

Book Reviews

Selma K. Sonntag and Mark Turin, eds. 2019. *The Politics of Language Contact in the Himalaya*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

A diverse range of state and sub-state language policies interacting with various community and market forces mean that the Himalayan region is fertile land for language contact. However, there are few academic publications that tackle the complex language politics of the region. *The Politics of Language Contact in the Himalaya*, edited by Selma K. Sonntag and Mark Turin, is a book on the interdisciplinary topic of language politics—mainly in the sense of “politics of language” and also in the sense of “language of politics”—of some selected parts of the region. Politics of language is the study of policy issues related to language in the fields of language policy planning (LPP) and political science. Language of politics refers to the use of words and structures of language to frame political (in this context, linguistic) issues, studied in critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, as well as political science. The book contains five articles based on field studies and secondary sources on each language discussed, as well as an introduction and a conclusion chapter. The chapters (some under single authorship and others under multiple authorship) have been written by eight scholars from varied scholarly backgrounds including political science, anthropology, linguistics and geography.

The articles in this book present an analysis of language politics where different languages, different varieties and/or modes of languages meet. Language contact leads to language shift and ultimately to language loss. During the process, various factors interact and politics come to the forefront in the form of language policies, language movements, formalization and standardization processes, language choices, establishment of language hierarchy and hegemony, spatial mobility of users of the language, influences from modernity, etc. The articles present case studies on five Himalayan languages—Kaiké and Tharu from Nepal, rTa’u and Chone from the Tibetan cultural region of China, and Ahom from Assam, India. The articles present detailed historical and contextual backgrounds and look into the cases

following certain theoretical concepts. Thus, the editors of the volume claim that these articles are “historically grounded and theoretically informed” (p. xi). The articles explore the dynamics of contact between the languages at various levels of hierarchy which is built upon bases such as: a) number of speakers—majority and minority languages; b) support from the state—supported by central/provincial/local or all government or not supported by any of them; c) socio-cultural power—with more or less or no social/cultural power; d) domains of use—administration, education, media, home, ritual performance and written or oral domains; e) resources available—on various genres and forms; f) speakers’ attitude—how the speakers of the language think about their mother tongue in comparison to other languages; etc.

In the first chapter, Tunzhi (Sonam Lhundrop), Hiroyuki Suzuki and Gerald Roche explore vertical language contact through the theoretical concept of “recognition,” mainly collective recognition, of rTa’u speaking Horpa in their article “Language Contact and the Politics of Recognition amongst Tibetans in China: The rTa’u-speaking ‘Horpa’ of Khams.” The authors present the case of rTa’u language spoken by Horpa people within the Khams cultural region of Tibet which comes under dKar mdzes prefecture in Sichuan province of China. They conclude that the language is misrecognized because of two reasons: (a) it is difficult to link the polysemous term “Horpa” to a certain group of people residing in Tibet today because it referred to different groups of people at different points in history; and (b) it is supposed to be a dialect of Tibetan though there is a weak voice for the distinct identity of the language.

The article explores the meanings of “Horpa” in different contexts—in historical and contemporary literature, in different spaces, in different periods of history, in different communities—as the misrecognition is supported by academics through interpreting the term Horpa as a Tibetan subgroup of people. It also explores the misrecognition that the authors argue has been supported by two recent language movements—one, an informal pure father tongue movement that has spread through social media, literary creations and word of mouth that supports the use of pure standard Tibetan; and two, neologisms, a grassroots literacy movement run by monasteries for the preservation of Buddhist culture and tradition.

In the second chapter titled “What Happened to the Ahom Language? The politics of language contact in Assam,” Selma K. Sonntag presents a reconstruction of the Ahom polity based on historical written documents.

The article explores the language contact situation in pre-colonial Assam, discussing how the Ahom people entered present Assam as warriors and established their kingdom which became the power center of the mandala states around it. It details how the language of the state—a Tai Kadai language, Ahom—was replaced by an Indo-Aryan language, Assamese. This article is a window into a language contact situation in the pre-colonial era, a period when no single process of language shifts existed. The way in which Ahom royalties shifted to the people's language, Assamese, is an uncommon process in the language contact studies of language shift. The author's argument is that the Western concept of the identity of a nation through the geographically based unit of people and their language cannot be applied to places where political forms of “mandala states” and inherent multilingualism are in practice.

In the third chapter titled “Transforming Language to Script: Constructing Linguistic Authority through Language Contact in Schools in Nepal,” Uma Pradhan presents the case of the Tharu community's effort to enhance the sociolinguistic status of Dangaura Tharu spoken in Kapilvastu district. She describes the case of written language contact in which Tharu speakers judge their own language in relation to another language, Nepali. Their judgement is based on authenticity, correction, acceptability and legitimacy. The article argues that the written form of Tharu substantially deviates from spoken Tharu and comes closer to the written form of Nepali in search of authenticity, correctness, acceptability and legitimacy during the process of transforming a spoken language into a written language.

In the fourth chapter titled “The Significance of Place in Ethnolinguistic Vitality: Spatial Variations across the Kaike-speaking Diaspora of Nepal,” Maya Daurio studies the Kaike speaking community's language vitality within the language contact situation in three places: Tarang, the native place to many Kaike-speakers, Dunai, the district headquarter, and Kathmandu. The author finds that Kaiques in Tarang have power and thus they use their language even with Nepali speaking people that they come into contact with. They do not fear language loss. Kaiques in Kathmandu belong to two groups: born/brought up in Tarang and migrated to Kathmandu later, and born/brought up in Kathmandu. Both groups have a strong sense of identity through the Kaike language and fear of language loss. The first group still has access to the ethnolinguistic sites at the mainland as described in cultural texts but the second group does not have access to those sites. Kaiques in

Dunai are in between. The article shows that the place of residence and the generation one belongs to play a crucial role in one's sense of power and identity.

Bendi Tso and Mark Turin explore the language contact situation of Chone language spoken by the people living around Luchu river in Gansu province of China through the theoretical concept of hegemony achieved through the process of coercion and consent in the fifth chapter titled "Speaking Chone, Speaking 'Shallow': Dual Linguistic Hegemonies in China's Tibetan Frontier." The central theme of the article is the dual hegemony of Chinese and Tibetan over Chone, which the authors argue is supported by coercive government policies on literacy and education implemented at the state level for Chinese and the sub-state level for Tibetan. Claiming that the Chone community is consenting to these policy implementations, the article concludes that the situation is leading to language shift from Chone to Tibetan and Chinese.

In addition to their major themes, almost all the authors in the volume touch on sub-themes such as language hierarchy, language hegemony, standard vs. non-standard, written vs. spoken, language policies at state and sub-state levels, mobility of the speakers of the languages or the varieties, identity and recognition, purity and authenticity, language vitality and language loss, etc. Thus these concepts are the central themes of the book.

There is an introductory chapter by Sonntag and a conclusion chapter by Turin that help readers understand the context of the articles. Though the authors and editors have made a significant contribution to the study of politics of language contact in the Himalayan region through this volume, the book has some major weaknesses. The title misrepresents the scope of the book as the volume contains only six cases chosen from the vast geographical area that "the Himalaya" implies. Turin addresses this point by noting the urgency of study of the language situation of stateless Rohingya from Manmyar and Lotshampa from Bhutan as well as many other communities. This limitation of the book could have been reflected by adding a sub-title that accurately described the region it is focused on.

Most of the articles agree that the philosophy of monolingual nation-building which was developed in the West and followed by the ruling elite of the East is a challenge for multilingual communities in the Himalaya. However, multiple linguistic identities of a person which is a crucial phenomenon in multilingual communities—for example a person can

be a member of a Tharu, Awadhi, Nepali, Hindi and English language communities at the same time with various degrees of affinity—is not discussed in this book. This phenomenon exists in the Himalaya as a positive side of language politics.

In the book's conclusion, Turin cites articles 6, 7a and 7b (merged in a single paragraph) from the constitution of Nepal 2015 which are related to the languages of Nepal. He criticizes this provision as giving Nepali special status as an official language. However, he ignores the provision of article 7b where there is a provision of an additional official language at the provincial level. He suggests that the “three language formula” practiced in India may be a solution. The provision of article 7b (which Turin has ignored) is a copy of India's three language policy. The formula is not in favor of minority among the minority languages as it supports only the majority among the minority languages, i.e., the languages spoken by majority in the respective provinces. Dahal and Subba (1986: 248) have already warned that this Indian practice has the potential to shift the tension from center to the province (or such a larger territory, as at the time of their writing there was no provincial level structure in Nepal). Dahal and Subba argue that the three language formula would not benefit the minority among minority languages if implemented in Nepal, stating that this solution is “selective token recognition.”

Turin spends four pages on Nepal in his nine-page long conclusion chapter. However, he does not cite a single Nepali scholar. Same applies to the article by Pradhan. She excludes even the M.A. thesis of the chief editor of the textbooks and the textbooks themselves from the list of references though she mentions those works in the main text of her article. This leaves a big question for the readers: are works by Western scholars the only ones that are useful? How is quality research possible without going through works by Nepali scholars? If works written in other languages may not be accessible, how about those available in English? How can the core materials of the research be not listed as references? This may be taken as a simple mistake but it is a serious ethical question in academia.

Though the cases picked in this book are very few as the Himalaya is vast and diverse, the varying perspectives taken to look into the cases in these articles are likely to attract scholars working in anthropology, sociology, geography, linguistics, political science, law, policy studies, and many other disciplines. Moreover, the concepts, methodologies and findings from these articles will be useful in the studies of similar contexts in the other

parts of the region. In Nepal, it can be an important resource in studying pre-unification era language contact situations, triple hegemony following the implementation of the constitutional provision of official language at the province level, transformations of many spoken languages into written languages, and internal and external mobility of the speakers of various languages.

Reference

Dahal, Ballav Mani and Subhadra Subba. 1986. Language Policies and Indigenous Languages of Nepal. In *Language Planning: Proceedings of an Institute*. E. Annamalai, Björn H. Jernudd and Joan Rubin, eds., pp. 238–251. Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages.

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