GOVERNANCE, CONFLICT AND CIVIC ACTION: VOLUME 5

Edited by

Gérard Toffin
Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka

FACING GLOBALIZATION in the HIMALAYAS

Belonging and the Politics of the Self

Facing Globalization in the Himalayas

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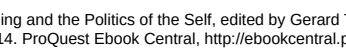

PART V
NATIONAL RECONFIGURATIONS

Chapter 15

Mother Tongues and Language Competence

The Shifting Politics of Linguistic Belonging in the Himalayas

MARK TURIN

INTRODUCTION

'Hypocrisy is the essence of snobbery', says the protagonist and narrator of Alexander Theroux's *An Adultery*, 'but all snobbery is about the problem of belonging' (1987: 212). Although literary rather than sociological in genre, Theroux has identified the same process that Nira Yuval-Davis, following John Crowley, describes when she defines the politics of belonging as the 'dirty business of boundary maintenance' (2006: 203). Identities and statements of belonging are often formed, revised, and challenged at boundaries and borders (whether spatial, geographical, political, or—as I will suggest—linguistic), in large part because these are sites of accentuated political valence and heightened emotional attachment.

The now considerable corpus of literature on belonging has addressed the formation of ethnic categories, the rootedness of identities, and the interface of politics, power, and passion in the construction of a sense of self and the imagining of a nation. However, these studies are still predominantly European in focus and remain strangely quiet on issues of language identity and linguistic belonging. In *Globalization and Belonging*, Sheila Croucher is critical of the fact that:

> identity is invoked as an explanation, but little effort is made to explain or understand identity itself ... the origins or essence of identity is taken for granted or rendered irrelevant. (2004: 36–37)

A similar critique may also be made for language: it is often cited as an integral component in personal identity formation and portrayed as central to concepts of belonging, but routinely under-analyzed. Drawing upon linguistic examples from across the Himalayan region, including Bhutan, Nepal, and the Indian state of Sikkim, I aim to situate language competence as important determinants and constituents of belonging. To do so, I first bring the literature of linguistic anthropology and identity to bear on the writings on belonging; I then turn to recent events in Nepal (and briefly in the United States) as examples of the emotive power of linguistic attachment; and finally, I discuss census-taking and surveys as classifying and classificatory tools that record, and even help to create, a sense of belonging.

I should end this introduction with a note to the effect that both the form and the substance of this chapter have changed from a presentation of field data on Sikkim (as envisaged) to a position on ways of thinking about belonging that explicitly incorporate language.[1] In part, this shift is an explicit attempt to avoid rehearsing the tired territory of identity politics, but it also stems from my reading of the literature on belonging and out of an increasing conviction in the utility of the concepts of linguistic competence and language heritage in making sense of belonging.

SITUATING LANGUAGE IN BELONGING

Linguistic anthropologists are acutely aware of the importance of language in the construction of personal and private identities, and the different modalities that shape such formations, but have said little about belonging. As we know, languages have been heavily implicated in the formation and formalization of nation states, with nation-building exercises across Europe and Asia predicated on unifying and binding people together using a single language, with a belief that national identity and a sense of belonging would naturally ensue. As de Varennes (1996) has shown, the process by which emergent European nation states imposed a single national language on linguistically diverse populations in the interest of fostering national unity

has strong parallels in post-colonial Asia, where similar approaches, in the name of 'language planning' and unity, have foisted monolingual policy on multilingual communities. In many European nations, the 'naturalization' test for aspiring citizens requires that candidates demonstrate a communicative competence in the national language. In such cases, the ability to speak a language can act as a gatekeeping device to determine membership of a nation.

Reflecting on linguistic belonging, Bonnie Urciuoli summarizes one position as suggesting that "people act in ways that are taken as 'having' a language, which is equated to 'belonging' to an origin group" (1995: 525). This statement would resonate strongly with many ethnolinguistic activists and *Janajati* (indigenous nationality) organizations in Nepal, who believe that a one-to-one correlation between language and ethnicity (and the inalienability of both) exists, essential for the promotion of a distinct group identity within a nation state. As Urciuoli goes on to point out, however, language and group identity should not, by definition, be considered as isomorphic, and 'people do not always see language shift vitiating their cultural identity' (1995: 533). As I illustrate in this chapter, language shift is a dominant feature in the identity landscape of Sikkim, where language heritage, acting as shorthand for ethnicity, can trump linguistic competence in instilling and maintaining a sense of belonging.

Although Nepal (a diverse nation state home to many ethnolinguistic communities) and Sikkim (India's least populous and second smallest state) differ massively in scale and their historical trajectories, the utility of comparison between the two endures because their populations continue to draw on similar sets of ideas and narratives of belonging, in large part because they believe that they share elements of a common past. Furthermore, if we prioritize borders as highly articulated sites for creating ideologies of belonging, the Nepal–Sikkim border can serve as a useful case in point. As Urciuoli continues:

> Border-marking language elements are locational markers: They assign people a place, often opposing places between those who 'have' the language and those who do not. Borders are places where commonality ends abruptly; border-making language elements stand for and performatively bring into being such places. (1995: 539)

Even though state borders can become sites of highly articulated and performative displays of belonging, Andreas Wimmer (2008)

reminds us that national boundaries are neither ahistorical nor uncontested. Working through his taxonomy of how actors are able to change ethnic boundaries and even redraw social borders, we can begin to conceive of national borders as 'notional borders', seeing them as important objects of inquiry in their own right rather than as rigid territorial units. Presenting a range of strategies that have been used for 'making and unmaking ethnic boundaries' (2008: 1043), Wimmer looks beyond typology and taxonomy to imagine an 'agency-based model of ethnic boundary making' (2008: 1046), one that could well be developed for application to linguistic boundaries and language borders.

In a volume on language and national identity in Asia, Andrew Simpson explores how language 'is and has been relevant for the cultivation of nationalistic feelings of belonging' (2007: 3). He makes the point that language differences are not only more accentuated at national borders but that language itself is often invoked in boundary keeping and maintenance:

> As a symbolic marker and index of individual and group identity, language has the potential to function as an important boundary device. (2007: 1)

One notable difference between Nepal and Sikkim is in their experience of migration: Nepal has a tradition of 'sending' migrants, whereas Sikkim is a state that has accepted and 'received' them, even building itself on their labour. Peter Sutton observes that:

> As migration increases and monocultural nation-states become obsolete, cultural identity becomes more complex, less tied to a geographical location, more individualized, and less static. (1991: 136)

The different historical experiences of migration may, in part, account for the different expressions of linguistic belonging as they are articulated in Sikkim and Nepal. Yet Nepal to Sikkim migratory movements are in themselves unusual: in his influential 2006 book *A Nation by Design*, Aristide Zolberg illustrates how most labour migration brings in people who differ culturally, linguistically, ethnically, and religiously from the bulk of the established population already settled in the host country. The story of the Nepali migration to the eastern hills of India, however, is more one

of ethnolinguistic continuity than rupture, unlike most other modern migratory narratives.

In Sikkim, the loss of speech forms and the process of language shift are popularly presented as unavoidable by-products of the juggernaut of global progress and development, whereas in Nepal, the continued vibrancy of minority mother tongues has been associated with their remote and sequestered status. This opposition, at least in the popular imagination, is fleshed out to the extent that Sikkim is often portrayed in the press as modern, literate, educated, and connected, whereas the ethnolinguistic homeland areas in Nepal are widely described as remote, backward, and traditional. My point here is not to endorse such descriptions, but to reflect on them for what they tell us about the forms of belonging that individuals and communities may invoke or be subjected to, and what these ideological formulations tell us about the different nation-building exercise in Nepal and India.

Patterns of language shift as well as transformations in linguistic identities are familiar territory for linguists. The late Michael Noonan, writing about Chantyal-speaking villages in western Nepal, suggested that their 'relative isolation and poverty' might contribute to 'the retention of the language' (1996: 130). Although out-migration may even prolong isolation for those left behind, in-migration brings individuals together in unexpected ways, sometimes creating new speech forms and often elevating regional tongues to the status of *lingua franca* or *Verkehrsprache*.

Over the last two decades, some linguistic anthropologists have turned their investigations away from semiotics and 'ethnographies of speaking' to refocus on the ways that speech communities maintain and manage their borders to create a sense of cohesion or group belonging. Michael Silverstein has referred to this repositioning as "the dynamic linguistic anthropology of what we might term 'local language communities' investigated as dialectically constituted cultural forms" (1998: 401). This approach takes literally the proposition that, through group action,

> people participate in semiotic processes that produce their identities, beliefs, and their particular senses of agentive subjectivity. It considers culture to be a virtual—and always emergent—site in socio-historical spacetime with respect to the essentialisms of which such agents experience their groupness. (Silverstein, 1998: 402)

Although phrased somewhat differently, these concerns effectively dovetail with the emerging field of research on belonging. When Nira Yuval-Davis describes belonging as a 'thicker' concept than that of citizenship, suggesting that 'it is not just about membership, rights and duties, but also about the emotions that such memberships evoke' (2004: 215), it reminds us of Silverstein's words. In short, we must position language practice and linguistic identification within discussions of belonging, and connect with linguists and anthropologists for whom speech forms and the emotions that they elicit have long been explicit objects of study.

HINDI VERSUS NEPALI, OR ENGLISH AND DZONGKHA AS 'GLUE'

Paul Brass writes of language movements as 'inherently and necessarily associated with the modern state and modern politics' (2004: 353). This statement holds both at the level of national state-building around a language (sometimes even more than one) and at level of the counter-assertion by language activists that citizenship and nationhood need not be predicated on a sole speech form. In fact, if the process of nation formation were not so linguistically homogenizing, local language movements would likely not have emerged with such force and vigour.

When effective politicians invoke the emotive, political, and boundary-maintaining power of language in the rhetoric of their speeches, they also use specific languages to lay claim to domains of belonging. Just as minority language identities are often forged because of struggle and protest in opposition to dominant linguistic ideologies mandated by the nation state and underwritten by its legislation, the speakers of hegemonic languages may assert themselves when they feel insecure or under threat. A timely illustration of such a tension was Nepal's first Vice President Parmananda Jha's oath taking in Hindi in 2008, which unleashed five days of angry demonstrations in Kathmandu and a lawsuit against him in the country's Supreme Court.

Vice President Jha asserted that Hindi was widely used in Nepal and should be classed as an official language. 'I translated the oath into Hindi so as to convenience the people of southern Nepal, who speak such languages as Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi. And Hindi

is considered as our medium language', he told the BBC.[2] However, most analysts agree that Jha's primary motive for speaking in Hindi was political (perhaps even at the request of the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, whose leaders have a policy of debating in Hindi at public events), and that he was only secondarily invoking a linguistic right to speak in a language easy for Tarai-dwellers to understand. If his objective had been to generate a sense of belonging and inclusion, as he was asked by the newspaper *Naya Patrika*, why did he not take the oath in his native Maithili, in the manner that Matrika Yadav had done, and avoid the political fallout? Jha's answer was that he even uses Hindi to converse with his wife, a Bhojpuri speaker, which would make Hindi their family *lingua franca* and therefore a language inextricably bound up with his personal sense of self and emotional and familial belonging.

To situate this debate in its proper context, we should recall that Maithili has come to be regarded as one of Nepal's minority languages, whereas Hindi is still perceived by many Nepalis to be a dominant and domineering language primarily associated with India, even if it is spoken by over 105,000 Nepali citizens as a mother tongue (as reported in the 2001 Census of Nepal). Such associations make Jha's decision to speak Hindi provocative, earning him a reputation in some circles as politically expedient. In the heightened political context of Parmananda Jha's oath taking, columnist Prashant Jha's riposte in the *Nepali Times* focused on the Vice President's linguistic choice rather than the symbolic associations that he was invoking:

> How is Hindi a Nepali language when Pahadis use it to communicate in the Tarai, but is an Indian language when Madhesis use it to speak to each other or in public? (2008: 10)

To clarify: at issue with Parmananda Jha's choice of language was not that it was linguistically incorrect (from a dispassionate perspective, his choice might even be commended), but that it was widely perceived to be politically inappropriate and even inflammatory, evinced by the fact that 'once all sides met their political objectives, the confrontation fizzled out' (Jha, 2008: 10).

The caustic backlash by some commentators to the Vice President's choice of language (in both *langue* and *parole* in this case) illustrates the force unleashed when politics intersects with language. It also reminds us of the ever-emotive power of linguistic attachment and

confirms the special place that some accord the Nepali language in the collective imagining of what it means to be Nepali, and thus belong to Nepal (see Chalmers, 2007). Writing in *Kantipur*, journalist Dhirendra Premarshi was shocked by 'Madhesi leaders who start blabbering in Hindi' and proposed that Jha's effort to 'sideline Nepali is being seen by many as a matricidal act' (translated and reported in the *Nepali Times*, #411, page 6). Premarshi's polemical point was that within the borders of Nepal, Nepali is 'spoken' but Hindi can only be 'babbled', and then only as an alien and degraded speech form. Far worse, in fact, Hindi speaking is a desecration of the motherland and therefore anti-national (leaving aside any allusions to the matricide of the Palace Massacre of 2001).

In his detailed coverage of the events that followed, writing for *Kantipur.com*, commentator Puran P. Bista remained perplexed by Jha's inexcusable mistake:

> Obviously, the vice-president who speaks perfect Nepali deliberately uttered Hindi instead of reading the text in Nepali. (4 August 2008)

Bista's position echoes sentiments heard across the political spectrum in Nepal: although speaking Hindi spontaneously and without mal-intent may be pardoned, why would someone who is able to speak Nepali choose not to do so? How should such flagrant disregard for national sentiment be understood and forgiven? The answer is that to some it was unforgivable, with Nepal's Supreme Court deciding a year after the event that Jha must retake the oath in Nepali for it to have legal and constitutional weight.

These strong reactions are reminiscent of another ongoing and heated debate played out in a distant country whose principal language is as unthreatened and secure as Nepali, but is nevertheless perceived by an increasingly vocal minority to be under attack: English in the United States. In the United States, and to a lesser extent in Nepal, the self-consciousness of the nation is flagged by the use of a common language as an indelible part of its heritage, and, as Pier Guiseppe Monateri has written, 'as a constituent of its cultural peculiarity' (1999: 124).

While in its 200-year history, the United States has never yet seen fit to adopt an official language, a campaign to 'officialize' English has gathered momentum in recent years, 'resting on the claim that the most successful and dominant world language is threatened in

its bastion: the USA' (Monateri, 1999: 124). However, as Zolberg has shown, a sense of North American linguistic fragility is far from new, with many US leaders (including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson) expressing deep concerns about growing immigration from the German empire, as the German language that the migrants carried with them was considered to reflect a culture incompatible with republican democracy.

In June 1995, Newt Gingrich informed a group of Iowa business leaders that: 'English has to be our common language, otherwise we're not going to have a civilization' (Thursday, 8 June 1995, in section A, page 22 of the *New York Times*). Only a few months later, Robert 'Bob' Dole, gearing up to be the Republic presidential candidate, announced to the 77th national convention of the American Legion in Indiana:

> Insisting that all our citizens are fluent in English is a welcoming act of inclusion. We need the glue of language to help hold us together. We must stop the practice of multilingual education as a means of instilling ethnic pride or as a therapy for low self-esteem or out of elitist guilt over a culture built on the traditions of the West. (Dole, 1995)

There are many rhetorical flourishes worth analyzing in Gingrich and Dole's proclamations, in particular the promise of a Babel-like end of society if the shared tongue is lost, the apparent oxymoron that 'inclusion' can somehow be 'insisted' upon, and Dole's choice of the term 'glue' for the collective sense of belonging that language instils. Besides the ideological posturing, though, these strident statements echo a common concern that plurilingualism and particularly bilingual education programmes are a force of social decomposition and national disunification, fuelling a change 'from a nation of individuals to a loose conglomeration of groups' (Croucher, 2004: 192). The sum of these atomized and individualized identities, the argument supposes, will no longer cohere into a sense of belonging and would also effectively exclude Spanish-speaking citizens in the United States.

The underlying positions in this debate are elegantly analyzed in an article by Aristide Zolberg and Long Litt Woon, entitled 'Why Islam is like Spanish'. Arguing that both Islam and Spanish have become metonyms for the perceived dangers of immigration—namely, a loss of cultural identity, disintegration, separatism, and communal

conflict—the authors show how Islam in Europe can be understood as structurally similar to Spanish in the United States. In the United States, 'the English language emerged very early on as a crucial unifying element, entrusted with the mission of balancing ... diversity' (1999: 7). Seen from this perspective, then, the expanding reach of Spanish, the 'common speech of an expanding population', feeds 'fantasies of a malignant growth that threatens national unity' (ibid.).

Although geographically removed from our present focus on the Himalayas, the apparent incongruity between a language's unmistakable strength and its assumed vulnerability in North America is worth a moment's reflection, as it resonates with sentiments expressed across the Himalayas, but played out differently in each nation. Alessandro Simoni suggests that the Bhutanese state has endorsed a 'division of labour' between English and Dzongkha, in which English is a 'code of rules' (2003: 52) and the 'tool required for operating the legal machinery borrowed from the West' (2003: 51), whereas Dzongkha maintains the position of "social glue", of defense against cultural alienation, of brick stone of national identity [sic]" (2003: 52). Although such clear domains of use may be what the Bhutanese authorities desire, can such divisions ever be so clear-cut? Moreover, where does this leave Nepali, a language spoken as a *lingua franca* by so many Bhutanese of all ethnic backgrounds and a speech form about which Simoni and the national powers of Bhutan are regrettably silent? It appears that the Bhutanese authorities have resorted to patrolling their socio-linguistic borders by invoking purism and tradition, demarcating their boundaries with legal mechanisms such as the 2005 constitution, which positions Dzongkha as the only national language.

We should recall that all projects involving ethnic categorization and linguistic classification are fraught with taxonomic, political, and ideological problems, often compressing complex and highly local ethnolinguistic identities into standardized checkboxes. There is a sizeable literature on 'colonial linguistics', which lays bare the power relations involved in mapping 'monolithic languages onto demarcated boundaries' (Errington, 2001: 24). Nation-building projects not only objectify languages through documentation but also inhibit the spread of some speech forms in the name of elevating a favoured vernacular to the status of national or official language. For the moment, we may focus on the emotive rather than on the hegemonic

side of classification through surveying and census-taking, described so elegantly by N. Gerald Barrier in his writing on Imperial India:

> Thus from its beginning a census acts to reshape the world it will examine and in this way is not simply a passive instrument ... individuals find themselves firmly fixed as members in various groups of a particular dimensions and substance. Thus the census imposes order, and order of a statistical nature. In time the creation of a new ordering of society by the census will act to reshape that which the census sought merely to describe. (1981: 74–75)

CENSUS AS CLASSIFICATION, SURVEYS TO CREATE BELONGING

A census is the single most important statistical operation for most national populations. Although the methodology and motivations for the decadal census in Nepal and India are similar, the questions that are posed are not equivalent. The Indian census enumerates for mother tongue but not for ethnicity, whereas the Nepali census seeks responses in both categories, and has recently included an additional question on bilingualism. For those who work in cultural Tibet, it may be relevant to note that the 1990 census of China collected 15 categories of information for each individual, one of which was 'nationality', but that there was no question on language (Jianfa Shen et al., 1999: 176).

According to census enumerators and statisticians, only a census can provide 'uniform information both about the country as a whole and about individual areas' as the continuity of statistics from census to census 'shows how conditions are changing over time' (Sillitoe and White, 1992: 142). A baseline linguistic survey can be a helpful, and usually additional, tool for effective policy planning in education, media, and the public sphere. The decadal Indian census returns very little data on monolingualism, bilingualism, and multilingualism, and does not investigate the levels of retention of officially recognized minority languages.

The Linguistic Survey of Sikkim (LSS), administered through the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in Gangtok with the support of the Department of Human Resource Development (formerly Education) of the State Government of Sikkim, was designed to generate a better

understanding of the complex reality of language use and to evaluate language teaching in government and private schools across the state. When I initiated the survey in 2004, there was still no official confirmation that the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) in Mysore would undertake a new national linguistic survey. The go-ahead for the 'New Linguistic Survey of India' came only in late 2006, and more recent reports indicate that the implementation has been held back because of funding troubles.[3]

According to an early report in *The Hindu*, the New Linguistic Survey of India would involve at least 10,000 linguists and language experts, nearly 100 universities, and would be conducted over a period of 10 years at a cost of ₹280 crore, with the aim of describing and documenting each speech variety in the nation. The announcement of this massively ambitious project was good fortune for those involved in the LSS, because it permitted a refocusing on the issues that most interested us: mother tongue instruction, language competence, heritage identity, and belonging.

Over a period of a little over a year, the linguistic survey field team travelled to Sikkim's four districts visiting more than 120 of the state's 157 secondary schools and administering a 29-question survey on language use to over 17,000 students and teachers. Included in the survey were questions on which language(s) the respondent speaks with his or her parents, grandparents, and siblings; which languages a respondent's kin speak with one another; how many languages the respondent could speak and write, and which ones; questions on the different domains and registers of language use (songs, lists, numbers, TV); and which language the respondent identifies as his or her mother tongue. A survey form is enclosed as an appendix to this chapter for readers interested in the questions. Some of the findings and their implications for discussions of belonging follow below, but I would first like to focus on the issue of self-classification.

The contrast between etic statements about belonging and emic experiences of belonging is not new: 'interviews fail to get at the difference between peoples' professed and actual behavior' (Collins, 1988: 304). Most censuses and surveys rely exclusively on respondent statements and are almost by definition non-ethnographic. The literature on the formulation of census questions indicates a movement towards recognizing the virtues of respondent-led classification

rather than concealing it as a methodological flaw. Although not referring explicitly to census-taking, Joane Nagel's point that 'the extent to which ethnicity can be freely constructed by individuals or groups is quite narrow when compulsory ethnic categories are imposed by others' (1994: 156) is well taken. Although identities and belonging may be assigned by organizations, states, census bureaus, politicians, and dominant social groups, individuals and groups are 'not merely passive recipients in the process' (Croucher, 2004: 40), and some consciously choose to subvert classificatory systems that are imposed on them. Permitting, or even encouraging, respondents to classify themselves works to equalize relationships of power and, as the discussion below illustrates, may even generate a more interesting dataset.

In Mauritius, for example, the 'onus of ethnic classification was thus shifted from the enumerator to the individual' making the census far more effective (Christopher, 1992: 59), whereas a report on the configuration of the 1991 census of Great Britain recommended that the form of a question 'should enable people to identify themselves in a way acceptable to them' (Sillitoe and White, 1992: 148). Returning to linguistic surveys, Paul Brass endorses such realignment:

> I believe that the only fair and honest census of languages is one that accepts what the respondent says and notes it down. My point is simply this: the decisions concerning grouping, classification, recognition, are ultimately political decisions, not scientific linguistic ones. (2004: 367)

As the data below illustrate, the results of the Linguistic Survey of Sikkim are not scientific evaluations of competence in a language, but rather statements of linguistic belonging.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM THE LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF SIKKIM

There are three main findings of the survey to be discussed here. First, the identification of a mother tongue; second, the process of language shift; and third, the issue of multilingualism and education.

Question 7 of the survey asks respondents 'Which languages can you speak?' whereas question 22 asks 'Which language is your

mother tongue?' The results of these two questions are shown in the following table:

	Can speak the language (%)	*Mother tongue (%)*
Nepali	94	67
English	74	1
Hindi	67	7
Bhutia	7	10
Lepcha	5	6
Limbu	3	4

A few points are worth drawing attention to. First, the table can be divided into two categories: languages with more speakers than mother tongue claimants, versus languages with more mother tongue claimants than speakers. The first cluster includes Nepali, spoken (to some level) by nearly all surveyed school-going students in Sikkim, but claimed by only two-thirds as a mother tongue; English, claimed as a mother tongue by only 1 per cent of the school-going population, but spoken by three-quarters (to some degree of proficiency); and Hindi, which follows a similar pattern to English, albeit less extreme.

The most interesting results are to be found in the second half of the table in the responses for Bhutia (also known as Denzongke, Löke, and Sikkimese), Lepcha (also enumerated as Rongaring), and Limbu (variously spelled as Limboo, but also returned as Subba): all three are claimed by more young people as a mother tongue than can speak them. At first glance, this claim appears to be contradictory, at least from the perspective of linguistic competence: How can an individual profess to have as a mother tongue a language in which he or she has no declared proficiency? Are these respondents, particularly the Bhutia students for whom the differential is the greatest (3 per cent), not subverting the survey to bolster their numbers for political gain? Unpacking this apparent inconsistency lies at the heart of understanding linguistic belonging in Sikkim.

The autochthonous languages of modern Sikkim—Bhutia, Lepcha, and Limbu—are at present severely endangered. Besides a few notable areas (parts of North Sikkim for Bhutia, the Dzongu reservation for Lepcha, and West Sikkim for Limbu), these three languages are spoken by an ever-dwindling number of people, and the majority

of children from these communities have only basic proficiency at best. The first census of Sikkim dates back to 1891 when Sikkim was under British colonial rule. The total population of Sikkim was then recorded as 30,458, of which a little over one-third constituted the indigenous Lepcha and Bhutia populations. This early census and some later surveys recorded ethnic affiliation only, and contained no explicit data on which languages were spoken or by how many people. According to the 1931 Census, out of a total population of 109,808, 12 per cent were Lepcha and 11 per cent were Bhutia, the rest mainly Nepalese. The 1961 Census reported that 43 mother tongues were spoken in Sikkim, whereas the 1971 Census Report gave the percentage of population by language, according to which speakers of the Nepali language constituted about 64 per cent, whereas the Lepcha and Bhutia languages were each spoken by about 11 per cent of the total population. On 17 October 1977, the Sikkim Official Language Act was passed by the Governor of the State, adopting Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha as 'the languages to be used for the official purposes of the State of Sikkim'.

There are a few general points worth making about the census statistics for language and ethnicity collected from Sikkim at decadal intervals over the course of a century. First, there is no doubt that many Lepchas and Bhutias, two of Sikkim's Scheduled Tribes, are now speaking ever more Nepali and Hindi. Second, many of those individuals more recently recorded as speaking Nepali as their mother tongue are members of non-caste and non-Hindu ethnic groups of Nepalese origin, that is Tamang, Gurung, Rai, and others. Third, disaggregated language data from 2001 are expected to confirm the trend towards Nepali, a linguistic shift occurring across other parts of the Indian northeast as well as within Nepal itself. Finally, we may wonder why the Bhutia speech community decreased since the 1960s whereas the Lepcha speech community remained relatively stable, according to government figures, at least. A working hypothesis is that the difference between the speech patterns and language retention of these communities can be attributed to their different economic statuses and locations. Many Bhutias have had better access to education over the last 40 years, and some of their larger population concentrations are increasingly urban (correlated with a decreased use of their ethnic mother tongue). In contrast, the Lepcha community is still largely rural, providing an ongoing context for

the mother tongue to be spoken, particularly in protected or remoter areas such as Dzongu.

As competence in Sikkim's traditional mother tongues has declined, however, their status has begun to shift from spoken vernaculars forming a part of a lived ethnic identity, to symbolic markers of an ancestral heritage, and elements of emotional belonging. Yuval-Davis' observation that belonging 'becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way' (2006: 196) is very pertinent to the language shift observed in Sikkim, in which a growing attachment to the 'idea' of a mother tongue is directly related to its decline in use as a speech form.

Alongside these emotional attachments are important political motivations that underlie claims of linguistic belonging. Even though the Lepcha, Limbu, and Bhutia languages are on the wane as spoken vernaculars, these speech communities have waged successful campaigns to be accorded 'Scheduled Tribe' status, and an application is presently under review for Lepchas to be classified as a 'Primitive Tribe'. An integral component of such applications is the existence, both real and abstract, of a mother tongue. Declining utility and diminishing speaker numbers, then, do not necessarily threaten the inalienable connection between a tribe and their traditional language and their 'right' to have a mother tongue.

Fernand de Varennes is a respected authority on such 'rights' of linguistic minorities, whose comprehensive 1996 work aimed to establish language rights as fundamental human rights, once and for all. Using case studies of international human rights law to illustrate how minority languages and their speakers can be protected, he makes a compelling case for three areas of human rights legislation being pertinent and appropriate to linguistic claims: the right to freedom of expression, the right to non-discrimination and the right of individuals to use their minority language with other members of their community. Although his fighting prose is certainly a boon to language activists around the world seeking to preserve, promote, and revitalize endangered speech forms that have been marginalized in the name of nation building, the field data from Sikkim open up a new avenue of inquiry: the 'right', perhaps even the need, to have, own, and deploy a language, specifically as a mother tongue, without using it.

From observations during the survey process and analysis of the returns, students answered the question on their mother tongue in

a number of different ways. Some wrote down what language they spoke at home, others wrote down the name of the language that they thought they should speak at home, some read the question as another way of asking for their ethnicity (mother tongue in lieu of caste or tribe), and some understood it to be a question on heritage and origin. Others simply asked their teacher what to put down. In other words, respondents answered this open-ended question by filling it with whatever meaning they found most appropriate.

The issue of language shift has been variously understood, explained, and defined by different writers, but is traditionally characterized as a process in which both *langue* and *parole* are systematically simplified. Individuals move from functioning as full speakers with complete grammatical and pragmatic command to being 'semi-speakers' with reduced verbal dexterity. Eventually, all competence drains away, leaving only a residual smattering of specialized vocabulary (food words, kinship terminology, or elements of ritual vocabulary), and often a strong sense of attachment to a heritage identity as a former speaker.

Language activists such as Philippe van Parijs accentuate the hegemonic aspects of this process, talking of the 'displacement of local by national languages' and underscoring the assertion of state power (2000: 218). In this argument, language shift or replacement is seen as a product of projects of modernity: languages can coexist for centuries when there is little or no contact between groups, but the 'nicer people are with one another, the nastier languages are with one another' (van Parijs 2000: 218). Once a particular language has taken the lead, more and more people will converge towards the same vernacular, quickly promoting it to the level of a *lingua franca*.

The processes of linguistic convergence and language shift are in fact not as straightforward as van Parijs would have us believe. 'Language shifts are inextricably tied to shifts in the political economy in which speech situations are located' writes Urciuoli (1995: 530), and Sikkim is undergoing a period of profound social, economic, and political upheaval.

There are effectively three *linguas franca* or *linguae francae* in Sikkim—Nepali, English, and Hindi—all of which operate in different functional domains of use yet constantly intersect with one another. The pragmatic utility of all three languages in Sikkim—Nepali in the bazaar, English in school, and Hindi on television and in Central government offices—prevents any one of them from becoming overly

dominant. In the process of language shift, then, which Sikkim is undergoing, a region can experience an explosion of plurilingualism.[4] In anything other than abstract models, one language does not give way to another overnight, and a number of speech forms remain in use for long periods of time until the linguistic residue settles. Data from the linguistic survey of Sikkim would support this analysis: while only 2 per cent of the respondents reported as speaking five or more languages, 20 per cent claimed to speak four languages, 63 per cent three languages, 11 per cent two languages, and under 4 per cent only one language.

The speech of some Sikkimese students would offend the ear of a language purist: young men and women pepper their Lepcha or Bhutia with Nepali verbs, English sentiments, and Hindi conjunctions, in much the same way that urban, educated elites in Nepal can be heard to do. The resultant amalgam is a heterogeneous blend of linguistic forms and elements, and a performative strategy that is rapidly gaining ground in Sikkim as well as in Nepal's urban centres. Is this but another indication of language shift or a sign of the emergence of a hyphenated linguistic identity? And what do such linguistic fusions mean for belonging?

In Sikkim, language competence and purity do not have primary roles in the maintenance of individual identities and in the construction of a sense of group belonging. But then Sikkim is not one of India's 'linguistic states' in the model of Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, or West Bengal, where the 'internal reorganization of much of its territory … has been a deliberate attempt to consolidate populations of speakers of regional languages and concentrate these in administrative units, helping promote the strength of [these] languages' (Simpson, 2007: 25). In Sikkim, ethnic and linguistic identities are not oppositional (i.e. 'he is Tamang, but he doesn't speak it'), rather they are more incorporative (i.e. 'although she's Lepcha, she speaks Nepali pretty well'). Additionally, linguistic identities are increasingly understood and expected to be complex.

Perhaps as a consequence of massive in-migration, considerable intermarriage between groups, an administration that recognizes and rewards diversity, the presence of sufficient resources to avoid intense ethnic competition, or a combination of all of these conditions, there is an almost post-modernist rejection of 'totalizing metanarratives', and in their stead an acknowledgement of the 'multiple, shifting and, at times, nonsynchronous identities' that are the norm

for individuals (May et al., 2004: 10). In Sikkim, then, speaking a language—or perhaps more saliently, 'not' speaking a language—is not a diagnostic marker of ethnic identity or belonging. Linguistic belonging increasingly lies not in performance, but in history. From a legal perspective, one may speak of the 'right' to not use and not speak a language, but invoke it nevertheless as a primary form of symbolic attachment. As one student answered my clearly naive query on the apparent disconnect between his avowed lack of proficiency in a language and his answer to question 22 of the survey: 'Of course we have a mother tongue, I just don't speak it'.

However, if spoken or written competence is not so highly prized, why are so many students learning their ancestral language in schools across Sikkim? Along with other commentators, I have congratulated the Sikkimese government for offering minority languages as subjects in the school curriculum. To be clear, the medium of instruction across Sikkim is English, but Lepcha, Limbu, Newar, or Rai (and many other languages) may be taken as additional subjects by students who hail from these communities. Yet we should not assume that the students who opt for these classes are actually being taught the language in order to use it, or that they are being steeped in the performative skill that true competence entails. Rather, through the prism of language, they are learning mostly heritage, culture, history, and ancestry. In fact, these students are 'learning belonging', because the utility of such languages to young Sikkimese is now as markers of belonging rather than as vernaculars for daily use. Moreover, it is precisely because these languages now have emotional, symbolic, and political importance, rather than practical utility, that the Government of Sikkim can afford to teach them. Once again, we hear an echo of Zolberg's writing on the history of migration to the United States, where he demonstrates how the development of cheap printing technology (in Sikkim we may think of school books as well) led to a proliferation of newspapers in the immigrants' mother tongues, contributing to the formation of hyphenated identities.

We should therefore not be surprised when initiatives to bring Newar teachers from Kathmandu (cf. Pariyar, Shrestha, and Gellner's chapter, this volume) to teach Nepal Bhasa in Sikkim fail, as the aims of the instructors and the students are most likely quite different: Newar teachers come to these classes to revive their language among migrant Newars in Sikkim, whereas the latter attend the classes to learn the symbols and metaphors of ancestry. In Nepal, by way of

comparison, where minority languages are still spoken, language competence continues to be a core marker of ethnic and individual identity for most speakers.

ELITES, CLASS, AND BELONGING: FURTHER AVENUES FOR INQUIRY

The results of the Sikkim language survey offer interesting insights into a number of issues, including correlations with gender, region, age, and kind of school (government or private), but there is no space to address these here. The full results will be provided to the Sikkimese government in the future. For now, I would like to conclude with a few thoughts on elites and their relationship to language.

David Gellner (1997) has noted the incongruity in the positions taken by language and culture activists in Nepal who promote the use of indigenous languages but pay for their own children's education in Nepali or even English medium schools. Are such activists claiming the right to a language at the same time as asserting the right not to speak and propagate it? As Simpson has noted, this reflects a wider trope across South Asia, and may even hold true for national languages, where one finds 'elite groups in many countries who may function almost fully in English and are perceived as being considerably detached from other members of their ethnic groups and may not be not proficient in the national language of their country' (2007: 16). This inconsistency has not escaped the attention of more grassroots language campaigners, who perceive ethnic elites to be jealously guarding their proficiency in the very languages that have helped further their own advancement while at the same time wanting, or even needing, the homeland language to be maintained by their rural cousins. Such advocacy positions can become conflicted and contested, as Yuval-Davis notes for what she calls 'political agents', who:

> struggle both for the promotion of their specific position in the construction of their collectivity and its boundaries and, at the same time, use these ideologies and positions in order to promote their own power positions within and outside the collectivity. (2006: 204)

In the case of Nepal, it is almost a truism to suggest that articulations of language identity grow and change as competence in the

speech form declines. As Sheila Croucher reminds us, 'inherent in the concept and practice of belonging is the related reality of fear of not belonging' (2004: 40), and for many non-speakers of a language, a sense of emotional belonging is all that can be rescued from the ashes of dwindling linguistic proficiency.

For Tamangs who speak Tamang, or among Newars for whom Nepal *Bhasa* is still the reality of daily familial interaction, language remains embedded in practice, and the belonging that it indexes continues to be implicit. However, for members of such communities who have little or no competence in their traditional or heritage mother tongue, what matters is the existence, ongoing vitality of, and even belief in the language rather than their ability to speak it. Language has become heritage and an inalienable right, and belonging can become invoked in more explicit ways as a consequence.

Related to the issue of competence is that of purity, which once again appears to matter more to non-speakers than it does to speakers. How often does one hear a fluent speaker of Thangmi complaining about the pervasiveness of Nepali loan words in his language? Not very often, because the incorporation of loan words from Nepali or Newar may not even be noticed, or if it is, then promoted as a practical strategy for linguistic survival. In fact, as some have argued, the incorporation of loan words is a key strategy for ensuring the continued vibrancy, relevance, and longevity of smaller languages whose lexical inventories were historically modest.

Where does this leave English as it is spoken in Nepal and Sikkim? The short answer is that English continues to be a language of class and education, its role in education being fired by 'pragmatically driven public demand' (Simpson, 2007: 15). English is not a language of territorial identity in traditional terms, but is very much a language of globalized access, which makes English almost anti-territorial. English is also a language of belonging and group attachment, but belonging to a class rather than an ethnicity. In Sikkim, English is additionally the medium of instruction in all schools, breaking down elite associations somewhat, although not entirely. At face value, at least according to the national Indian narrative underscoring the equality of access, the prevalence of English as a medium of instruction benefits all communities. In reality, as de Varennes has shown, it is a false argument to suggest that by imposing a single language upon all individuals, the state is in effect treating everyone equally. The range of aptitude in English is enormous across Sikkim,

illustrated by the fact that only 74 per cent of all students surveyed claim to speak English whereas 88 per cent write it. Which language the remaining 12 per cent write in when their teachers are instructing them in English is up for debate.

Schools themselves are important sites and sources of belonging, creating associations of community through instruction and curricular content. In Sikkim's government schools, when students learn Lepcha or Bhutia, local cultural content is only one component of what is taught. As they progress through school, books on Lepcha culture gradually give way to narratives of national history written in Lepcha.

Belonging, then, 'necessitates and implies boundaries' (Croucher, 2004: 40), and schools are just one location where these boundaries can be instilled and reproduced. Belonging does not just happen, but requires action and agency, and is achieved through boundary maintenance. 'Social actors bring into being a sense of boundedness, which may also map onto a border', writes Urciuoli (1995: 531), but some communities transcend borders and many boundaries exist only in the mind. The Lepchas of Sikkim, for example, patrol multiple boundaries comprising the various aspects of their identity against encroachment from outsiders: their exclusive status as a primitive tribe, their homeland reservation of Dzongu against hydropower interests, and their political and cultural rights in Sikkim—a state that many Lepchas believe originally 'belonged' to them. At the same time that this Lepcha sense of belonging is being maintained, even supported by the state, a sense of Indian belonging is being produced, and the two processes are not mutually exclusive. Local languages such as Bhutia and Lepcha, then, are co-opted into the larger regional and national project of creating a sense of Indian belonging: becoming Indian through being Sikkimese, becoming Sikkimese by being Lepcha. Andrew Simpson makes a related point when he argues that:

> A strengthening of national identities in Asia based on local language and culture might therefore also not be an unlikely by-product of increased globalization in certain instances. (2007: 27)

Although the borders between Nepal and India are very real, they are also very thin, and in some ways the countries may be seen to be converging in how they approach attachment and belonging. In Nepal in particular, the identity landscape is fast changing. In his study of

Chantyal over a decade ago, Noonan observed that 'knowledge of the language is no longer at the core of ethnic identity, as it once must have been' (1996: 135) and that "'Chantyalness', therefore, does not include the ability to speak Chantyal among its characterizing features" (1996: 133). It is only a small step from this to having a mother tongue in which one has no mastery.

Paul Brass's statement that 'it is probably more often the case that one defends one's mother tongue when one cannot speak at all or well a language of wider communication' (2004: 365–66) is not borne out or supported by the examples that I have provided in this chapter. On the contrary, I would suggest that it is usually the elites who defend languages—sometimes even languages that need no defence such as English and Nepali—while marginalized monolinguals aspire to bilingualism. No surprise then, that battles for linguistic representation are not usually fought by the politically marginalized if linguistically competent, but waged rather by the politically strong (if linguistically incompetent) who invoke the rights of the disenfranchised in order to construct their own sense of belonging to a community of speakers whose language they may not speak.

APPENDIX

Namgyal Institute of Tibetology Gangtok, Sikkim

Linguistic Survey of Sikkim:
Part I - Language in Education and Schools

Date:

1. What is your full name ? _____ Male / Female

2. What is the name of your school ? _____

3. In what class do you study ? _____ 4. How old are you ? _____

5. How many languages can you speak ? _____ 6. How many languages can you write ? _____

7. Which languages can you speak ? _____

8. Which languages can you write ? _____

9. Which language(s) do you speak with your mother ? _____

10. Which language(s) do you speak with your father ? _____

11. Which language(s) do your parents speak together ? _____

12. Which language(s) do you speak with your grandparents ? _____

13. Which language(s) do your grandparents speak together ? _____

14. Which language(s) do your parents speak with your grandparents ? _____

15. Which language(s) do you speak with your brothers and sisters ? _____

16. Which language(s) do you speak with your school friends in break ? _____

17. If you have to write a letter, which language do you write it in ? _____

18. If you have to write a shopping list, which language do you write it in ? _____

19. If you know any songs, in which language(s) are they ? _____

20. If you know any poems, in which language(s) are they ? _____

21. If you watch TV, in which language(s) are the programmes that you watch ? _____

22. Which language is your mother tongue ? _____

23. Which languages are you now learning in school ? _____

24. Which of these languages is most important to you, and why ? _____

_____

25. If you could study only one language, which one would you choose ? _____

26. What do you want to do when you graduate from school ? _____

_____

27. Where are you from ? _____

28. How many brothers and sisters do you have ? _____

NOTES

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2. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7528454.stm
3. I am grateful to Tanka Subba for bringing this delay to my attention.
4. I am grateful to Charles Ramble for reminding me that such evocations of multilingualism with different speech forms accorded different domains of use is not new. Charles V, the King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor (1500–58), is alleged to have remarked 'I speak Spanish to God, Italian to Women, French to Men, and German to my horse.'

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