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PHONOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY OF NEPAL LANGUAGES[1]

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Abstract This study applies the method of Henderson's classic typological survey of SE Asia to 21 languages of Nepal, including 20 members of the Tibeto-Burman (TB) family.

Nepal has both tonal (a close majority) and non-tonal languages; in each category, languages with 2, 3, and 4 initial manner-series are found. Stopped and open syllables generally have the same number of tonal distinctions. Two neighboring East Nepal languages have a preglottalized ɓ- (as well as b-). The opposition of retroflex vs dental is found in Nepali and in three East Nepal TB languages, as well as in the Tibetan and Tamang groups, which have initials of the rhotacized type. The languages of the survey have between five and ten vowel qualities, with the richest system in East Nepal. Only Limbu, the easternmost, has distinctive length in closed syllables. Two eastern languages have syllabic nasals, only as personal prefixes. Many of the languages have the ten finals of written Tibetan; one, Chepang, has both glottalized and devoiced series of resonant finals.

In a brief comparative digression, a link is proposed between the preglottalized ɓ- of Bahing and Sunwar and labiovelar articulations of West Nepal.

The present survey is an attempt to apply the method of Henderson's classic typological study of South East Asian languages (1965) to a much smaller area, namely the languages of Nepal. My aim is partly to see if it is possible to detect any micro-areal features (which may or may not turn out to have a common genetic origin), and at the same time to pass in review the phonological properties of the Nepal languages on which materials are available as a preliminary to comparative studies. Eventually I would hope to extend this study at least to neighboring parts of the Western Himalaya and Assam, and, on another axis, to morphological and syntactic traits.

Because Nepal shows less phonological diversity than the vast area covered by Henderson, I have not retained all of her typological criteria; on the other hand, I have been able to go into a few less salient ones. I hope I have not forgotten to make clear what features are common to all of the languages covered, or absent from all, so that this study can be used in conjunction with hers, or with that of Ramanujan and Masica (1969).[2] The relative homogeneity of the

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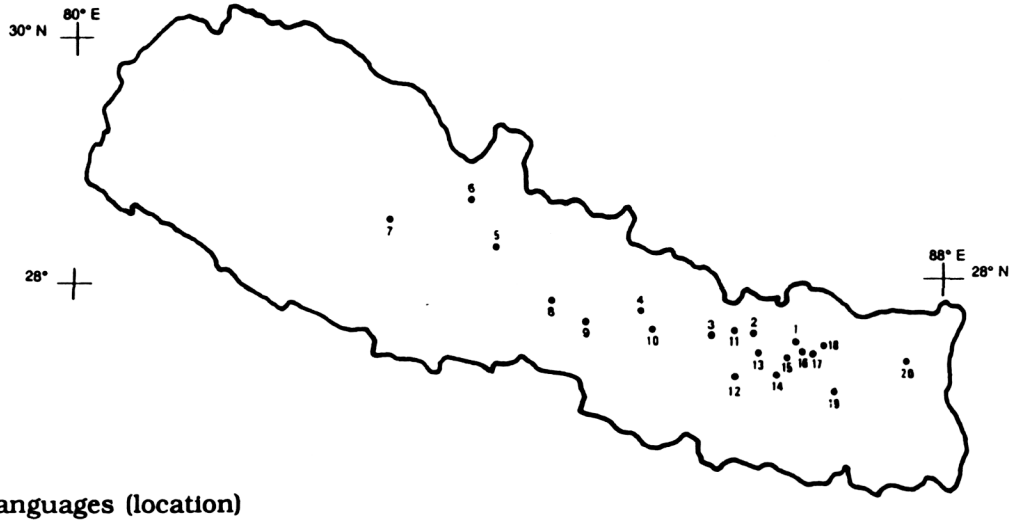
[2] The information on Nepal in Ramanujan and Masica's survey contains several inaccuracies, not all of them traceable in their cited sources: (1) Newari is credited with distinctive retroflexion (p. 555). (2) Nepali is credited with the oppositions i vs ɪ and u vs ʊ – an opposition of tenseness and reflex of quantity – in addition to the well-known a vs ə, (3) Nepali is credited with a palatal nasal initial.

languages covered has made it possible to be fairly complete; if I do not mention a salient feature, for example prenasalized series or retroflex vs non-retroflex laterals, it is probably safe to infer that it does not occur, or at least has not been reported. I have tried to exclude patterns found only in loans.

The 20 languages covered, with the exception of Nepali, the Indo-Aryan national language, all belong to the Tibeto-Burman family – in fact to Shafer's Bodic Division of the family. As for subgrouping, it seems clear that Sherpa and Jirel are dialects of Tibetan (i.e. in Shafer's Bodish branch), and that Tamang, Gurung, and Thakali form a subgroup allied to Tibetan (in Shafer's Bodish section). Subgrouping of the rest of the languages is less advanced: most attempts have coincided with geographical distribution in distinguishing a western from an eastern group, with Newari by itself. For the purposes of this survey I will refer to Hayu, Sunwar, Bahing, Thulung, Khaling, Sotang, Kulung, Bantawa, and Limbu as the "Eastern Pronominalized Group." For the geographical distribution of the languages, represented in schematic form on the typological maps, see map 1;

MAP 1: Languages



Languages (location)

1.	Sherpa	(Kerung)	12	Hayu	(Murajor)
2.	Jirel	(Jiri-Yarsa)	13.	Sunwar	(Sabra)
3.	E. Tamang	(Risiangku)	14.	Bahing	(Rangadip)
4.	W. Tamang	(Sahugaon)	15.	Thulung	(Mukli)
5.	Gurung	(Ghachok)	16.	Khaling	(Khastap)
6.	Thakali	(Tukchhe)	17.	Sotang	(Nambu)
7.	Kham	(Taka-Sera)	18.	Kulung	(Bung)
8.	Magar	(Yanchok)	19.	Bantawa	(Chhinamkhu)
9.	Chepang	(Maiserang)	20.	Limbu	(Libang, Tembe)
10.	Kathmandu Newari			Nepali	(Central and E. Nepal dialects)
11.	Dolakha Newari				

for the sources, see the language bibliography. In recent years, each of the TB languages has been more closely in contact with Nepali (virtually all speakers being bilingual) than with any neighboring TB language.

An earlier survey along these same lines was made by Hale (1970), covering Gurung, Tamang, Thakali, Chepang, (Kathmandu) Newari, Sunwar, and Sherpa in considerable detail. My main interest is in the eastern languages, of which only Sunwar is covered by Hale, but I have chosen to cover Hale's other languages as well for the sake of completeness.

I have included a few comparative and historical remarks in the survey, but I think it will be clear where typology ends and comparison begins. In any case, diachronic developments have their own typologies, as Haudricourt (1951) has pointed out (Haudricourt's term "panchronic" is particularly suggestive – cf. Hagège and Haudricourt 1978).

Tone/Register (map 2):

The survey area includes both tonal and non-tonal languages, and some borderline cases. As a general rule, the same number of tonal distinctions is found in syllables with and without final stops (but see Chepang, below). This is in sharp contrast with the situation in the languages of Henderson's survey.

The Tibetan and Tamang groups are described as having four tone categories each, with either no initial voicing distinction or a distinction only on certain tones. These systems have been thoroughly discussed by Mazaudon (1973b, 1977, 1978). Sherpa is noted on the map as having an initial voicing opposition limited to the low tone; in the Khumbu dialect, however, voicing of stops is entirely determined by tone (Sprigg 1977:15).[3]

The remaining tone systems are rather different in type, in that they coexist with fully distinctive voicing oppositions on initial stops. In West Nepal, Kham is described (PS) as having a complex interaction between "pitch-pattern" and register, Magar as having only register.

Magar is described as having a system of two registers, clear and breathy, whose domain is the syllable. The phonetic exponents of the breathy register depend on the voicing of the syllable-initial as follows (PS:31):

voiced initials: initial murmured; vowel breathy; low pitch.

unvoiced initials: initial aspirated; "slight" breathiness and pitch lowering.

Aspiration or murmur, which are observed with all initials, are considered as entirely conditioned by register. No difference in pitch between clear register syllables with voiceless and with voiced initials is mentioned.

The syllabic nature of breathiness, at least with voiced initials, the fact that its exponents, aspiration/murmur, can be generalized to all initials (Magar is the only Nepal language to have [sʰ]), and the fact that breathiness may move forward a syllable after the negative prefix all make its interpretation as a prosody attractive. It would still be possible, however, to describe Magar as having p-ph-b-bh-m-mh initials (i.e. both aspiration and murmur – the Newari pattern plus sʰ) instead of register.

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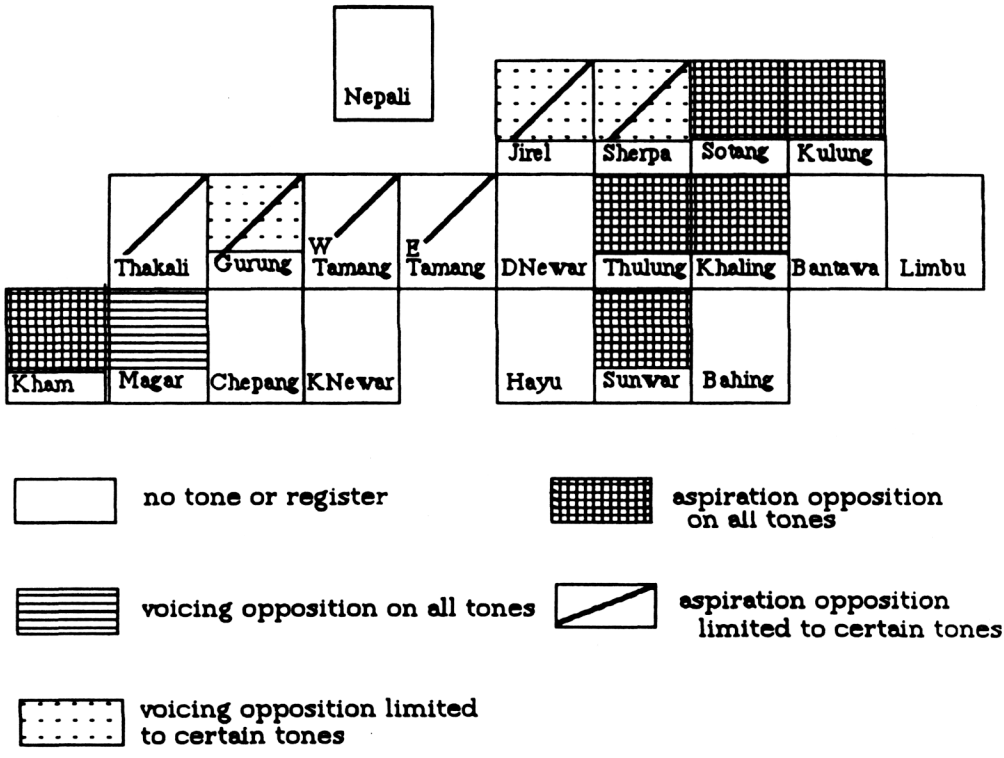
3 Burton-Page described voicing as entirely conditioned by tone in Gurung (1955).

MAP 2: Tone/register and initial stops



Chepang is described as a non-tonal language in which pitch plays an important rôle. According to Caughley's analysis (PS, 1970), pitch is conditioned mainly by syllable-finals, in which Chepang is particularly rich (see below). High pitch is conditioned by the stop finals (p, t, c, k), the glottal finals (ʔ, mʔ, nʔ, ɲʔ, ŋʔ, rʔ, lʔ), and perhaps the devoiced series (n̥, etc.). The problem is that the glottal stop, whether alone or associated with a resonant, is not always realized as such, and at times the raised pitch is the best clue as to its underlying presence (PS:5-7). Thus Chepang has the classic type of Southeast Asian tone (or pre-tone) system (without the bipartition or tripartition of Haudricourt 1961), with one series of stop finals (or the stopped tone) and three series of non-stop finals (or three tones): clear, glottal, and breathy. (In Chepang, the glottal series would apparently have the same pitch as the stopped series.) This is the kind of system proposed by Haudricourt for proto-Vietnamese (1954a) and Archaic Chinese (1954b) and currently found in a number of Mon-Khmer languages. It is also comparable to Boro (Burton-Page 1955).

In the pronominalized languages of East Nepal, tone is reported from a clearly defined area including Sunwar, Khaling, probably Sotang and Kulung, and (problematically) Thulung. All of these languages have distinctive voicing and aspiration of initial stops on all tones; some have murmur as well.

In Sunwar and Khaling, and tentatively in Sotang and Kulung, two-tone systems are reported. Phonetically, the exponents of these systems are high and