Simultaneous Identities: Language, education and the Nepali nation, by Uma Pradhan

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As a multilingual and multi-ethnic country undergoing a series of political, social and cultural overhauls over the last decades, Nepal is faced with issues regarding language in education that has always been an area of contention for educators, policymakers, politicians, activists and many other key figures. Because of the symbolic power of language that operates in relation to the politics of identity (individual, ethnic and national) and to capital accumulation in/for the local-global market (Bourdieu 1993), language-in-education policies, practices and discourses have historically played a crucial role in shaping and reshaping the identity and dispositions of ethnolinguistic groups in Nepal. To this end, Uma Pradhan’s seminal book Simultaneous Identity: Language, education and the Nepali nation examines the ‘complex dynamics between education, national identity and ethnic identity in the changing sociopolitical context of Nepal’ (p3). In this book, Pradhan presents an ethnographic analysis of language practices and discourses in two mother tongue schools: a Nepal Bhasa school in Kathmandu and a Dangaura Tharu school in Kapilvastu. An exceptional educational ethnography, the book contains seven chapters dealing with varied issues relating to language, language ideologies, education, ethnic and national identity, state-making, educational quality and equity, and development. It will be of great interest to policymakers, educators, curriculum and textbook designers, and researchers who are
keen to develop their understanding of the issues of language in Nepal’s educational landscape.

The Introduction sets the scene for the reader to understand the central issues the book examines, including the overview of key concepts and frameworks (eg simultaneity), the introduction of research sites and why the author became interested in this topic of mother tongue and education. Chapter 1 (ie Language, Education and State-Making in Nepal) then provides a comprehensive historical account of language-in-education policymaking in the façade of changing political and social terrains of the Nepali state. It carefully presents controversies over the discourses and practices of some key languages (eg Nepali, Hindi, Sanskrit and English) in Nepal’s educational landscape, highlighting the ways in which the state’s agency in creating certain language regimes can create language hierarchy and consequently engender asymmetries between the political power of ethnolinguistic groups. This chapter demonstrates that ‘particular discourses of national unity, belongingness and progress’ have existed across all periods of history that have shaped language-in-education policies (p66).

Chapter 2 on ‘Mother Tongue and the Construction of an Educated Person’ begins with a discussion of what it means to be an ‘educated person’ (padhe lekheko manchhe) in Nepal, which – Pradhan argues – is a construct situated in the ethos of ‘the nation-state, market and other institutions’ (p67). The disposition, knowledge and skills that characterise an ‘educated person’ are defined, so Pradhan contends, through the school’s institutionalisation of nationalism and monolingual ideologies in Nepal. The chapter then contextualises the two schools where the author conducted her ethnographic fieldwork. The first school, located in the Kathmandu Valley, is a private school that uses Nepal Bhasa (a language spoken by the Newar indigenous community as its mother tongue) as a medium of instruction (MOI). The second school is a government school in Kapilvastu in the Tarai, which has adopted Dangaura Tharu (a language of the Tharu indigenous community) as an MOI. As examples of the handful of schools that have embraced mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in Nepal, they showcase how bottom-up language planning with community engagement can promote minoritised languages in education. The author also highlights how the lack of ‘financial support from the state’ (and therefore, I believe, the absence of the state’s and its elite policymakers’ political will to support the MTB-MLE policy [Sah 2021]) has challenged the sustainability of these schools (p91). To keep them running, the former school receives financial support from foreign sponsorships, while the latter is funded by NGOs and INGOs.

On the theme of ‘Language, Public Space and Identity’, Chapter 3 discusses the ways these two schools have regulated minoritised languages on their premises and in public spaces. It demonstrates a context of flexible or spontaneous bilingualism in which students use their mother tongue (eg Nepal Bhasa or Tharu) alongside Nepali. Such hybridity can also be observed in students’ performance of their ethnolinguistic identities by dressing up in traditional attire and presenting cultural arts (eg dance and music) at ethnic festivals, while simultaneously displaying their national identity by carrying the Nepali flag and speaking the Nepali language. Pradhan interprets this process of crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries as ‘becoming multilingual’, which she defines as ‘a dynamic process of achieving different levels of proficiency in different languages’ (p99). The central discussion in this chapter proves to be a
welcome addition to the emerging literature on multilingualism or, as some would prefer to call it, ‘translanguaging’: a flexible use of languages can be ‘used as a strategy for mother tongue education’ (p108). This multilingual/translingual form of language practice is also reported in English as a Medium Instruction (EMI) in classrooms in Nepal (cf Phyak 2018, Sah et al 2022).

Chapter 4 (ie Transforming Language to a Script) addresses the ideological, political and technical processes through which Nepal Bhasa and Tharu textbooks have been developed. Pradhan makes a case for developing textbooks in minoritised languages as ‘asserting the legitimate authenticity’ of these languages in education and as ‘seek[ing] to shift power relations between languages’, as well as between speakers of minoritised ethnolinguistic groups (p116). Doing this will no doubt challenge the linguistic hierarchy in education in which Nepali has always held a dominant position. More importantly, textbooks in minoritised languages present stories pertaining to the struggles and successes of local communities in developing textbooks for mother-tongue education and in getting them approved by the federal government. The analysis in this chapter illustrates how ‘authentic’ and ‘local’ representation and adherence to national curricular guidelines can be key mechanisms for the approval of textbooks.

While dealing with the theme of ‘Language, Education, and Knowledge-Making’ in Chapter 5, Pradhan continues to examine the discourses of textbooks in minoritised languages alongside language use in classroom instruction in order to understand the processes of knowledge-making. The fundamental understanding the chapter foregrounds is how the use of local contents (eg stories, names, contexts and pictures) in multilingual textbooks can increase students’ participation in the classroom discourse and socialisation, and provides teachers with ‘space to use not only the local language but also local contents in their classroom teaching’ (p144). As the chapter further discusses, such textbooks simultaneously affirm Nepali nationalism through the presentation of nationalist content and knowledge, which leads Pradhan to argue that textbooks are often sites of contestation and negotiation between local and national knowledge.

In Chapter 6, Pradhan examines the discourse of ‘Quality, Equity and Language Ideology’ in education to show how the definition of quality education in Nepal ascribes prestige to certain languages. Drawing on the notion of ‘imaginaries of competence’, Pradhan demonstrates the way English-Nepali elite bilingualism has been posited as a marker of quality education, foregrounding a demeaning discourse towards other local and indigenous languages. This goes on to show how the ideology of English-Nepali bilingualism has led to a situation in which, even though the schools legitimated minoritised languages in the educational landscape, this ‘legitimacy was constantly being contested while measuring the quality of education in school’ (p163). Quality of education was mapped out based on the social value attributed to different languages, which – Pradhan argues – results in ‘the speculative evaluation of mother-tongue education as providing low-quality education’ (p184). Therefore, both schools in Pradhan’s study offer additional English language lessons in keeping with the prevailing notions of quality education and in an effort to satisfy parents’ ideological demands. In this chapter, Pradhan readily unsettles broader dominant ideologies and discourses on language demands in education – language being both a subject and a medium of instruction – and the ways they can create unequal educational experiences.
Chapter 7 covers the theme of ‘Ethnicity, Education and Empowerment’ and examines the link between minority language education and employment prospects in reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s thinking tool, ‘linguistic marketplace’. This chapter demonstrates the discourse of profit vs pride in language (in) education: while mother tongues were categorised in the bubble of pride, there was consistent questioning of whether and to what extent mother tongue depositions and skills can accumulate profit. In this chapter, Pradhan walks the reader through a new market (eg FM radio and newspapers) for minority languages, especially for Nepal Bhasa in Kathmandu, indicating the possibility of minority languages accumulating economic benefits. Nevertheless, Pradhan rightly notes that not all minority languages may achieve economic accumulation. Although not explicitly discussed in this chapter, this context suggests a market difference even between minority languages in terms of their commodification which, I believe, can depend on the social class, location and political power of the speakers of those languages. For example, Nepal Bhasa spoken largely by middle-class Newars in Kathmandu provides more possibilities on the linguistic marketplace than Tharu and Awadhi spoken by indigenous Tharus in the rural, far western region of Nepal. Additional research into this aspect might have given further substance to the discussion on minority languages and employment. The chapter nevertheless steers the reader towards the broader market for dominant languages such as Nepali and English, and argues that minority languages may not ensure employability on their own but in combination with Nepali and English. This aligns with current scholarship according to which multilingual competence is sought after on the global job market, not monolingual proficiency (Kubota 2016).

In sum, Pradhan’s book is an excellent addition to the literature on language in education in Nepal, while guiding researchers, educators, curriculum and textbook developers, activists and policymakers to social and semiotic meanings associated with the notions of language, education and the ‘educated person’. More importantly, for me, this book provides ethnographically grounded evidence to support the importance and feasibility of teaching (through) mother tongues and provides an eye-opening moment to those who are cynical of MTB education in Nepal. It is a timely contribution to counter deficit views of minoritised languages, their speakers and their use in education. Finally, more discussion about ‘neoliberalism’ or the discourse of ‘bikas’ (development) – although the Bourdiean concept of the linguistic marketplace has helped to analyse some issues – would have enhanced an already extremely well presented book. Whilst the discourse of neoliberalism in Nepal’s language (in) education policies and practices is being analysed, issues associated with nationalist ideologies should also be discussed since these two discourses are inextricably related, at least, in the context of Nepal (Sah 2021).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Pramod K Sah is a postdoctoral research associate at the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics, The Open University, United Kingdom. His primary research focuses on English as a medium of instruction, language planning and policy, TESOL, language ideology, multilingualism/translingualism and critical sociolinguistics. His published research can be found, for example, in the Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, Asia Pacific Journal of Education, International Multilingual Research Journal, Journal of English-Medium Instruction, Ethnicities, English Teaching & Learning and The Qualitative Report, and in many edited volumes.