

Chapter 6

Summary and conclusions

6.0 Introduction

This research project has examined Nepali language maintenance trends in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The focus of this study has been on analyzing language use patterns in the Nepali community. These patterns were discovered through the results of two orally administered questionnaires. The Sociolinguistic Questionnaire was administered to fifty Nepalis, all of whom live in Chiang Mai. Additionally, informal interviews and observations about Nepali cultural practices and communication patterns were observed and written down.

All the data, from the development of the questionnaires, to the analysis discussed in chapter four, stemmed from the original four objectives:

Objective 1: Investigate the language use patterns of Nepalis in Chiang Mai.

Objective 2: Determine the attitudes of Nepalis in Chiang Mai towards their language and towards the languages of wider communication.

Objective 3: Assess if Nepalis in Chiang Mai are maintaining their ability to speak Nepali.

Objective 4: Draw conclusions about the future of Nepali spoken in Chiang Mai.

The four objectives led to the development of seven research questions (RQ). They are:

- RQ1. What languages are being used in key domains by Nepalis in Chiang Mai?
- RQ2. What is the dominant language used by each generation of Nepalis in Chiang Mai?
- RQ3. What are the attitudes of Nepalis towards the Nepali language?
- RQ4. What are the attitudes of Nepalis towards the languages of wider communication?
- RQ5. How do Nepalis in Chiang Mai perceive their language ability?

-RQ6. Do Nepali parents teach their children Nepali in Chiang Mai?

-RQ7. What are the differences in language use between first, second and third generation Nepalis in Chiang Mai?

The conclusions for each of the four objectives are detailed below. Additionally, a section will cover the results of the research question that guided the social network analysis chapter.

6.1 Conclusions for language use patterns

Nepali language use, in Chiang Mai, is quite high overall. Almost all the participants reported that they speak Nepali every day. It is good to keep in mind that South Asians practice “additive bilingualism”. That is, they are comfortable adding the languages of wider communication to their linguistic repertoire without losing the ability to speak their ethnic language. Therefore it is no surprise that Nepalis reportedly speak their mother tongue daily, yet also use the LWCs in many domains.

The Nepali language is spoken with the participants’ parents and grandparents. The majority of the subjects do not speak the LWCs with the older generations. The data indicates that elderly people are spoken to in Nepali because they are less comfortable with the LWCs. However, with siblings and spouses, Nepalis use both the LWCs and their ethnic language.

The domain of education seems to be the only one reserved for the LWC, whether that is Thai or Burmese. Interestingly, when I was conducting this research, I was told on two occasions that there was a Nepali-medium college in Myanmar. Unfortunately that has not been independently verified as of the time of this writing.

Unlike their parents’ language use, the LWCs are often spoken by children. They reportedly speak the LWC in the home on occasion. They are said to often speak the LWC with other Nepali children. It is possible that the children are shifting to the LWC because of their education in Thailand.

6.2 Conclusions regarding the attitudes of Nepalis towards their language and towards the languages of wider communication

The Nepali people in Chiang Mai have a positive attitude toward their ethnic language. Although Nepali children reportedly speak the LWCs in the home, most Nepali adults prefer that the children use their ethnic language in the home domain. The majority of the subjects expressed a desire for Nepali to be spoken in Chiang Mai by future generations.

Interestingly, Nepalis also have a positive attitude towards the LWCs, both the Burmese language and Thai. They recognize that many languages are useful for commerce or education. For example, some of the Nepalis interviewed for this study speak more than five languages. However, most Nepalis in Chiang Mai have a negative attitude towards exogamy. They expressed the belief that Nepalis should only marry other Nepalis. Even among Nepalis, they believe that one should only marry within one's caste.

In summary, the Nepali language is considered the best language for the home domain, but other languages can be appropriate outside the home.

6.3 Conclusions on Nepali language maintenance

The current generation of Nepalis living in Chiang Mai is maintaining their ethnic language ability. Almost all the participants in this study claimed that Nepali is their best language, and that they speak it daily. However, even though most parents still speak Nepali with their children, some parents speak an LWC with them as well. Fortunately, language maintenance among the older generation is very strong. When asked, members of the older generation all claimed that Nepali is their best language. On the other hand, some of the younger generation claimed their best language is an LWC, or Nepali and an LWC.

Among the participants in this study, self-reported Nepali language ability is strong. The majority of the subjects said that they can speak Nepali as well as any Nepalis who just arrived in Thailand. Yet, again the participants expressed uncertainty about the ability of Nepali children to speak their ethnic language as well as they speak an LWC. In fact, there appears to be a tension between the parents and children in the Nepali community, as the majority of the parents claim to be teaching their children Nepali but many children are speaking the LWC in the home.

The first, second, and third generations of Nepali speakers in Chiang Mai have very few differences in language use. The main difference is that the younger generation is more likely to use the LWC with their siblings. The older generation prefers to use Nepali with their brothers or sisters. More importantly, all the generations speak Nepali with their children, parents, and grandparents to the same degree.

6.4 Conclusions for the future of Nepali spoken in Chiang Mai

Each generation of Nepalis in Chiang Mai speak their ethnic language daily. For the most part, Nepali people have positive attitudes towards their language, which is an indicator of language vitality. In fact, almost every Nepali interviewed told me that

they hoped Nepali would be spoken by future generations in Chiang Mai. Yet some Nepalis seemed doubtful that their ethnic language would be spoken in Chiang Mai in the future, and they seemed sad about the prospect of such a loss.

Nepalis have a strong cultural identity and discourage exogamy. When Nepalis marry Nepalis, it ensures that Nepali can be spoken by both parents to their offspring, thus promoting language vitality.

Children, however, are choosing to speak the LWC as well as Nepali in the home. They also like to speak the LWC when playing with their Nepali friends. Therefore, the future of Nepali spoken in Chiang Mai is uncertain.

6.5 Conclusions regarding the introduction of a language development/preservation program

Many Nepalis in Chiang Mai have indicated a desire to start an after-school program to teach Nepali children their ethnic language and culture. Social Network Analysis (SNA) has been used to aid the introduction of various development programs to different communities. SNA can identify the most strategic communities within a group, and the influential people within that group. Therefore, SNA can help identify the best venue for introducing and implementing a language development program in the Nepali community.

After a brief analysis of the Nepali community in Chiang Mai, it was discovered that the Hindu temple and the Nepali tailors are the groups with the most information paths, both receiving information and distributing it to the other groups. Furthermore, the Nepali tailors and the members of the Hindu temple also have the highest degree of centrality.

A person must be identified to initiate the diffusion of information about the study program for Nepali children. In SNA, this person is referred to as a “network weaver”. In the Nepali community, the network weaver ought to be a member of the Hindu temple, or one of the Nepali tailors. Fortunately, many of the tailors interviewed stated that they were members of the Hindu temple. Therefore, it might be possible to identify a network weaver who is from both groups.

The network weaver could promote the after-school program, as well as encouraging the less-connected groups to participate in meetings. Eventually, they could even contact periphery groups of Nepalis living in Bangkok or Phuket, which would enable them to share ideas and resources.

6.6 Limitations of the research

At the time of this research, I recognize that attempting to measure language shift or language maintenance is limited by the small scale of this survey. Language shift and language maintenance are difficult to examine in quantifiable terms. This study is merely an observation of language maintenance trends. Any attempt to quantify maintenance or shift is beyond the scope of the research. Hopefully this study can reveal a picture of the direction in which the Nepali community is moving.

Some specific limitations in this study were: a lack of female participants, a limited amount of time, and a geographical limitation to the community in Chiang Mai. Finding female subjects was a challenging part of this study. It appears as if there are more Nepali men than Nepali women migrating to Chiang Mai from Myanmar. Many of the Nepali men said their wives were too occupied with their babies, or they lived too far away to participate in this research. Therefore only 20 women were involved in this study, whereas 30 men were interviewed.

The current research was also limited by time constraints. Most of the Nepalis interviewed work in tourist areas, so the research was conducted during the low season for tourism in Chiang Mai. When peak season began, it became increasingly difficult to find subjects who had free time. Therefore, a random sample of subjects was not possible, and a convenience sample was employed. Additionally, this study would benefit from more sociolinguistic research on the sizable communities of Nepalis living in Bangkok and Phuket.

There is a drawback to using a questionnaire, rather than in-depth observation of language use. It is possible that the Nepali people believe their language is being used more than it actually is, particularly with children. It is difficult to administer a questionnaire to children, and therefore most beneficial to observe their language use at home, at school, and at play. Observation would certainly help clarify the language maintenance issues with Nepali children in Chiang Mai. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, observations of children were limited in this study.

6.7 Evaluation of the sociolinguistic questionnaire (SLQ)

No sociolinguistic survey work is without flaws. Therefore, it is constructive to look at what was ineffective. In this section, the main tool of the research, the SLQ, is evaluated. The following are questions, which, for various reasons did not work:

47. What languages do you speak (if old and have children)...with your grandchildren?

This question could have been eliminated because only three subjects had grandchildren which were old enough to speak. Three subjects' responses are not enough to be statistically significant. The research would have been improved if the researcher had investigated the ages of the oldest members of the Nepali community before designing the questionnaire.

51. *Do you ever speak a "bholi" or caste language? Nepali translation: Kahilekahi saano bhasha bolnuhunccha?*

When the researcher asked this question, the subjects often did not understand her, until she gave examples of a few of the other languages spoken in Nepal. The confusion may have risen from a bad translation in Nepali. Literally, the question asks: "Sometimes do you speak small languages?" This question has worked successfully in surveys in Nepal, but may be too regional for Burmese Nepalis to understand. However, even when they did seem to understand (after further explanation), only six people had ever heard of other languages from Nepal.

63. *Can you read or write any other languages?*

64. *Which languages?*

These two questions are simply unnecessary for this research. In retrospect, the information about literacy in other languages does not correlate to the objectives or hypothesis of this study.

It is important to understand what kind of information a researcher is attempting to document. The next set of questions actually elicited the wrong types of information for this survey:

13. *What is your religion?*

This question was not specific enough. Because 16 subjects responded Hindu Buddhist, the researcher should have followed up with "Which temple do you go to?" Nepalis seem to see both religions as very similar, and indeed, some Nepali groups such as the Newars of Nepal, worship Hindu and Buddhist deities. It would have been more effective to ascertain what temples each subject attends, because sometimes they see Hinduism and Buddhism as two variations of the same thing. If the research showed that they only go to the Hindu temple (or a Buddhist temple, for that matter), it would have clarified the data. "Hindu Buddhist" may have been a convenient answer for the subjects, but made it difficult to analyze the data for this research.

59. *Can you explain the relationships in your family in Nepali?*

In conducting sociolinguistic surveys, one must keep in mind that working class people can feel distrustful of anybody who asks too many questions about their personal lives. This question, while seemingly straightforward, actually frightened some people. A few subjects acted disconcerted, and needed to know why the researcher was asking questions about their family members. The researcher had to explain very carefully that she was only trying to assess their ability to explain certain topics using the Nepali language. After such explanation, the subjects all agreed that their Nepali ability was sufficient. A different sort of self-reported language ability question would have been less threatening to the subjects. A popular self-reported ability question among surveyors is:

“If you were buying land from another Nepali, could you get a fair price using the Nepali language?”

This question would be less threatening, while still eliciting the right information.

There are a few questions which would have helped this research. In hindsight, the researcher ought to have included questions about who, in the Nepali community, communicates to whom. Some SNA questions such as, “Do t-shirt sellers ever talk to the Nepali tailors?” would have been helpful for this research. Additionally, a question about the perceived need for an after-school program for Nepali children would have benefitted this study too.

6.8 Suggestions for further research

Many recommendations can be given for ongoing research, as language maintenance is a rich area of study. The way education in Myanmar influences Nepali language maintenance would be a beneficial subject for research. Additionally, a study similar to this one, using the same questionnaires, could be administered to Nepali villages in Myanmar for a cross-country comparison.

It was reported that, in the Nepali villages in Myanmar, there are after-school programs to teach Nepali children the language, script, religious rites, and culture. Perhaps this is one reason that Nepalis in Myanmar have been able to maintain their language for so many years. In Chiang Mai, on the other hand, there are no Nepali villages, just a small community within a large city. Also, there is no after-school program yet. These could be the factors that are crucial for the language maintenance success in Myanmar. A survey in Myanmar would clarify these language vitality issues and shed light on the language environment in Chiang Mai.

There are reported Nepali communities in Bangkok and Phuket. One participant described an after-school program for Nepalis in Bangkok, at a Nepali temple. That would be a good location to conduct research on language maintenance in that Nepali community.

A further area of research could be a comparison of the dialects of Nepali spoken in Myanmar, north India, Thailand and Nepal.

Finally, it would be beneficial to add a few questions to the sociolinguistic questionnaire to assess whether or not Nepalis have access to literature in Nepali, and whether or not they choose to read it, as well as whether or not they have Nepali DVDs, movies, or Nepali music.

6.9 Summary

The hypothesis which led to this study is reexamined here:

The first generation of Nepali immigrants living in Chiang Mai is preserving their language, and they use it in all domains. The second generation of Nepali immigrants living in Chiang Mai uses their language in the family and home domains.

The hypothesis was confirmed by the data gathered using the results of the Sociolinguistic Questionnaire. Though other languages are spoken, Nepali is still used the most in the family and cultural domains (see Section 4.2.2, Figure 6). Although the subjects' generation and the younger generation speak more than one language, there is strong evidence that the Nepali subjects prefer to speak Nepali more than any other language, with all three generations (see Section 4.2.1, Figure 5).

In this research evidence seems to support that there is ongoing language maintenance in the Nepali community in Chiang Mai, Thailand. This conclusion comes from the results of the Screening Questionnaire, and the Sociolinguistic Questionnaire, which was administered to 50 Nepali participants. Additionally there are other factors which contribute to language maintenance among Nepalis. One such factor is the scarcity of marriages between Nepalis and non-Nepalis. According to Joshua Fishman, keeping marriages in one's own language group is the most important factor for language preservation (personal communication). Another factor is the desire for Nepalis to send their children to an after-school program to study Nepali language and culture. One final factor is the knowledge that South

Asians practice additive bilingualism, and handle speaking many languages, without necessarily leading to the loss of their mother tongue.

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