
Language Contact in Nepal: A study on language use and attitudes, by Bhim L Gautam

Mark Turin



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/434>
DOI: 10.4000/ebhr.434
ISSN: 2823-6114

Publisher

CNRS - UPR 299 - Centre d'Etudes Himalayennes

Electronic reference

Mark Turin, "*Language Contact in Nepal: A study on language use and attitudes*, by Bhim L Gautam", *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* [Online], 57 | 2021, Online since 15 December 2021, connection on 22 July 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebhr/434> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebhr.434>

This text was automatically generated on 22 July 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution 4.0 International - CC BY 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Language Contact in Nepal: A study on language use and attitudes, by Bhim L Gautam

Mark Turin

REFERENCES

Language Contact in Nepal: A study on language use and attitudes, by Bhim L Gautam. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 2021. XX & 181pp, 11 b/w illustrations, 20 colour illustrations. ISBN 978-3-030-68809-7

- 1 Finally, a readable and mainstream introduction to the very complex topic of language contact in Nepal. Drawing on his earlier published work and on the harmonised results of a 15-year mixed methods study, Bhim Lal Gautam presents both quantitative and qualitative data on the attitudes and perceptions that speakers of English, Hindi, Nepali, Sherpa, Dotyali, Jumli and Tharu display about their mother tongues.
- 2 In broad strokes, language contact is the process by which languages influence one another on account of their speakers interacting with one another. As linguist Yaron Matras has argued, language contact manifests in a 'great variety of domains, including language acquisition, language processing and production, conversation and discourse, social functions of language and language policy, typology and language change' (2009: 1). Matras reminds us of the importance of recognising the 'role of speakers as creative communicators and innovators' (2009: 8) and identifies multilingual speakers as particularly powerful agents of language change. Given Nepal's high rate of multilingualism across almost all generations and linguistic groups, the country offers a rich site to investigate language contact, mixing and changing attitudes to language use.
- 3 The author of *Language Contact in Nepal: A Study on Language Use and Attitudes* is Bhim Lal Gautam, currently senior lecturer at the Central Department of Linguistics at

Tribhuvan University, Nepal. Since the early 2000s, Gautam has been researching issues of language contact and shift in Nepal's ethnolinguistic communities, with a particular focus on Nepal Bhasa (Newar), Nepali and Sherpa. In 2020, Gautam defended his doctoral dissertation, entitled *Language contact in Kathmandu* and is an emerging expert in this dynamic field.

- 4 The highly structured nature of the book – with eight rigorously subdivided and heavily internally signposted chapters – helps the author achieve his ambitious goal of understanding the trends, causes and impacts of language contact and shift in Nepal. Following a jarringly concise Introduction of just over 2 pages, the first two substantive chapters introduce important aspects of the sociolinguistics of multilingualism and offer a descriptive review of the state of scholarship about language contact in Nepal.
- 5 Chapters 4, 5 and 6 have identical structures, covering language contact in Sherpa, Newar and Maithili respectively. While this organisational convergence certainly helps the reader undertake a comparative analysis of the three case studies, I was disappointed to find the near verbatim repetition of whole paragraphs of text (for example, on pages 64, 93–94 and 117–118, to mention but the most obvious). Such redundancy should really have been picked up by the publisher through the review process and through more substantial hands-on structural editing. Taken together, these repetitions unfortunately contribute to a sense that *Language Contact in Nepal* is more of an assemblage of self-standing articles than a carefully constructed and integrated whole.
- 6 In the convergence of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, interesting results emerge, particularly around changing attitudes towards and ideologies about languages. Gautam asserts that ‘mother tongues are strongly used in personal activities in informal settings within the family and language community’ (p150), a finding that will be unsurprising to most scholars from and citizens of Nepal, even if Gautam’s methodology offers a welcome empirical baseline to underwrite what are often otherwise simply impressionistic observations. Gautam’s interview and survey data reveal that media, migration and marriage exert complex pressures on individual and group language choices, and he identifies them as major causes of language contact and shift (p151).
- 7 In Chapter 8, Gautam demonstrates how speakers of Sherpa, Newar, Tharu, Limbu, Jumli, Dotyali and Maithili shift to Nepali when interacting with ‘interlingual social groups’ (p150). Gautam also draws attention to the increasing influence of English in formal contexts in particular, arguing that this ‘indicates the complex shifting patterns of language in people’s daily communication’ (p151). The trend in Nepal, Gautam argues, is away from ‘home language toward official Nepali language and then to English in all aspects of society’ (p151), leading the author to conclude that the preservation of linguistic and cultural heritage is at least in part the responsibility of government and aligned agencies. While mother tongues in Nepal are associated with ethnic identity and boundary maintenance (see Turin 2019), Nepali and English have become increasingly identified with pragmatic and instrumental functions (p151). Gautam concludes this chapter, and with it the whole study, with a number of helpful recommendations for language policy, with a particular focus on corpus planning, status planning and acquisition planning.
- 8 Overall, the analysis presented in *Language Contact in Nepal* is clear and uncomplicated, making this book a valuable textbook for undergraduate instruction, either in parts or

as a whole. For the more advanced reader, a helpful and comprehensive bibliography provides many resources for further study. This reviewer was left imagining what the results of a similar study among diaspora Nepalis in Darjeeling, New York or Singapore might reveal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Matras, Y. 2009. *Language contact*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Turin, M. 2019. 'Concluding Thoughts on Language Shift and Linguistic Diversity in the Himalaya: The Case of Nepal.' In *The Politics of Language Contact in the Himalaya*, edited by Selma K. Sonntag and Mark Turin, pp163–76. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers.

AUTHORS

MARK TURIN

Mark Turin is associate professor at the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies and the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. The author or co-author of four books and editor of 12 volumes, Turin has worked in collaborative partnership with Himalayan communities on language and culture documentation projects since the early 1990s.