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Mark Turin

Language Endangerment and Linguistic Rights in the Himalayas

A Case Study from Nepal



According to even the most conservative estimates, at least half of the world's 6500 languages are expected to become extinct in the next century. While the documentation of endangered languages has traditionally been the domain of academic linguists and anthropologists, international awareness of this impending linguistic catastrophe is growing, and development organizations are becoming involved in the struggle to preserve spoken forms. The death of a language marks the loss of yet another piece of cultural uniqueness from the mosaic of our diverse planet, and is therefore a tragedy for the heritage of all humanity. Language death is often compared to species extinction, and the same metaphors of preservation and diversity can be invoked to canvas support for biodiversity and language preservation programs. The present article addresses language endangerment in the Himalayas, with a focus on Nepal, and presents the options and challenges for linguistic development in this mountainous region.

The Hindu Kush–Himalayan region: a language "mega center"

The Hindu Kush–Himalayan region (HKH), which extends for 3500 km from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, sustains over 150 million people and is home to great linguistic diversity and many of Asia's most endangered languages. Moving across the region, Afghanistan boasts 45 living languages, Bangladesh 38, Bhutan 24, China 202, India 387, Myanmar 107, Nepal 121, and Pakistan 69. The HKH is known as one of the 10 biodiversity "mega centers" of the world. But this stretch of mountainous Asia is also home to one-sixth of all human languages, so the area should be thought of as a linguistic "mega center" as well.

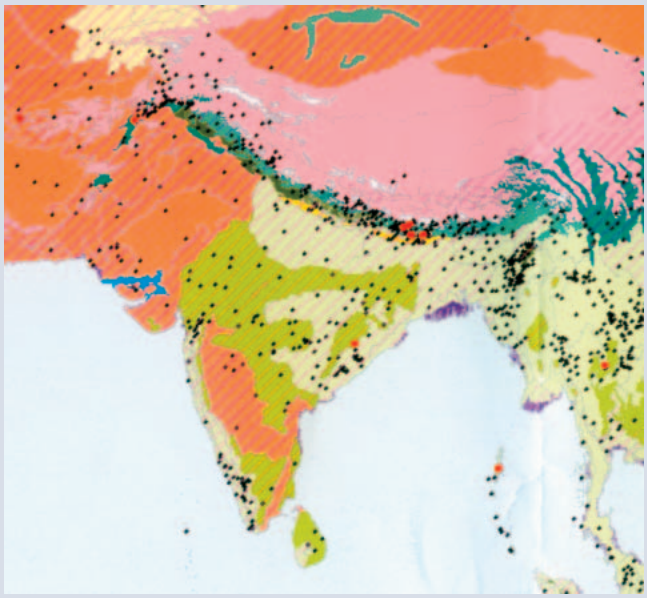


FIGURE 1 This map shows the overlapping distribution of the ecoregions and languages spoken in the HKH. The black dots indicate languages and red dots indicate endangered languages. Note that areas of high biodiversity (plants, animal species, and their habitats) coincide with a high number of distinct ethnic groups speaking different languages. Most of the regions' languages are spoken in areas of rich biological and cultural diversity. (Source: close-up of map entitled *The World's Biocultural Diversity: People, Languages and Ecosystems*, produced by UNESCO, Terralingua, and the World Wide Fund for Nature [WWF]; available at: http://www.terralingua.org/poster.pdf)

Preserving linguistic diversity

Why should development workers and scholars be concerned with the extinction of endangered languages? After all, 96% of the world's population speak 4% of the world's languages, and over 1500 languages have fewer than 1000 speakers. Some monolingual English speakers would have us believe that linguistic diversity is incompatible with the juggernaut of inevitable progress that requires interoperability and smooth international communications across national boundaries. This is simply not the case, particularly in areas such as the Himalaya, where many people are functionally tri- or quadri-lingual, speaking an ethnic or tribal mother tongue inside the home, a different language in the local market town, conversing in the national language at school or in dealings with the administration, and often using an international language (or two) in dealings with the outside world. The monolingualism of much of the First World is as provincial as it is historically anomalous.

While the origin of the extraordinary diversity of human languages is intertwined with the evolution of cognition and culture, the spread of modern language families is a direct result of histori-

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cal population movements and migrations across continents and the colonization of new geographical and environmental zones. Human languages are not evenly distributed across the world: there are relatively few in Europe compared to an abundance in the Pacific. The Himalayan region is home to great linguistic diversity, in part because the mountains have in the past been a natural barrier to mobility and communication (Figure 1).

The need to prevent language death

There are 4 solid reasons for supporting, preserving, and documenting endangered languages. First, each and every language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity of our planet; second, each language is an expression of a unique ethnic, social, regional or cultural identity and world view; third, language is the repository of the history and beliefs of a people; and finally, every language encodes a particular subset of fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine, and ecology.

Mother tongues are comprised of far more than grammar and words. For example, Thangmi (known in Nepali as *Thami*), a Tibeto-Burman language spoken by an ethnic community of around 30,000 people in eastern Nepal, is a mine of unique indigenous terms for local flora and fauna that have medical and ritual value. Much of this local knowledge is falling into disuse as fluency in Nepali, the national language, increases. When children cease to speak their mother tongue, the oral transmission of specific ethnobotanical and medical knowledge also comes to an end.

Language and ecology: an intimate relationship

Linguistic diversity is an integral component in ecological stability and the fabric of cultural life, and we should remember that the evolution of a species or a language takes much longer than its extinction. Languages, like species, adapt to and reflect their environment. The Thangmi language, spoken in a highly mountainous region where topography is challenging, has 4 semantically distinct verbs that are translated into English as "to come:"

- *yusa*, "to come from above (down the mountain),"
- *wangsa*, "to come from below (or up the mountain),"
- *kyelsa*, "to come from level or around a natural obstacle," and
- *rasa*, "to come from unspecified or unknown direction."

Language thus mirrors ecology, and ecology reflects the linguistic and cultural forms of a people inhabiting a specific niche. The languages and cultures of millions of indigenous peoples in the Himalaya are in part endangered because their traditional habitats and ecological niches are now under threat.

Recent scholarship on language endangerment points to an intriguing correlation: language diversity appears to be inversely related to latitude, and areas rich in languages also tend to be rich in ecology and species. Both biodiversity and linguistic diversity are concentrated between the tropics and in inaccessible environments, such as the Himalaya, while diversity of all forms tails off in deserts. Around the world then, there is a high level of co-occurrence of flora, fauna, and languages, and humid tropical climates as well as forested areas are especially favorable to biological and linguistic diversification.

Language and education in Nepal: the mother tongue debate

During Panchayat rule in Nepal, which ended in 1990, the state promoted the doctrine of "one nation, one culture, one language," and the national education policy of that era was largely intolerant of indigenous and minority languages. Since 1990 though, Nepal has come a long way in acknowledging diversity: Article 4 of Part 1 of the Constitution of the Kingdom contains important legislative guarantees which state that Nepal is a "multi-ethnic, multi-lingual" nation. Article 18 even states that "each community shall have the right to operate schools up to the primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education to its children," even though this provision remains essentially inactive at present. This constitutional guarantee is very much in line with con-

"It concerns me that our ancestral language is on the wane and will likely not be spoken by the next generation, but it upsets me far more to think that as our speech is dying, no one will think to translate into Nepali the knowledge that our forefathers collected in order that our grandchildren may know what we have known." (Rana Bahadur Thangmi, a local shaman and village leader, in an interview with the author)

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Education in local languages: a developmental priority

As John Daniel, Assistant Director-General for Education in UNESCO, writes:

> *Years of research have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language. The same applies to adults seeking to become literate.*

This is particularly important because about 476 million of the world's illiterate people speak minority languages and live in countries where children are for the most part not taught in their mother tongue (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2 Educating Babel: the mother tongue dilemma. While studies show that students learn better through their mother tongue, the language has to be taught in school for the benefits to be reaped, which is rarely the case with minority languages. (Source: Education Today, The Newsletter of UNESCO's Education Sector, Number 6, July–September 2003, pages 4–5, copyright Erik Staal; reproduced with kind permission of UNESCO)

temporary research and international best practices (see Box).

The National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) in Nepal views the existence of a specific and unique language as a primary basis for the identification of an ethnicity or *adibasi janajati*. The Foundation is implementing a range of policies to support endangered and indigenous languages. Dictionary projects are particularly popular, since the products have both practical benefits and symbolic capital: linguistic minorities can canvas central and local government more effectively for mother tongue education when a lexical corpus has been prepared and the process of standardizing an unwritten language is already underway (Figure 3). There is an increasing realization that successful language maintenance efforts ideally combine literacy and education with an improvement in the economic and political standing of the minority language community.

Language and gender: the central role of women

Across the HKH, disaggregated census data demonstrate that mountain women retain fluency in their ethnic mother tongue longer than men. While men from disadvantaged mountain areas commonly engage in trade with other communities or seek wage labor in local centers and neighboring states, thereby learning regional *lingua francas* and foreign languages, women are still in many cases the natural resource managers of a community. Whether collecting firewood and forest products, fetching water, working the fields or raising children, women in remote Himalayan villages have cause to use their ethnic language in daily life.

In terms of educational and linguistic planning, Nepal is now taking steps to ensure that rural primary schools are staffed by more local women teachers who can explain words and concepts using the mother tongue of the students as a medium to help them transition to functional bilingualism. Part of this movement requires a change of mindset: dispensing with the prevailing belief that Nepal's indigenous unwritten languages are backward, primitive and somehow shameful, and moving to embrace ethnic languages as symbols of diversity and indigenous knowledge. NFDIN is leading by example through training 200 local women to work in their own communities.

Language and conflict: Maoists, politics and Sanskrit

The deployment of "language" in public arenas, whether ethnic or national, can quickly become very politicized. The clamoring of linguistic minorities in Nepal for education in their mother tongue is as much about basic linguistic rights as it is a call for national recognition and participation in the governance of the modern

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FIGURE 3 Cause for hope: after years of being forgotten by scholars and language activists, the endangered Thangmi language now boasts 3 dictionaries, all of which were published in 2004. (Photo by Mark Turin)

nation state. Ethnic and linguistic differences are also quick to be invoked in times of conflict.

In Nepal, the violent conflict between Maoist rebels and government forces, which has claimed over 10,000 lives since 1996, has tapped into the pre-existing concerns of ethnic and linguistic minorities. Some analysts even argue that the marginalization of Nepal's disadvantaged and ethnic groups is one of the root causes of the Maoist insurgency. The Maoists have been very adept at co-opting indigenous peoples and their outstanding grievances into their overall political struggle for a constituent assembly and radical communist reforms. In their 40-point demands, the Maoist leadership address the basic rights of indigenous peoples and their mother tongues, arguing for local autonomy for communities where ethnic peoples are dominant and the provision of education in the mother tongue through secondary school.

The Maoist ideologues and linguistic activists are united against another common cause: the teaching of Sanskrit in Nepali schools. Sanskrit, the liturgical and classical language of India, to which modern spoken languages such as Hindi and Nepali are related, is intimately associated with issues such as caste, Hinduism, and highly structured learning. It is also a language that has no mother tongue "speakers" in Nepal, and is perceived by almost all indigenous people as the linguistic embodiment of a hegemonic heritage that they do not share.

Sustainable futures: promotion of diversity at all levels

The preservation of a language in its fullest sense entails the maintenance of the speech community. Reversing language death therefore requires the preservation of the culture and habitat in which a language is spoken. While many of the languages spoken as mother tongues in the Himalaya today will likely only survive, if at all, as second languages in the coming years, that is in itself no small feat. Supporting minority languages and halting linguistic decline must become an integral element in securing the sustainable livelihoods of diverse mountain peoples. Integrated development programs that focus on the vulnerability of marginalized peoples in the HKH should introduce a component of support for the languages and livelihoods that are presently under threat.

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"If during the next century we lose more than half of our languages, we also seriously undermine our chances for life on Earth. From this perspective, fostering the health and vigor of ecosystems is one and the same goal as fostering the health and vigor of human societies, their cultures, and their languages. We need an integrated biocultural approach to the planet's environmental crisis." (UNESCO 2003: 44)

Signs of hope: projects underway in Nepal and the Himalaya

To date, there are no active projects on languages and livelihoods in the HKH that interweave biological and cultural diversity with the aim of building sustainable futures for disadvantaged mountain communities. The Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance Program (CEGG) at ICIMOD, which promotes the equality and empowerment of vulnerable mountain peoples for enhanced social security and reduced conflict, is planning to introduce a layer of project support for linguistic and cultural diversity to areas previously focused on biological and ecological diversity. As one way of reaching out to the grassroots and addressing the multilingual base of its constituents, ICIMOD produced a brochure on the International Year of Mountains (IYM) in 4 languages of the HKH: Chinese, English, Hindi and Nepali. ICIMOD also has a welcome sign in 8 regional languages (Figure 4).

The British Department for International Development (DFID), through its Enabling State Program (ESP), has recently provided a 3-year grant to the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) to support the empowerment of Nepal's marginalized ethnic groups. Entitled the Janajati (indigenous ethnic group) Empowerment Program (JEP), the project has the explicit purpose of increasing the participation of Nepal's disadvantaged ethnic peoples in socioeconomic and political processes at central and district levels. Focusing on local capacity building and strengthening civil society networks, JEP proposes to preserve and further develop Nepal's ethnic languages and help advocate for linguistic rights.

Language revitalization campaigns aim to increase the prestige, wealth and

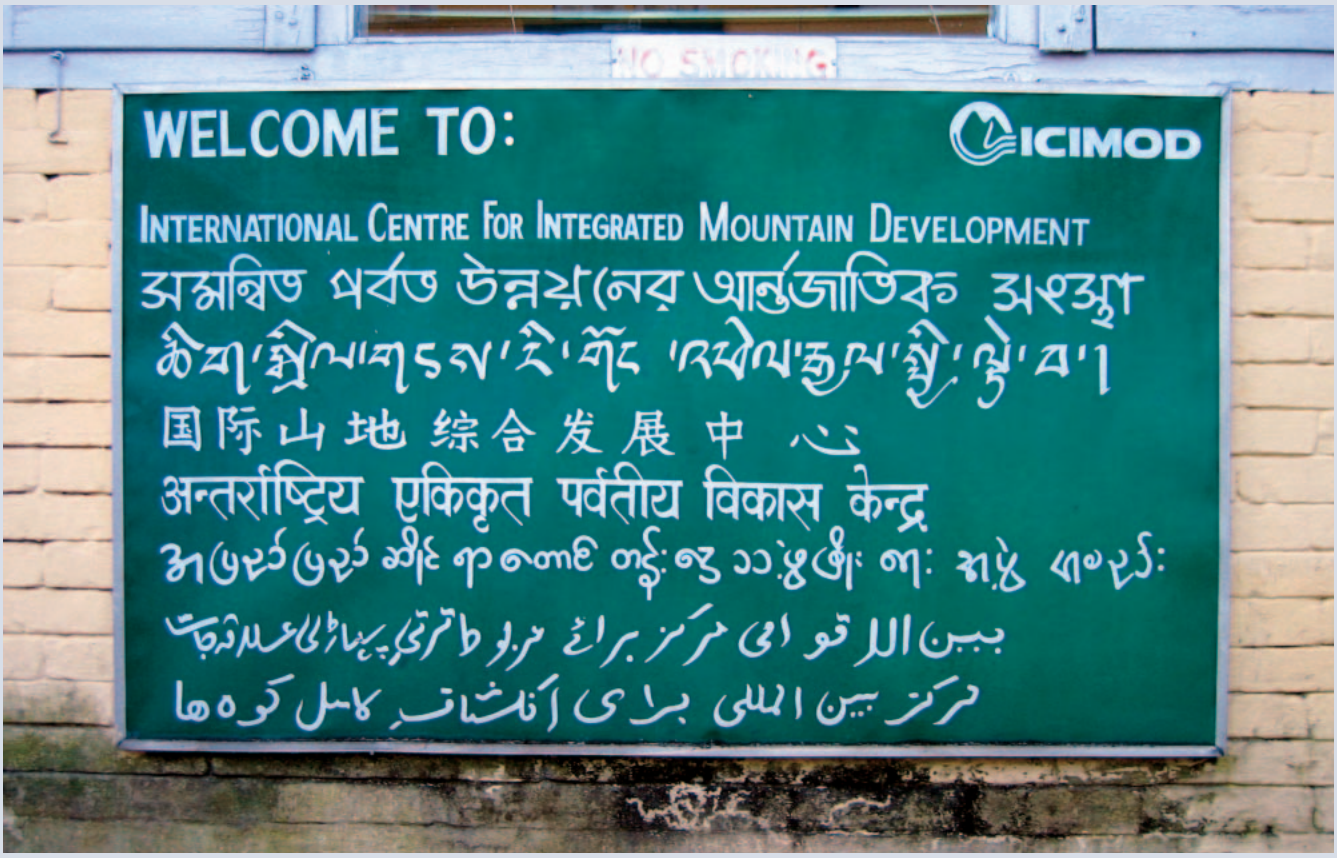


FIGURE 4 "Welcome to ICIMOD" in 8 different languages. The sign at the entrance to the main offices gives an indication of the multilingualism and linguistic diversity of the 140 staff. (Photo by Mark Turin)

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FIGURE 5 The result of a major effort to map biocultural diversity: an online map of the "Indigenous and traditional peoples in the global 200 ecoregions." (Source: WWF and Terralingua 2000; map available at: http://www.terralingua.org/Images/WWFmap.JPG; reproduced with kind permission of Terralingua)



power of speakers of endangered mother tongues, to give the language a strong presence in the education system and to provide the language with a written form to encourage literacy and improve access to electronic technology. Linguistic diversity is, after all, the human store of historically acquired knowledge about how to use and maintain some of the world's most vulnerable and biologically diverse environments (Figure 5). Biocultural development projects need to involve and mobilize communities to build positive values for indigenous languages.

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