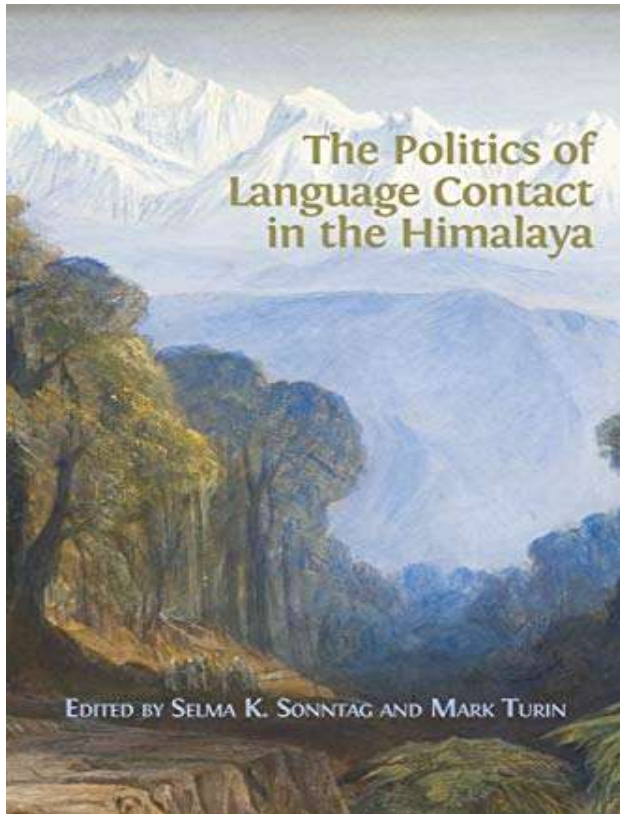


Selma K. Sonntag and Mark Turin, eds. *The Politics of Language Contact in the Himalaya*. Cambridge UK: Open Book Publishers, 2019. xiv+181 pp. ISBN 978-1-78374-704-7.



The book under review is a noteworthy publication for two specific reasons. First, it deals with a unique geo-cultural region which has been gradually coming into wider focus for various reasons including literary-cultural ones. Two prominent “nations” which have attracted global attention in this respect are Nepal and Tibet. Secondly, exclusive focus of the chapters in this book is on the linguistic contact zones in the Himalayan region. The “contact zones” initiate dialogues between languages but at the same time the very contact generates a battle for establishing hegemonic control over other competing languages. As the book demonstrates, official language policies, coupled with popular perceptions and practices, create hierarchies between “mainstream” languages and local “dialects,” between written and oral languages, and between systemically “structured” language and poorly structured languages. All the contributors have

paid attention to this aspect of politics in their studies. The chapters are based on serious empirical researches. Field studies, surveys, interviews carried out by them yield a rich crop of facts and figures related to specific languages and sites of linguistic exercises and performances. The speech communities are carefully selected and the chapters are uniformly structured. Although the fields of discussion are approached mainly from synchronic points of view, diachronic information also flows in, when necessary, for the sake of wider historical understanding. The book is interdisciplinary in approach as the contributors belong to different fields of study such as linguistics, political science, anthropology and geography.

The introductory chapter is written by Selma K. Sonntag. She sets the tone of the book by observing that “language politics” can be “parsed” in two ways: “the *language of politics* versus the *politics of language*” (1; emphasis original), and that the contributors mainly dwell on “the second parsing of language politics, the politics of language” (3). However, they have kept in mind the role of “the language of politics, or more precisely how language politics is framed by different agents” (3). The book comprises five other chapters which deal with the language communities and language contexts of several areas in the Himalaya: “Tibetans in the People’s Republic of China” with exclusive focus on the rTáu-speaking “Horpa” of Khams (17), the Ahom language of Assam in India, language contact in schools in Nepal, “Kaike-Speaking Diaspora of Nepal” (109) and “Dual Linguistic Hegemonies in China’s Tibetan Frontier” (137).

In the first chapter Tunzhi (Sonam Lhundrop), Hiroyuki Suzuki and Gerald Roche approach the rTáu-speaking “Horpa” people of the Kham region of Tibet from the theoretical perspective of “recognition.” The socio-cultural context of the “dialect” group is quite problematic as the language community is widely considered to be “foreign,” the descendants of the invading Mongol soldiers who settled down in the region. Besides, in contemporary times the rTáu-speaking “Horpa” people find their language marginalised by the dominant Tibetan language perceived as “a prestige ur-language” (32). The rTáu language, on the contrary, is viewed either as “degraded” or “fossilised” (32). This perception is actively sponsored by the institutionalised Tibetan monastery and the official Chinese language policy. Interestingly, the rTáu-speakers themselves are convinced by the perception of the superiority of the Tibetan language. This, according to the authors, is the “mis-recognition” of their own spoken language (37). They argue that “the lack of a language system can be seen as one of the factors that deprives rTáu of social and cultural prestige, and places pressure on speakers to abandon their language for Tibetan” (39).

The second chapter by Selma K. Sonntag traces the history of the Ahom language in the Indian state of Assam and the language regime’s gradual shift from Tai-Kadai Ahom language (during the pre-colonial period) to the Indo-Aryan Assamese language which was later “reified under the colonial language

regime” (51). Gradually, there was “the vernacularisation of the Sanskrit cosmopolitics in Assam” (74) which gave way to “postcolonial linguistic nationalism” (51). Sonntag employs the “historical institutionist framework of state traditions and language regimes” (51) in analysing the language of politics and politics of language. Specially interesting is her analysis of the concept of the “indigenous” model of “Mandala state” (52-57) which emphasises power relations, and not territoriality. Sanskritisation provided an elitist bias to the language used during the later part of the Ahom kingdom. Sanskrit/Sanskritised form of language was used as the court language. It survived till the colonial conquest which led to geo-cultural mapping of the region, initiating the territorial aspect in the system of governance. She refers to Bengali being made the official language in 1837 which made Assamese appear as an inferior “dialect” of Bengali, a “linguistic appendage” (71). The decision generated protests and there were attempts to revive Assamese as the language of Assam through ‘*buranji*’ texts as a powerful weapon... to assert an Assamese linguistic identity” (Purkayastha qtd. in Sonntag 72). This created “language-territory-people association” (72) obviously foregrounding the issue of ethnic identity. She asserts that “linguistic rationalization” which is the “political agenda of states within the Indian union” in the postcolonial period actually “grates against its [Assam’s] linguistic diversity” (74). The chapter reveals the complicated play of power between the received state language and different dialects.

The third chapter written by Uma Pradhan is entitled “Transforming Language to Script: Constructing Linguistic Authority through Language Contact in Schools in Nepal.” It analyses how, under Nepal’s official Multi-lingual Education (MLE) programme introduced in 2010, the DangauraTharu language gained in power and status. Textbooks written by local facilitators on topics familiar to the children of the community upgraded the local language, although it had to go through a “purification” and “sanitisation” process (80). This was accepted by the DangauraTharu speakers themselves because it would, in their own perception, upgrade the language. She informs us that despite having a written tradition, DangauraTharu had not been “systematized earlier” (95). The policy and the production of locally produced school text books paved the way for the preparation of a “systematic” written language – it was purged of “profanities, jargon, bad grammar and mispronunciation” (80). Writing thus became a tool for preventing “a language from being labelled as a dialect of another language” (95). This largely provides a picture of how the nation can be reimagined and reconfigured through its new language policy.

The next chapter “The Significance of Place in Ethnolinguistic Vitality: Spatial Variations across the Kaike-Speaking Diaspora of Nepal” by Maya Daurio begins with the assumption that “memory of, and language about, place is a form of cultural knowledge which is site-specific [and] processual” (110). The case study involves movement of Kaike speakers between their native villages in

Dolpa region and urban spaces such as Kathmandu, and how this mobility affects the language of the migrants. Interestingly, she also applies the generational dimension which affects the choice of language in the contact zones over some decades. Movement of children outside the “socio-ecological landscape associated with the Kaike language serves to lower the practical transmission and retention of that language among younger generations” (129-30) while the members of the older generation respond in the opposite way. This reviewer believes that the use of the word “diasporic” throughout the chapter is rather problematic as the author mostly refers to the cases of migration within the nation state itself.

The next chapter “Speaking Chone, Speaking Shallow: Dual Linguistic Hegemonies in China’s Tibetan Border” written by Bendi T’so and Mark Turin takes the case of Chone-speaking people dwelling in the Chone County situated on the Sino-Tibetan Border. This region was incorporated in the People’s Republic of China in 1953. It is part of the Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Gansu Province. The chapter deals with the effect of the post-1953 Chinese official language policy about the ethnic minority groups. In the face of the aggressive assimilative drive of the language policy, the Chone language encounters the dual hierarchy of Chinese and Amdo Tibetan. This creates possibilities of the language loss. The authors argue that the hegemonic hierarchy is created through both imposition/coercion and the manufacturing of consent. The members of Chone-speaking community internalise the “validity” of the hierarchy (154). The authors argue that the case study nullifies any possibility of local agency and oppositional, anti-hegemonic tendency so far as language situation is concerned. The authors employ the concepts of hegemony as proposed by Kathryn A. Woolard and Terence G. Wiley in the field of language study.

The title of the book mentions “the Himalaya” as the site of “language contact” to be dealt with in the work. The Himalaya is, however, a wider zone. As Mark Turin mentions in the concluding chapter, “Greater Himalayan Region” covers 3,500 km from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east (164). He also observes that the region is home to 150 million people (164). This space nurtures several languages, and the people historically negotiated several languages simultaneously until recently when in many nation-states language politics acquired more hegemonic, monolingual orientations, resulting in the emergence of endangered languages. The book, however, covers only a few geo-cultural areas, mainly Nepal, Tibet and Assam in India, leaving out a large number of geo-cultural regions in the Himalaya where politics of language is equally evident. Turin as an editor is aware of this and hence in the concluding chapter he discusses the problems of Rohingyas who fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh as well as the Sikkimese situation. But the treatment of the areas is sketchy and many other parts of the Himalaya such as Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh and

Himachal Pradesh, and parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan remain unexplored in the volume. Perhaps the geo-cultural regions in the Himalaya are too large to tackle in a single volume, but the introductory and concluding chapters could have provided a more comprehensive survey.

All the chapters in the edited volume are scholarly and are supported by proper theoretical frameworks. It is a very valuable addition to the area of cultural knowledge of the Himalayan region.

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