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BIBLIOGRAPHIC RESEARCH REPORT

Learning Nepali: Textbooks, Dictionaries and Other Aids

Ruth Schmidt

I. Grammars and Textbooks

A wide range of grammars and textbooks is currently available in Kathmandu bookstores. These are described below in terms of their usefulness for various types of learners.

Clark, T.W. 1977. Introduction to Nepali. London: School of Oriental and African Studies. xvii, 421 pp. A comprehensive treatment of the grammar using traditional grammatical concepts and terminology. It is somewhat out of date and not particularly relevant to the needs of a student wanting primarily conversational skills. As a reference work, however, it is comprehensive and well-organized, and would be a useful guide in tackling the complexities of the written language. The Nepali writing system is introduced, but the reader does not need to learn it in order to refer to the book. There is no index.

Karki, T.B. and C.K. Shrestha (no date). Basic Course in Spoken Nepali. Kathmandu: By the Authors. xv, 266 pp. Written for use in Peace Corps language training, it contains mainly conversational lessons on topics relevant to daily life, in a question-and-answer format. There is a useful introduction to the Nepali sound system, but minimal systematic explanation of grammar. A 15-page, topically organized vocabulary and a brief description of the writing system (in which the reader is shown how to form the Devanagari characters) are helpful additions. Apart from the section dealing with the writing system, all the material is presented in Romanized transcription.

Karmacharya, B.N. and K. Khanal. 1983. New Revised Nepali Course. Kathmandu: United Mission to Nepal, Language and Orientation Programme. iv, 305 pp. Uses the Devanagari writing system throughout except for English titles and directions to the reader. Contains grammatical explanation, graded vocabulary, phonemic drills, buildup grammar drills and conversational practice, in 48 graded lessons. It would be a useful book for a student working with a trained language teacher, perhaps less helpful to a student studying on his own.

Matthews, D.J. 1984. A Course in Nepali. London: School of Oriental and African Studies. iv, 344 pp. The author aims for a balanced approach in 20 graded lessons dealing with both conversational and written Nepali. The grammatical concepts and system of transcription follow conventions adopted by Clark, but their handling is less abstruse. While the grammatical explanation is systematic and insightful, there are places where the author's efforts to provide a comprehensive grammatical analysis interfere with his usual simple and precise treatment of colloquial material.

For example, on p. 40, a complete listing of personal pronouns is provided, in which yini, uni and tini are treated as "middle grade honorifics" equivalent to timi. Yo, tyo and u are

ranked as "low grade honorifics" equivalent to ta. This results in a symmetrical analysis and is formally correct, but may be misleading to the student, who is apt to conclude that he should shun the use of u as rigorously as he avoids the use of ta. However, the middle grade form, uni, belongs as much to a distinct speech style (formal/literary) as it does to a vertical ranking of honorifics. Furthermore, tini tends to mean 'she,' and does not correspond exactly to tyo, which as a pronoun usually means 'it'.

The Devanagari writing system is introduced at the outset, and the reader must master it in order to make effective use of the work. The author has made minor adaptations to the spelling (with halantha) to reflect pronunciation; otherwise the traditional Nepali spelling is employed. A 45-page Nepali-English vocabulary is appended.

Pradhan, K.B. 1980. The Structure of Spoken Nepali. University of Wisconsin. Madison [xerox]. 370 pp. Consists of nine graded chapters organized as (a) text, (b) explanations, (c) vocabulary and (d) exercises. Uses the Devanagari writing system for texts and exercises with some Roman transcription in grammatical explanations. The grammatical explanation is insightful and the texts and exercises are interesting. The two major weaknesses of the book are its lack of an index (partially offset by the detailed table of contents) and the unsystematic, unalphabetized presentation of vocabulary (which is however well-glossed). Fred Euphrat has compiled and alphabetized the vocabulary in a glossary (See Euphrat, p. 4).

Pradhan, Y.S. and K.M. Malla. 1985. Nepali Self-Taught. Kathmandu: Educational Enterprises. 208 pp. A conversationally oriented book using traditional grammatical terminology and pedagogical methods. There are 20 lessons organized by grammatical topics, with vocabularies, conversations, and translation exercises. A 58-page appendix contains topically classified English words with Nepali equivalents. The Devanagari writing system is introduced, but all the lessons are in Roman transcription. The book is so portable that the trekker may wish the authors had geared it to his special needs.

Sharma, T.N. 1983. Beginning Nepali for Foreign Learners. Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan. 232 pp. A well-organized book, beginning with an introduction to the writing and sound systems, including helpful lists of minimal pairs; going on to graded grammatical explanation with plenty of drills. There is a 22-page topically organized vocabulary. In order to use the book, the student must master the Devanagari writing system.

Shrestha, B.P. and K.P. Sharma. 1982. Speak with the Nepalese. Kathmandu: By the Authors. vi, 227 pp. Topically organized, conversationally oriented lessons with brief grammatical notes. There is an introduction to the Devanagari writing system; otherwise Roman transcription is used. There is also a 25-page glossary and a section containing "useful expressions."

Varma, M.K. and T.N. Sharma. 1979. Intermediate Nepali Structure (Vol. 1) and Intermediate Nepali Reader (Vol. 2). New Delhi: Manohar. Volume 1 contains a review of major grammatical and syntactic structure, with drills and exercises; this material is summarized in paradigmatic format at the end of the book. It would be helpful to a student who controls the basics of the language and who wishes to tackle more complex grammatical structures. Volume 2 contains glossed readings, which are not graded.

Two additional works which may be of use to some students are mentioned below, although they are no longer generally available.

Hari, A.M. 1971. Conversational Nepali. Kathmandu: Summer Institute of Linguistics. Contains an introduction to the phonemic system and orthography, six conversational lessons oriented toward daily life situations, samples of letters, some grammatical information, and drills. This is usually available in U.S. libraries which participated in the PL-480 acquisition of books published in Nepal, and may be useful to the beginner who must make a quick adjustment to Nepal while simultaneously learning the language.

Schmidt, R.L. 1968. Nepali Conversational Manual. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Department of South Asia Regional Studies. vi, 140 pp. Intended as a companion volume to Clark, Introduction to Nepali, this provides drills, conversations, cultural notes and readings. There are extensive cross-references to Clark, but limited grammatical explanation, so a student who has this book will want to obtain a copy of Clark and look things up as he goes along. The most useful part of the book is perhaps the cultural notes and cultural material incorporated into the drills and readings (although this reflects conditions which have changed since the book was written). A discussion of the levels of honorific usage in Chapter 7 may also be helpful.

II. Small Phrase Books and Grammatical Sketches

Baidya, K. 1982. Teach Yourself Nepali: A Tourist Manual. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar. Brief grammatical sketches, work study, translation exercises, and 13 pages of topically classified English words with Nepali translations. The Nepali writing system is introduced. More situational conversations of relevance to the trekker would be desirable.

Ratna Book Distributors. 1986. Ratna Trekker's Pocket Pal. 36 pp. Topically organized vocabulary, useful phrases, numbers. Tiny, but handy.

Shrestha, D.B. and C.B Singh. 1985. Situation Conversation in Nepali with English Equivalents. Kathmandu: By the Authors. 136 pp. Situational conversations, useful phrases, some vocabulary, and numbers. The conversations are provided in English, Romanized Nepali and Devanagari--a useful feature for people with no "ear for language," since they can simply show the book to the Nepali speaker and point to the appropriate phrase.

III. Dictionaries

As with grammars, the student should first decide what his needs are and make his selection accordingly. If his aim is rapid acquisition of simple conversation in an active field situation, he may be better off making do with Meerendonk or some other pocket dictionary or glossary, supplemented by his own vocabulary notebook (in which he records words and phrases as he learns them). If on the other hand he wants to read and write Nepali, he will probably find Turner and/or Sarma indispensable, even though the first is out of date and the second has become a rare book (and neither fits in a backpack).

The student should also bear in mind that it is never enough to learn single words in isolation. The meaning of even simple words changes in different contexts (compare sajilo kaam 'an easy job' with sajilo mec 'an easy [comfortable] chair'). Furthermore, single English words may be translated by Nepali compounds, such as 'wait' (baaTo hernu) or 'confirm' (pakkaa garnu).

Finally, the advanced student should not overlook the resources offered by Hindi-English

and Sanskrit-English dictionaries for the Sanskrit vocabulary which has been borrowed into Nepali, much of it fairly recently.

Nepali-English Dictionaries and Glossaries

Euphrat, Fred. 1985. An Incomplete Nepali Dictionary [based on the text of Krishna Pradhan, University of Wisconsin, Madison]. 52 pp. An alphabetical list of English words with English glosses, followed by an alphabetical list of English words with Nepali equivalents. The choice of words is good and the booklet is a useful adjunct to Pradhan, K.D., The Structure of Nepali.

Meerendonk, M. 1960. Basic Gurkhali Dictionary. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, (Nepali-English and English-Nepali sections.) 257 pp. This favorite of trekkers has gone through numerous reprintings. It fits in a shirt pocket, but contains only 2,500 entries with brief glosses, and some terms are obsolete (such as military terms for which the average reader has no use). These disadvantages are offset by the handiness of its English-Nepali section.

Pradhan, P.M. 1983. Nepali-Nepali-English Dictionary. Kalimpong [India], Bhagyamani Publishers. 636 pp. Relying heavily on Turner, it nevertheless includes many Sanskrit borrowings of recent adoption, and is handy for those reading Nepali language newspapers or Nepali literature. Its most serious weakness is its failure to deal with compounds except in a few brief tables at the end of the book. It also lacks illustrative examples. The selection of entries is good.

Schmidt, R.L. with M. Singh and R.N. Ghimire. 1985. A Learner's Glossary of Nepali [Draft]. University of California, Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies. xii, 127 pp. This modest collection of 1,249 Nepali-English entries disappeared almost immediately after its publication in a short print run. Its usefulness lies primarily in its illustrative examples of the usage of its entries in sentences or phrases, and in its supplementary grammatical information. It is currently under revision by Grace Terrell and Raghu Ghimire in Kathmandu.

Singh, M. and A. Aistrop. [no date]. English to Nepali Translation Dictionary. San Francisco: By the Authors. 50 pp. Despite its title, this is a pocket glossary; as such it is practical and easy to carry around. Contains over 1,000 Nepali translations of English words and phrases with some special meaning-groups (family, parts of the body, feelings, foods, numbers, time, etc.).

Turner, R.L. 1931, 1966. A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language. New York: Frederick Ungar; reprinted New Delhi, Allied Publishers, 1980. Still the most useful work for students of literature at the intermediate level. Its 26,000 entries include grammatical and etymological information, with occasional illustrative phrases. Compounds of all types are treated in detail. In many cases, however, the definitions are incomplete or the information is out of date.

Nepali-Nepali Dictionaries

The advanced student will want to consult one of the two unabridged Nepali-Nepali dictionaries (of which one, Nepali Sabda-Kos, has unfortunately become quite rare. Both of them provide definitions of specialized terms and modern Sanskrit borrowings which are not

found in Turner, often defining difficult words with a phrase or entire sentence. The major disadvantage of both is that they do not deal with compounds.

Parajuli, K.P., et al., 1983. Nepali Brhat Sabdakos [Unabridged Nepali Dictionary]. Kathmandu: Royal Nepal Academy. 1431 p. The most modern treatment of the language and the most comprehensive as far as new borrowings and modern usages are concerned, it is not more accurate than Sarma, Nepali Sabdakos. Advanced students will find it useful especially when supplemented by a good Sanskrit-English Dictionary.

Sarma, Balachandra. 1962. Nepali-Sabdakos. [Nepal Dictionary]. Kathmandu: Royal Nepal Academy. 1146 pp. This is the best dictionary for the advanced student, but it is not available in Kathmandu. The enterprising scholar may manage to track down a copy in libraries in the U.S.A. or Europe.