

## RESEARCH NOTE

# A TYPOLOGICAL COMPARISON OF NEPALI AND JAPANESE

Sueyoshi Toba

### Introduction

The kingdom of Nepal is situated very far from Japan, yet some aspects of culture share common features. Similarity is found even in language. If languages have something in common because of geographical proximity, it is understandable, but one wonders why these two which are so far apart areawise have such similarity. Is it just coincidence?

When a Japanese learns Nepali, s/he finds it easier to master it than English, perhaps due to similar syntactic structure. In this paper we will look at some of the similarities in the two languages on the clause and phrase levels.

### Clause Level

**Structure of the Clause:** The clause is a grammatical unit usually consisting of constituents such as subject, object and verb. The order of the major constituents differs from language to language.

The order of constituents of the clause is one of the most important word-order typological parameters. The parameter characterizes the relative order of subject (S), object (O), and verb (V), giving rise to six logically possible types, namely:

1. SOV (found in Japanese, Turkish)
2. SVO (English, French, Chinese)
3. VSO (Welsh, Biblical Hebrew)
4. VOS (Malagasy)
5. OVS (Hirakanya in Brazil)
6. OSV (not found yet)

Among the six types, Nepali is an example of the first type, i.e. SOV:<sup>1</sup>, it can also be described as a verb-final language. If there are only S and V in a clause, the S always comes before the V. Japanese works exactly

the same:<sup>2</sup>. Consider the following examples (Part (a) of the example is in Nepali, and part (b) in Japanese.)

- 1) a. Aamaa            aayo  
      S: mother V: came  
      b. Naha-ga        kita  
          S: mother-sub.mk. V: came  
          'Mother came.'

When all three constituents are present, the order is SOV.

- 2) a. Pitaa-le            bhaat            khaanubhayo  
      S: father-ag.mk. O: rice            V: ate  
      b. cici-wa            gohan-wo        tabemasita  
          S: father-ag.mk. O: rice-ob.mk. V: ate  
          'Father had his rice.'

In both languages the subject can be deleted when it is a pronoun, as it is clear from the verb morphology or context of the clause who the subject is. In some cases both the subject and the object can be deleted, leaving only the verb in the clause, for example in answer to a question like:

- 3) a. Khaana            khaanubho?    khaae.  
      O: food            V: ate            (I) ate.  
      b. Gohan-wo        kabemasitaka? tabeta.  
          O: food-ob.mk V: ate            ate  
          'Did (you) eat? Yes, I did.'

In the above example the answer could also have been simply, 'āā' (Nepali) or 'hai' (Japanese) as an affirmative response to the question.

Objective complements have the same position as that of a simple nominal object, as in examples 4 and 5:

- 4) a. raaj-le            katha            bhanyo  
      S: Raj-ag.mk. O: story            V: told  
      'Raj told a story.'  
      b. taro-wa            monogatari-o    hanasita  
          S: Taro-ag.mk O: story            V: told  
          'Taro told a story.'

- 5) a. raaj-le        sitaa-le        ghar banaayo    bhanera    bhanyo  
       Raj-ag.mk.   Sita-ag.mk.   house built    saying said  
       Or: raaj-le   sitaa-le        ghar    banaayo    bhanyo  
       Raj-ag.mk.   Sita-ag.mk.   house built    said  
       'Raj said that Sita built a house.'
- b. taro-wa    jiro-ga<sup>3</sup>        ie-wo        tateta to        itta  
       Taro-ag.mk.   Jiro-ag.mk.   house-ob.mk.   built that    said  
       'Taro said that Jiro built a house.'

In Example 5 we find a grammatical difference between Nepali and Japanese, namely that in Japanese sentence 'to' is obligatory while in Nepali 'bhanera' is optional and is often deleted.

### Case Markers

**Agentive Case Markers:** In both Nepali and Japanese, the agent of a transitive clause is marked when the verb is in the perfective aspect or past tense. The agentive case marker follows the agent.

- 6) a. raam-le        bhaat khaayo  
       Ram-ag.mk.   rice    ate  
       'Ram ate rice.'
- b. taro-wa        gohan-wo    tabeta  
       Taro-ag.mk.   rice-ob.mk.   ate  
       'Taro ate rice.'

Regarding case marking, Japanese differs from Nepali in that in Japanese intransitive subjects are also marked. The subject marker for an intransitive clause is the same as the agent marker for a transitive clause.

- 7) taro-wa        ie-ni        imasu  
       Taro-sub.mk.   house-in    is  
       'Taro is in the house.'

**Object Case Markers:** In Nepali, the object takes '-laai' if it is animate, otherwise it does not, while in Japanese the object takes a marker regardless of animity. This is another difference between the two languages, so a Nepali learning Japanese has to be aware of the fact that the object marker '-wo' should always be added to the object.<sup>4</sup>

### The Noun Phrase

**Modifiers Preceding the Noun:** In both Japanese and Nepali nominal phrases, modifiers such as adjectives, demonstratives, numerals, genitives, and embedded clauses come before the noun they modify. For Example:

#### Adjectives:

- |       |        |           |    |        |           |
|-------|--------|-----------|----|--------|-----------|
| 8) a. | seto   | parbat    | b. | siroi  | yama      |
|       | white  | mountain  |    | white  | mountain  |
|       | 'White | mountain' |    | 'White | mountain' |

#### Demonstratives:

- |       |      |         |    |            |      |
|-------|------|---------|----|------------|------|
| 9) a. | tyo  | maanche | b. | sono       | hito |
|       | that | man     |    | that       | man  |
|       |      |         |    | 'That man' |      |

#### Numerals:

- |        |      |        |    |      |      |
|--------|------|--------|----|------|------|
| 10) a. | das  | paisaa | b. | jyu  | yen  |
|        | ten  | pice   |    | ten  | yen  |
|        | 'Ten | pice'  |    | 'Ten | yen' |

When adjectives, demonstratives and numerals are all present, the order is as follows: demonstratives first, numerals second and adjectives third.

- |        |                          |         |        |           |
|--------|--------------------------|---------|--------|-----------|
| 11) a. | ti                       | caar    | thulo  | ghar-haru |
|        | those                    | four    | big    | house-s   |
| b.     | korera                   | yottuno | ookina | ie        |
|        | those                    | four    | big    | house     |
|        | 'Those four big houses.' |         |        |           |

#### Genitives:

- |        |                  |       |
|--------|------------------|-------|
| 12) a. | nepaal-ko        | ghar  |
|        | Nepal-of         | house |
| b.     | neparu-no        | ie    |
|        | Nepal-of         | house |
|        | 'House of Nepal' |       |

Multiple genitive noun phrases are also common in both languages:

- |        |   |           |          |        |
|--------|---|-----------|----------|--------|
| 13) a. | nepaal-ko                               | raajaa-ko | ghar-ko  | dhokaa |
|        | Nepal-of                                | king-of   | house-of | gate   |
| b.     | neparu-no                               | oo-no     | ie-no    | mon    |
|        | Nepal-of                                | king-of   | house-of | gate   |
|        | 'the gate of the king of Nepal's house' |           |          |        |



two languages. This similarity helps the Japanese to learn Nepali faster; likewise, it enables the Nepalese to pick up Japanese easily.

### Notes

1. Pradhan (1982) presents word order structure in Nepali. In my paper only basic word order is discussed, thus topicalization or emphatic word order variants are not included.
2. Hale (1982) states, "The order OV is ... a pattern which typifies not only the Dravidian and Indo- Aryan languages of South Asia, but also the Tibeto-Burman.... There is a large area including a block of languages extending to the Hamitic and Semitic languages of Ethiopia ... and to Korean, Japanese." (p. 57).
3. In Japanese, "-wa" and "-ga", though both labeled as agent marker have separate functions in discourse.
4. Modern conversational Japanese sometimes deletes '-wo'.

### References

- Comrie, Bernard. 1981. *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hale, Austin. 1983. *Research on Tibeto-Burman Language*. (Trends in Linguistics, State-of-the-Arts Reports 14). Amsterdam: Mouton.
- Pradhan, Kishnal Lall Bhai. 1982. 'The Structure of the Simple Clause in Nepali'. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin.
- Toba, Sueyoshi. 1988. 'Jaapanma Nepalii Bhaasaa ra Saahityako Adhyayan'. *Gorkhapatra*, Push 25, 2044, p.5.