

BEGINNING TO READ NEPALI: MERO NEPĀLĪ KITĀBA AS A TEXTBOOK

Ramawatar Yadav

Background

mero nepālī kitāba (henceforth MNK) is a textbook for Grade 1 written by Divakar Dhungel and published by MOEC: CTSDC/BPEP Primary Curriculum and Textbook Development Unit in 2049 v.s. Printed at the Janak Educational Materials Centre, Sanothimi, MNK contains a total of 39 lessons and 56 exercises, and it is heavily illustrated. A *Teacher's Guide*, henceforth *TG*, (MOECSW: CTSDC/BPEP Primary Curriculum and Textbook Development Unit, 2049 v.s.) is also prepared to aid the teachers of Nepali to use MNK effectively.

MNK, we are told in the foreword, is prepared after three full years of preparation and extensive consultation with hundreds of teachers, parents, headmasters, educationists, resource persons, linguists, and Nepali experts (p. 3). It is therefore appropriate to look closely into the contents of MNK.

According to the preface, the objective of MNK is to teach such linguistic skills as listening, speaking, reading, and writing to grade 1 learners of Nepali (p. 4). Closer scrutiny reveals that the great majority of lessons are devoted to teaching writing and reading and only a few to listening and speaking.

Imperfections of MNK

MNK is replete with imperfections; only prominent ones will be mentioned here.

Lack of fit between Curriculum and MNK

A grievous imperfection of MNK is the gross lack of fit between the curricular goals set in the Grade 1 Nepali Curriculum (printed on pp. 6-8 in *TG*) and the MNK as a prescribed textbook. A few examples are cited below for illustration.

The Curriculum states that the case markers ले 'Nominative/Instrumental', लाई 'Accusative-Dative', मा 'Locative' and बाट 'Ablative' will be taught to Grade 1 learners of Nepali. However, Lessons 21 and 22 teach such possessive forms as उसका 'he-Possessive' (p. 64), हाँसका 'duck-Possessive' (p. 64), पाँधेराको 'tap-Possessive' (p. 64), and गङ्गाको 'Ganga-Possessive' (p. 67); Lesson 28 and the accompanying Exercise (pp. 82-83) also teach a

number of pronominal possessive forms such as मेरो/मेरा 'I-Possessive', तिम्रो/तिम्रा 'You (Mid Honorific)-Possessive' and हाम्रा 'We-Possessive'.

The Curriculum states that the personal pronouns म 'I', तिम्री 'You (Mid Honorific)', हामी 'We', तपाईं 'You (Honorific)' and the interrogative pronouns को 'who', कुन 'which', के 'what', and किन 'why' will be taught to Grade 1 Nepali learners. But, the third person pronouns ऊ 'he', उनीहरू 'they' (pp. 84-85) and the second person pronoun तँ 'You (Nonhonorific)' (p. 84); and the interrogative pronouns कसरी 'how' (pp. 92, 94) कति 'how much/how many' (pp. 98, 99), कस्तो 'of what type' (p. 105), and कहाँ 'where' (p. 105) also form the subject matter of *MNK*.

The Curriculum states that under Tense सामान्य वर्तमान 'simple present' and सामान्य भूत 'simple past' tenses will be taught to first graders. On p. 90, however, a complex tense form expressing indefinite mood is introduced, e.g., गन्यो होला 'will/may have done'. The expression is a rather complex conjunct verb construction: विचार गन्यो होला 'will/may have thought over'. Similarly, on p. 96 the present continuous tense verb forms, e.g., फुलि रहेको छ 'is blossoming', किनि रहेको छ 'is buying' etc. are also introduced into the text.

The Curriculum states that the negative marker होइन 'is-Neg' will be taught to Grade 1 pupils of Nepali. On p. 18, however, the stylistically variant negative marker हैन 'is-Neg' is also introduced.

Finally, the Curriculum states that the first grade pupils will be taught to read, write and understand simple sentences in Nepali. However, on p. 80, a number of complex adverbial subordinate clauses using perfective/absolute particles are used, e.g. कट्टु गन्जी लगाई बच्चाले बट्टा गुडाए 'Having worn the shorts and vest, the child rolled the box'; ढक्की बोकी बच्चो गयो 'Having carried the basket, the little child went'; बूढो मान्छेले लट्ठी टेक्दै डाक्टरलाई बोलाए 'Having held a walking stick, the old man called a doctor'. Other examples also exist: मूला खाई मूढामा बस 'Having eaten the radish, sit on the stool' (p. 49); केरा लिई खेतमा जाओ 'Having carried the bananas, go to the field' (p. 52).

Vocabulary

Textbook writing is a difficult job, and it requires professional skill and acumen. Textbook writing also entails a thorough linguistic research in the area of vocabulary frequency count. Without such a count, it may not be easy to specifically determine the exact content of the teaching materials, and the well-known principles of selection, gradation and presentation may not be adhered to. Exactly how important the study of word frequency might turn out to be is evident from a gleaning of Lesson 1 (p. 7) and Exercise 2 (p. 33) of *MNK*. The first lesson of *MNK*, a textbook meant to be used all over the country by non-Nepali speaking children alike, contains such infrequently

used lexical items as अगुल्टो 'burning log', and उछिट्याउँ 'to flick away'. Exercise 2 (p. 33) of *MNK* uses such lexical items as कत्र (whatever it may mean!), पत्र (a *tatsama* word meaning 'letter') and सत्र (since when did number 'seventeen' become a lucky number in Nepal?). As a matter of fact, the very first vocabulary item in Exercise 1 (p. 33) is कर 'hand': are we to assume then that कर is the most frequently used word in the Nepali language?

The quality of *MNK* as a textbook is gravely marred by the use of a number of stylistic and dialectal/sociolectal/idiolectal variants, e.g., आऊ (p. 43), आ (p. 46), and आओ (p. 52) – all meaning 'come-Imperative-Nonhonorific', and जाऊ (p. 52) and, जाओ (p. 52) – meaning 'go-Imperative-Nonhonorific'. A more precocious child, on the basis of analogy, may come up with देओ (for देऊ) 'give-Imperative-Nonhonorific' – a form which is not used in *MNK*. A more confusing example is छन् 'is' which is used both as a third person present tense singular/respectual as well as a third person present tense plural/respectual marker, e.g., राम घरमा छन् (p. 86) 'Ram (Singular-Honorific) is inside the house' and उनीहरू घरमा छन् (p. 84) 'They (Plural-Honorific) are inside the house'. The confusion is further confounded when the young reader is confronted with बकुल्ला and बकुल्लो 'crane' (p. 77) and बिराला and बिरालो 'cat' (p. 110) in the very same lessons. Apparently, there is a linguistic reason for this confusion. In Nepali there is a rule whereby a number of canonical forms ending in ° undergo a morphophonemic alternation of the type $o \rightarrow \bar{a}$ upon addition of case morphemes and postpositions. For example:

- andho 'blind', but andhā-le 'blind-Nom' (p. 77)
- andho 'blind', but andhā-lāi 'blind-Acc/Dat' (p. 77)
- kamilo 'ant', but kamilā-lāi 'ant-Acc/Dat' (p. 58)
- bakullo 'crane', but bakullā-le 'crane-Nom' (p. 77)
- cucco 'beak', but cuccā-le 'beak-Instr' (pp. 76-77)
- dulo 'hole', but dulā-bhitra 'hole-inside (Loc)' (p. 110)
- bacco 'child', but baccā-kā 'child-Poss' (p. 77)

On the other hand, the canonical form *phucco* 'child' undergoes a morphophonemic alternation of the type $o \rightarrow e$ upon addition of case morphemes, e.g.

- phucco, 'child' but phucce-le 'child-Nom' (pp. 76-77)
- phucco 'child', but phucce-lāi 'child-Acc/Dat' (pp. 76-77)
- phucco 'child', but phucce-ko 'child-Poss' (pp. 76-77)

It is unfortunate that *MNK* attempts to teach both types of complex morphophonemic alternation rules to first graders in one and the same lesson

(Lesson 26; pp. 76-77). It would have paid the author had he made a judicious selection of the more frequent and appropriate vocabulary in *MNK* and graded them in such a manner that the stylistically variant as well as complex forms may be introduced in higher grades.

Spelling

A major thrust of *MNK* is to teach the young pupil to write Nepali in a correct manner. Unfortunately, *MNK* tends to employ a rather inconsistent spelling system and causes unwarranted grief and consternation to the first grader. *TG* offers no relief either. For example, in an effort to teach how to write clusters, *MNK* recommends to omit the vertical bar of the first letter of a two-letter cluster, e.g. ऋ + ण् + डा = ऋण्डा (pp. 68, 72) 'flag' (also written as ऋन्डा on p. 11) and ग + न् + जी = गन्जी (p. 66) 'vest'. The letter containing no vertical bar is combined with the following letter to form a two-letter cluster in the following manner:

- ब + ट् + टा = बट्टा 'box' (p. 79)
क + ट् + टु = कट्टु 'shorts' (p. 79)
ल + ट् + ठी = लट्ठी 'a walking stick' (p. 79)

Immediately after, on p. 80, the same lesson (i.e., Lesson 27) also teaches to write बट्टा as बट्टा and लट्ठी as लट्टी.

The words containing -kk- and -kṭ- clusters are written in the following manner:

- हु + क् + का = हुक्का 'hookah' (p. 79)
ढ + क् + की = ढक्की 'basket' (p. 79)
डा + क् + टर = डाक्टर 'doctor' (p. 79)

However, *TG* teaches to represent these very same clusters as हुक्का and ढक्की (p. 126); both *MNK* and *TG* allow कट्टु to be written as कट्टु. In other words, the second consonant-letter is allowed to be represented underneath the first consonant-letter in the above examples. Under the circumstances, isn't it likely that a more precocious child, upon the basis of analogy, may tend to write डाक्टर 'doctor' as डाक्कुर? I presume that probably only a homorganic consonant-letter is allowed to be represented underneath the preceding consonant-letter in Nepali, but it is not quite clear.

Inconsistencies in the spelling system persists: whereas the -ng - cluster is represented as गङ्गा 'Ganga' and चङ्गा 'kite' (p. 67) in *MNK*, both *MNK* and *TG* tend to represent the very same cluster as सँग 'with' (p. 38 and p. 128, respectively) and not as सङ्ग.

A more curious example is the representation of the back rounded vowels following a consonant in Nepali. In sharp contradistinction with the

prevailing practice in other Indo-Aryan Languages using Devanagari, *MNK* observes a peculiar practice of the type shown below:

- कुकुर 'dog' (p. 45)
- कुखुरा 'cock' (p. 45)
- फुल 'egg' (p. 46)
- फूल 'flower' (p. 48)
- पुतली 'butterfly' (p. 45)
- मूला 'radish' (p. 48)
- धूप 'incense' (p. 49)
- बूढा 'old man' (p. 49)
- पूजा 'worship' (p. 49)

The above examples clearly demonstrate that while the back rounded vowels are represented under the vertical bar of the consonant-letter in खु, पु, मू, धू, बू, and पू, they are not done so in कु, फु, and फू. Instead, they are represented underneath the tail-like part following the vertical bar of the consonant-letter. Such a practice confuses the young learner and renders the writing system of Nepali less practical and even less scientific.

Presentation

In general, the material is well-presented in *MNK*; a veritable feature of the textbook is that it is amply illustrated. A number of lapses remain, however. To cite a glaring example, the language of command used in most Exercises of *MNK* is vague. The command given is: मिलने शब्द कापीमा लेख 'Write down the matching word in answer-copy'. The command, however, should read: चित्र हेर। चित्र संग मिलने शब्द कापीमा लेख। 'Look at the picture. Write down the word that matches with the picture in answer-copy'. This lapse occurs throughout *MNK* (pp. 33, 34, 37, 41, 44, 47, 50, 53, 56, 59, 62, 68, 70, 78, 81, 85), and it diminishes the pedagogic value of an otherwise well-written text.

Summing Up

To sum up, *MNK* may be a suitable textbook for Nepali-speaking pupils of Grade 1; for non-Nepali-speaking pupils, however, *MNK* may turn out to be an inept specimen of a textbook. Rather than lessen the existing high rate of educational wastage and attrition in primary education in Nepal, *MNK* may continue to contribute to it.