Consumers learning European languages today can choose from a growing list of instructional materials, ranging from traditional pocket-sized Berlitz travel companions to interactive CD-ROMs. The latter have the advantage of being designed as linguistic resources that the learner can personalize and hold his/her attention. For the most part, only the commercially viable language courses have been made interactive (such as Spanish, German, and Russian), while minority languages materials, into which category Nepali certainly falls, offer at best an audio tape of sample conversations alongside a printed course book.

By Mark Turner

I t was thus with some surprise that I came across EuroTalk Interactive’s Talk Now! series of CD-ROMs, offering multimedia instruction in lesser-known languages such as Assamese, Farsi, Kannada, Manx and…Nepali. I ordered the course entitled ‘Learn Nepalii: Essential words and phrases for absolute beginners’ and was rather bemused by the contents.

Double-clicking the rainbows coloured Talk Now! icon on the desktop, takes the user to a secondary folder. While the natural choice would be to click the icon labelled ‘Learn Nepalii’, my eye was drawn instead to a folder underneath which reads, in rather small and blocky Devanagari, Klining script. I can only interpret this to mean ‘Learn Klingon’, the language spoken by the race immortalized in Star Trek. More surprising still, in ways that I will describe later, is that the Klingon lemmot vmfu pervades the whole CD-ROM. Clicking on the folder ‘Klining script’, the user is left with the feeling that a Nligar-iterate computer program is having a laugh at someone’s expense, in this case probably the company’s (EuroTalk). After all, it is likely that neither EuroTalk’s managerial staff nor users of the CD-ROM read Devanagari script.

On double-clicking the more promising ‘Learn Nepalii’ icon, the user is required to personalize the interface by typ- ing in a name. A very pleasant (if uncommon) Nepali voice greeting, ‘nihau dhin (Good Day), is then heard followed by a loud American shouting ‘Good Afternoon’. While the top left of the home screen is dominated by administrative features, including ‘Talk Now!’ and ‘Learn Nepalii’, the prominent graphical icon of a CD in the middle of the screen labelled ‘Learn Nepalii’ is strangely not clickable. The user is to click a small start button instead, once again to enter a name, only to hear the same enthusiastic American voice say ‘Welcome to EuroTalk’, the irony of which is all too apparent when starting to learn a South Asian language.

The content of the CD-ROM is housed within a subdivided roulette wheel of clickable segments, including ‘First Words’, ‘Countries’, ‘Numbers’, ‘Phrases’ and ‘Food’. The subdivisions are sensible and useful, and navigation through the different sections is likewise intuitive. In each subsection, the user must choose an approach fitting his or her needs: word practice, speaking practice, an easy game or a more challenging one. The overarching structure is heavily dependent on graphics rather than text, and success is measured by passing tests. This approach will appeal to younger learners, but university students, researchers, healthcare or development professionals who are hoping to learn Nepalii as part of their vocational preparation may find the interface childish and frustrating. Many educational CD-ROMs offer level or aptitude testing. This approach will appeal to younger learners, but for the most part, only the commercial versions of the six emerging independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The book is divided into four parts. In the first part, the author provides a basic outline of the background of these newly independent states from the Soviet era to their present independent status. The second part studies each republic independently, focusing mainly on their future to survive as independent states. The third analysis their relationships with the global world in general and the neighbouring states in particular. The final part offers the reader an insight into the future of this region. Life After the Soviet Union is recommended for those who seek a better understanding of the complexities that

Learn Nepalii: Talk Later

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