

Linguistics and Development In Nepal

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0. Introduction

Man has designed ways where by he can now stand taller than a giraffe, travel faster than a gazelle and tunnel deeper down into the earth than any rodent ¹. This has become possible not because he has grown a longer neck, swifter legs or sharper claws, but because he possesses certain faculties which make him uniquely man. One of these skills is the human language skill as a communications medium. Without the every day use of human language the further development of science and technology as well as the dynamics of routine living would soon grind into one massive deadlock.

This daily use of language is one of man's most valuable possessions because it is his most important communication system. Despite the valuable role it plays in man's affairs, language continues not only to be poorly understood, but basic misconceptions about it abound on every hand - even among well educated people ².

The science of linguistics is the study of human language. Anyone who wishes to know himself and the society in which he functions must acquire to some degree an understanding of this linguistic system that plays such a fundamental part of his daily life. This same truth must also be applied on the national level. No nation can truly understand its socio-cultural foundations without a grasp of its linguistic heritage and character. Linguistic science provides the tools toward acquiring of such knowledge.

The desires for better living conditions, the search for more food to feed the growing masses of people, the need for constantly up-grading the education systems, and the continued quests for strengthening political integrity and stability challenges science and human ingenuity in every nation more today than at any point in history. Leaders of nations are accepting the tools that science offers to grapple with these impending, complex issues. Since interest and progress in linguistic science has grown by leaps and bounds over the past two decades, it is, therefore, only normal to be asked in what ways this nation building and development in general and to Nepal in particular is lending its assistance to the above stated needs and aspirations.

Under the wise and able leadership of His Majesty King Birendra his government and the people of Nepal have initiated many diverse programs of development for the country. These projects are geared to meet the basic socio-economic needs of the country and its development as a modern nation. And underlying all such effort must

be the important apriori foundation strata of careful scientific research to provide scope, rationale, motivations, direction, control and evaluation procedures for development schemes. Such vitally important research can only flourish where the right sympathetic and psychological climate and the physical and financial provisions exist for research. If such are not present, research flounders: and development slows down because the flow of key information is impeded, inspiration begins to wane, ideas shrivel, theories atrophize and momentum desipates.

Realizing these important facts and also believing that the science of linguistics has an important contribution to national progress, former Vice Chancellor of Tribhuvan University, Dr. Trailokya Nath Upraity initiated a joint program with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (an international voluntary agency) to begin a serious research program and to assist in developing linguistic facilities in Nepal. The needs as interpreted by the University were of the following nature: data collecting and processing on the languages of Nepal, publishing information on the findings of such research, assistance in teaching and producing Nepali linguists, and building a linguistic center on the University campus at Kirtipur.

Listed below is a brief projection of ways and means in which linguistics as a science and competent research may contribute to development in Nepal. Following that projection is a summary of linguistic projects accomplished to date and programs envisaged for the future.

I. The Linguistic Configuration of Nepal

Basic to the language picture of Nepal is Sanskrit with its linguistic-cultural heritage extending back in history at least to the Lichhavi period and King Mahadeva's rule (436 A.D.)³. Its significant body of literature and influence has left an indelible mark both on the languages and on the national culture of the country. It is an extraordinary heritage to be cherished, protected and to be kept close to national consciousness for the sake of national cultural homogeneity.

Superimposed on this Sanskrit base in Nepal are languages of at least two of the world's major language families - Sino-Tibetan and Indo-Aryan. Added to these is at least one language of the Dravidian family. Recent studies by SIL scholars confirmed what Dor Bahadur Bista had posited that the Dhangar language is Dravidian⁴. (Use of the term "superimposed" is not meant in a historically-chronological sense but in terms of relationship in scope and depth of influence).

Although national census reports usually give fairly reliable indications of linguistic diversities, they seldom yield the kind

of accurate detail data upon which serious linguistic judgments can be made. Only a thorough linguistic survey done in a systematic way with intelligibility testings between language communities will produce such information. To date, staff linguists have identified approximately forty mutually unintelligible languages still being spoken in Nepal. This inventory does not include many dialects of a plus 75% cognate relationship factor which coexist as satellites around the particular distinct language cores.

This wide disparate array of languages indicates an equally wide diversity of cultures since languages are unique parts of their specific cultures; and these cultures join to form the warp and woof of the country. These diverse languages are an important field of data and largely unmined information needing research to feed into national development input.

II. Some Benefits Gained from Linguistic Research

All scientific theories are constantly being exposed to change and revision as they collide with anomalies, new data and unique circumstances of application and so on. As tools of research in an empirical science such as linguistics, the structuring and revising of theory actually never really ends. Working with live language data challenges previously accepted concepts, sharpens or even in some cases discredits theories; hence constantly stimulating the revisions which in turn produce additional precision and give birth to new thought and concept paradigms. Therefore, the science itself is, perhaps, the first to gain from its own research and refining processes. However, more practical benefits are of the following nature:

a. Provides insights into social structure. Plato sought for what he posited were universals of truth underlying the Greek language⁵. Considering all other languages barbarian and unfit for study, he missed the immense value of cross linguistic-cultural studies which most certainly would have yielded some clues to facts about language universals and to the Greek. His psychological myopia prejudiced him and consequently restricted him from realizing that man, regardless of language or culture, has language as his most valuable possession and as such is a key to understanding man in his own unique cultural-social milieu.

To direct attention only to the main or majority languages invites missing extremely important information in much the same way Plato missed it. Science in principle insists on examining all the data. And the conscience of science cannot nowadays afford to ignore or withhold from its own country and leaders any knowledge where such information can be of practical value toward nation building and progress for its people. Furthermore, there can be no true progress and development without some understanding of a nation's social-cultural structure(s). There can be no

dependable accurate understanding of a nation's basic structures without using the specific language(s) as the medium to the heart of the related culture(s).

To be more specific, consider the following:

1. Information on phenomena surrounding multi-language contact points. Because of the multiplicity of languages and constant demographic shifts in Nepal, people of different languages are thrown into contact in a variety of different ways and on varying levels. A number of questions immediately present themselves for attention: What are the social ramifications at such contact points where two or more languages meet? What levels of social structure are affected and how, to what degree? Which language becomes the dominant one; why? Is it predictable? What parts of the subdominant language group are most easily affected? Is there commensurate change in other aspects of the culture? In what ways is the spreading and learning of the national language affected?

It is in the broad psychological and socio-cultural setting that languages in contact can really best be understood and conditions emerging from such contacts best be evaluated ⁶. Research into this phenomena is possible only through and in the respective languages in contact; any other medium is unreliable, yielding only suspect data.

2. Insights into the aspects of language and culture change. The inductive methods of research in science where arguments are derived from observed facts and built into theories which in turn are subjected again and again to experiment apparently had their beginnings with Hobb's doctrine of "cause and effect" where he insisted that if certain laws such as Newton's laws of motion are true, then all inherent consequences can be logically and mathematically deduced ⁷. Hence any processes of discovery in nature and life processes had to be an act of supposition, assuming that the course of nature pretty well follows a uniform pattern into the future. And this carries over into language research too.

Languages are part of the on-going natural life processes. Languages and cultures change constantly as they move in the time spectrum because man changes. He is continually becoming a different person for his daily experiences always vary as part of the dynamic natural life processes. Social conditions change, contacts between classes of people shift and races touch and go. Ideas, concepts, opinions are traded, shared and sold. And with language change comes cultural change. It usually involves not only new elements added but also elimination of previous existing elements and modifications and reorganization of other aspects of the culture.

Labov gives clues to what may initiate such change: "the underlying initiation of change may be simply in one or more words

in a speech event between two people or it may be broader. They may be induced by processes of assimilation, differentiation, analogy, borrowings, fusion, random variations and so on". Labov has also proven that social factors have a direct bearing on linguistic change which was discovered through linguistic evidence⁸.

For government planners, education officials and official administrators such insights and gathering of information can be of great value in policy formation and administration. It is important that attention be paid to the agents and processes of change phenomena and medium for eliciting data needed on change agents, processes and results.

3. Insights into inter-cultural communication systems. How is new information accepted, processed, conveyed and retained in a given culture? How is old information used? How is evidence gathered, weighed, and how are verdicts formed and solutions found? What part, if any, do special stylistic features of language play in successful communications within households, extended family groups, within the village, the panchayat, the District and Zone in Nepal?

Language style is influenced by cultural factors and affects choice of vocabulary, the degree to which classical words or more colloquial ones are used. Some speech must be tailored toward more vagueness to achieve culturally demanded courtesies, while other needs to be blunt and forceful. Hence knowledge of this part of language is also extremely useful.

b. Helps formulate appreciation for the historical background of the nation. Man's personality is the combination of his biological heritage, physical environment and cultural conditioning. His ideologies grow from these combined forces to form the nation state. The nation state creates the spirit of nationalism and belonging to a defined socio-political structural unit. His government provides a canopy and climate for him within which he can live and function⁹. Man talks and communicates his experiences, thoughts, hopes, fears and allegiances within this national matrix. He transmits his accumulated knowledge to his children by means of oral sounds, Others listen and comprehend and respond in various ways to the speech-event stimuli.

In development of countries like Nepal with widely disparate languages many people tend to feel that political and economic questions are the basic ones to be asked. Linguistic-cultural questions are of equal importance¹⁰. Historically, the cultural unity of many nations has been superimposed by political fusion of disparate language groups into one nation state. To achieve a sense of cultural homogeneity and a common sense of national identity and to keep that sense alive and fruitful remains a viable political challenge to leaders and administrators alike in such situations.

Linguistic research can assist in producing national homogeneity and the common sense of belonging by providing in-depth information and understanding of basic behavioural aspects of the disparate language groups which information in turn can be transmitted into the practical functions of empathy, understanding, and caution needed by administrators serving in areas populated by diverse or minority cultures.

c. Helps to provide for the purposes of both formal and informal education, formulation of the historic cultural, substance of a country. Many nations have done excellent, thorough, systematic research into this area of the history of their countries. The Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City is a superb example. It contains a detailed display of the country's diverse cultural heritage. However, this information has not just remained behind the walls of the exhibitions. The government has included it in the general educational text and reference materials of the schools to raise interest and to stimulate pride for their heritage and thus further cement the bonds of national unity. This consciousness of belonging to a past with its greatness has become a strong integrating force of Mexico as well as has been done by nations like Peru, the Philippines, Indonesia, etc.

d. Helps define language-culture boundaries. Dialect and language atlases can be a very helpful tool in the hands of government planners and administrators. In a sense every word, like every social convention or cultural artifact, has its own history. In a broader sense, then, languages have their own history, character and unique features. These are most evident at their language area core. Unfortunately language areas have peripheries where they have been exposed to erosion at contact points with other languages and dialects. Hence language and dialect boundaries are seldom sharply definable.

In Nepal this is no exception. Language research, of course, is the key to solving this linguistic-boundary puzzle. And a survey of the kind needed to produce a reliable atlas will take years of data collecting and processing. Realizing this, the language committee of the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies presented a detailed plan to the University administration for initiating such a comprehensive survey.

e. Helps Preserve Language-Cultural Data. In many nations today the fast pace of modernization is burying immense quantities of important artifacts of language and culture which are then lost forever to posterity. As national languages spread knowledge of local languages and dialects are lost, folk lore is forgotten, and local customs die. Realizing that there is nothing that will so readily give unity to divergent peoples as a common language, the importance of the role of the national language is not here being minimized. Rather the need for retaining information about languages and culture being phased out because of the modernizing and

developing processes is pointed out and emphasized. Once lost, such important information is no longer retrievable, leaving a great void in the history of a nation! Linguistic research and archiving can serve this need.

f. Provides means for strengthening national integration and education. Chomsky states that: "one goal of education must be to enable the student to develop his capacity for creative use of languages as part of successful adaptation of themselves and their communities in the continuously changing circumstances and characteristics of contemporary life. Linguistics must address itself to that goal" 11. Nationalism is nurtured and perpetuated through indoctrination by various social and religious institutions within the society and by the schools. Nationalism also provides a good part of the drive and motivation behind creativity of the people within a given society.

By giving opportunity for a beginning reader to learn to read through the medium of his own language first, where such materials are available; his own mother tongue can then be used creatively to shift more quickly and more easily into the national language when he has achieved functional literacy skills. This does not necessarily perpetuate his own language in competition with the national language, but rather makes transition into learning the national language easier and provides a consequent deeper and quicker appreciation for the national language and for learning to read materials in that language. The end results naturally are better integration and provision for the combined forces of local creativeness and nationalism to assert themselves in fruitfully acceptable ways.

Linguistics research can assist this aspect of development by accepting the challenge for basic analysis of the various languages, reducing the sound systems to practical orthographies designed to fit into the devanagri system and provide sketches of the respective grammars and syntaxes for the elementary primer readers needed in diglot form to transfer to the national language.

Townsend 12 has written a detailed study of the success of such a program in the Caucasus where the Russian government came to grips with the problems of bilingualism as a tool for national integration of its disparate language groups. Many other countries have and are using bilingual education approaches effectively in this way.

g. Miscellaneous practical benefits. How does man's mind function that enables him to accumulate and store information and organize experiences and thoughts into communicable form? We do not understand what is at the root of this skill, but we do know, as mentioned previously, of the vital importance of this ability in the affairs of every day life. Hence the practical rewards gained

from linguistic research are many. In addition to those already described above, the following are also worth nothing as benefactors:

- developing and up-grading teaching of reading techniques
- speech pathology
- second language teaching
- dictionary projects
- speech and drama in the performing arts
- enriching the national language vocabulary
- comparative historical studies
- developing pedagogical and instructional materials
- advertizing and information services, both government and private.

III. Linguistic Projects and Programs Accomplished and in Process

Research work on the following languages and projects has been done by SIL and other scholars at the Linguistics Center on the Kirtipur Campus:

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| 1. Nepali | 13. Khaling (Rai) |
| 2. Newari | 14. Kham |
| 3. Gurung | 15. Dhaangar |
| 4. Sherpa | 16. Chepang |
| 5. Magar | 17. Limbu |
| 6. Maithili | 18. Chitwan-Tharu |
| 7. Bhojpur | 19. Kusunda |
| 8. Thakali | 20. Thulung (Rai) |
| 9. Ghale | 21. Kulung (Rai) |
| 10. Kaike | 22. Darai |
| 11. Jirel | 23. Kagate |
| 12. Tamang | 24. Sunwar |

In most of the above languages phonemic summaries have been done on the sound systems, vocabulary lists compiled on a standard model for comparative uses, and various studies done on grammar and syntax have begun. The technical write-ups on these languages have been submitted to the central library of the university as well as the library and documentation center of the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies. Scholars working on six Indian languages also benefited from the services of the SIL consultants and services at the Center.

The following projects were also completed under the auspices of the university:

1. Cantro-metrics Project, Columbia University, U.S.A. Recorded materials from the Sherpa, Bhojpuri and Tharu languages were specially prepared for use by scientists of the Bureau of Applied Social Research in studies on conversation styles in human communication.
2. IBM Computer Concordances. To date computer concordances in twelve languages of Nepal have been completed at the University of Oklahoma. These IBM concordances consist of approximately 1800 pages of output double quarto size paper of each language. Every word and meaning bit from a 200,000 word corpus of text is isolated, alphabetized and counted. These concordances are invaluable research materials for linguists of the future. These have been submitted to the central university library archives.
3. Haskins Laboratory Project. Special tape recorded material was prepared for the Haskins Laboratory, U.S.A. for spectrographic analysis of stress in Newari.
4. Conversational Nepali Course. A Nepali course, along with recorded tapes was prepared for foreigners wishing to learn Nepali. At the request of the Japan-Nepal Friendship Society one of the SIL scholars translated and prepared the course in Japanese. To date around 1,000 copies of the Nepali (English) course have been sold.
5. Conversational Newari Course. A Newari course has also been prepared and limited numbers of the course have been sold to foreign scholars interested in Newari.
6. Comprehensive Bibliographic Index of the Lesser Known Languages of India and Nepal. This bibliographic information has been compiled into one volume for easy reference and made available to scholars in Nepal and elsewhere.
7. Microfiche Reader. A reader and the beginning of a card inventory has been donated to the central library for use as materials become available.

8. Linguistics Books and Journals. Over 200 linguistics and related reference books and journals have been donated to the university to up-grade the material on linguistics for local linguistic scholars.
9. Printing Press. A modern offset printing plant has been donated and set up at the Linguistic Center to publish linguistic materials as needed.
10. Linguistic Center. Buildings have been constructed and landscaping carried out on a plot of ground adjacent to the Institute of Education, providing for residences, offices, library, seminar-lecture facilities and for the University Press.
11. Nepali Linguists. Under Dr. Prayag Raj Sharma's stimulus a joint program with the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies has been initiated in linguistics instruction to selected Institute scholars. In addition the Summer Institute of Linguistics has brought to the campus competent visiting scholars to lecture and hold seminars for program enrichment and academic stimulation.
12. Consultation Services. Staff linguists under Dr. Austin Hale have had a wide range of opportunities to serve visiting scholars from many countries who have passed through Kathmandu and wanted information on languages of Nepal. This has provided for good public relations and opportunities for exposure of Nepal's rich linguistic and cultural heritage abroad in academic circles.

IV. Linguistics Projects Planned for the Future.

SIL is prepared to continue serving as requested and needed in research, academic stimulation and instruction and language research. The following is a summary of plans for the immediate future.

1. Language Research. Continue studies on the syntax and grammar of most of the languages cited above. Hardly any work has been done in semantics; so research will begin in that area of linguistics.
2. Dictionaries. Closely related to the semantic research in reference above are glossary-dictionary projects. Considerable effort needs to be made in producing triglot formats: local language - Nepali-English, to give maximum usefulness to local and international scholars.

3. Linguistic Survey. In Chaitra 2029 (April 1973) a joint agreement between the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies and the Summer Institute of Linguistics was signed in which the first steps toward a comprehensive linguistic survey of Nepal was formulated. Nepali students under the INAS auspices in training now are being prepared to take on active roles in this project. It is hoped that eventually an official report can be published under Nepali linguistic editorship similar to, but much more comprehensive, than the Grearson Report of Indian languages.
4. Printing Facilities. To date the University Press does not have adequate right hand justification and devanagri offset printing facilities. Efforts are being made to incorporate these into our services soon.
5. IBM Computer Concordances. Every effort is being made to provide concordances for each language studied during the SIL contract tenure.
6. Recorded Language Material. Programmed efforts are being made to submit tapes of recorded language materials to the archives of the INAS. In the event where languages die out completely in the years to come, tapes of those languages as they were spoken will then be available to interested historians and scholars of the future.
7. Microfilming Equipment. Tentative plans are being made to install microfilming equipment for the university at the request of the Rector's office. Such equipment is badly needed and will provide valuable documentation and information storage services.

V. Conclusion

The linguistic work in Nepal has been and continues to be both challenging and stimulating. Thorough, respectable research in languages in which no scientific studies have previously been done is very time consuming and, hence, no short term program. Gathering reliable language data at its primary sources in linguistics often means collecting that data right in the actual communities where those languages still function as a viable part of the cultural dynamics. This takes much work and accounts for a good part of time spent on specific projects.

This exposure to the various minority cultures and the anticipated much larger involvement of Nepali scholars as they develop and carry on the linguistic labors in Nepal will be among our chief rewards for SIL involvement and service in this country. And it is our firm belief that, if carried out well, the years to come will bear ample evidence that linguistics research has contributed to development in Nepal.

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