
2. According to the 1981 Census, the total population of Nepal is 15,022,839. (Regmi 1984).
3. Sanskritisation is an anthropological concept first described by Srinivas (1962); basically, it describes the incorporation of non-Hindu groups into the Hindu caste-hierarchy. Bista (1982) seems to have been the first to have used the term "Nepalization" in anthropological literature.
4. The classification of Nepalese Tibeto-Burman languages into groups labelled "pronominalized" and "non-pronominalized" was first set out by Hodgson (1874) and was later adopted by Grierson (1909). Although more detailed classifications have been devised, these two rather vague categories are still acknowledged by most writers on this subject.
5. Not all of the people now known as *Nevār* share a common origin; the ethnic composition of Newar societies is less homogenous than is often assumed. (Doherty 1978).
6. Malla 1982/3
7. Brian Houghton Hodgson was the British Resident in Kathmandu from 1832 to 1843. His papers were pioneering studies in the geography, ethnology, history and religion of Nepal, and most were originally published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* between 1840 and 1860.
8. Frank 1974.
9. Subba 1976.
10. *paharī*, an obscure Tibeto-Burman language, should not be confused with *pahāri*, which is one of the names given to Nepali by Tarai peoples.

11. Bayu has also been referred to as Hayu and Vayu. It is, or was, spoken by a minor tribe inhabiting an area between the Koshi and Sunkoshi rivers (Hodgson 1858).
12. These terms are borrowed from Einar Haugen (1966:928).
13. Hutt 1984.
14. Nepal only began to compile censuses after 1950, although the Rana government is said to have carried out "head-counts" in 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941. These gave no data on language. (Central Bureau of Statistics, HMG Nepal, 1977:22).
15. Gaige's study (1975) includes a thorough documentation of language controversies in the Tarai during the 1960s.
16. Regmi 1984.
17. Malla 1978: 6-7, 45.
18. This policy is outlined in National Education Planning Commission 1956:104.
19. Of particular interest in this context are the findings of a CNAS-sponsored "pilot project" on bilingualism in the Tarai. (Subba 1974).
20. The most well-known classifications are those posited by Shafer (1955, 1966-73), Grierson (1909), Benedict (1972) and Glover (1970).
21. Although Limbu and Lepcha both possess their own script, their literature is obscure and is rarely published in Nepal. Some Lepcha books are available in Sikkim.
22. Hodgson (1857) was the first to coin the term "broken tribes."
23. Grierson 1909: 171-181 and 214-226.
24. "Where they have not adopted Nepali as bilinguals they have no common identity except for their language." (Malla 1979:142).
25. Nepali 1965:28-29. Doherty (1978:435) states: "The assertion sometimes made that the Newars are connected with the Nayars of South India has no supporting evidence."
26. The earliest known inscription in Newari dates from 1173 A.D. (Malla 1982:2).
27. Lienhard 1984:3.
28. Malla 1982:75.

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29. The celebrated Newari epic *Sugatasaurabha* was written in jail during the 1940s by Cittadhar "Hṛdaya." (Lienhard 1984:4).
30. Malla 1978:73-74, 97-98.
31. Devkoṭā 1967:578-644.
32. Malla 1982:1-4.
33. See also Sprigg 1959.
34. Glover 1970.
35. Integration into the Hindu society now paramount in Nepal brings social, economic and political advantages, and so the Gurung do not always wish to be identified too closely with the Bhotia, who are usually Buddhist and generally Tibetan. Many of the Tibetan-speakers of Manang and Mustang now describe themselves as "Gurung". (Personal enquiries, Mustang district, 1982).
36. i.e. Nepali.
37. Grierson 1909:187-188.
38. Messerschmidt 1976:9.
39. Naraharināth and Gurung 1963.
40. i.e. the Thāk Kholā.
41. Glover 1970.
42. Such as Fürer-Haimendorf 1975 and Iijima 1963.
43. Iijima 1977:84.
44. Bista 1972:90.
45. Iijima 1982:25.
46. Gordon 1969.

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