



## The politics of language contact in the Himalaya

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**The politics of language contact in the Himalaya**, edited by Selma Sonntag and Mark Turin, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2019, xiii + 181 pp., £27.95 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-78374-705-5; £17.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-78374-704-7

The editors of this book deliver an interdisciplinary collection of linguistically and historically grounded chapters that discuss three socio-politically sensitive regions from both sides of the Himalayas – Tibet, Assam, and Nepal. The introduction points to the dearth of empirical scholarship on the politics of language contact in these regions, sets the context for the six chapters, and outlines the approach(es) taken by their authors.

Chapter 2 takes us several centuries back to the Ahom kingdom established in what is now Assam. The élite hierarchy of the Assamese had a hegemonic influence on the Ahom language, and influence that continues today (though in a different form). Starting from the present, The Himalayan region – Assam and North East India in particular – is once again at the centre of a political storm, the root cause of which is India's Citizenship Amendment Bill. It is inclusionary in its stated objective but exclusionary in its intent and discriminatory in its structure, making Hindus and related sub-sects eligible for naturalisation while excluding Muslims, Tamils and Tibetans. The Bill, widely seen as part of a policy of endorsing Hindu supremacy and promoting Hindu identity, attempts to convince the Assamese Hindus that their loyalty should be with Bengali-speaking Hindus who have migrated from Bangladesh rather than with Assamese-speaking Muslims. The indigenous Assamese are worried that Hinduisation tactics may one day destroy their distinct linguistic and cultural heritage.

Employing an historical-institutionalist theoretical approach, the author of this chapter shows how the language contact, inspired by Hinduisation, between Ahom (a Tai-Kadai language) and Assamese (Indo-Aryan) changed the local language dynamics – leading to the abandonment and eventual death of Ahom. Revivalists hope that Ahom, the principal historical source for the development of the Assamese languages, can be revitalised. Just as language contact was the cause of its demise of the *Ahom* language, so new language contact with other Assamese varieties might lead to its revival.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with Nepal, with an emphasis on language as a marker of ethnic identity and the politics of language maintenance. Local politics are important when choices must be made in the multilingual education programme (MLE). This programme, which follows the UNESCO philosophy of 'the first language first' (83), attempts to establish authority and authenticity through linguistic correction and systematisation. Trying to transform indigenous varieties into adequate vehicles for school education is, of course, an imposition of language hierarchy – and so some may argue that transformation undercuts the uniqueness of those varieties, and is an exercise in language dominance.

In Tibet, recognition of minority languages has long been an issue. They have been misrecognised as 'bizarre dialects', 'enclaved languages' or 'extraterritorial languages', and are declining as a result of Chinese 'encroachments'. The authors of Chapter 1 argue that ignoring or misrepresenting local languages casts their speakers as 'non-Tibetan inhabitant[s] of Tibet' (29) on the grounds that they do not speak the 'pure father tongue' (32). Speakers of many local languages have to prove their Tibetan identity by speaking standard Tibetan. There is a parallel here with the situation in Nepal, where people speaking indigenous languages are considered to be non-Nepali, while Nepali-speaking Indians are regarded as Nepali. The chapter provides a good explanation of the vertical hierarchy in Tibetan language-contact politics, but it does not address the horizontal relationships among indigenous languages. Chapter 5 also discusses the Tibetan linguistic context, which the


authors argue is established and maintained through coercion and consent, and in which many minority languages – now requiring both recognition and respect – are on the verge of extinction.

Chapter 6 concludes the volume, and its author outlines the complex process of language shift that is taking place across the region. He points out that as language revitalisation is being energised in most Himalayan contexts, language and culture are used for social exclusion and political disenfranchisement (as shown by the situations of Nepali in Bhutan and the Rohingya in Myanmar). Taking Nepal as a case study, the author leads us to ask if the state should support languages other than the dominant ones, particularly within the educational context. Current Nepali practice is problematic in several respects. Allowing a state or a community to select *a* language in which to teach does not take into account the fact that children may have competences (though of varying degrees) in more than one variety, nor – at a broader level – that school communities may not be linguistically homogenous. The policy validates the idea that languages other than the chosen one are subordinate and, therefore, unfit for use in social and academic contexts.

The major themes addressed in this collection have to do with contact and shift, with hierarchy and hegemony, with mis-recognition and non-recognition, and with the loss of ethnocultural identities. While the book presumes some knowledge of language planning and policy, it is an essential read and a valuable resource for all those concerned with matters of linguistic contact and politics, especially within educational settings.

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**Heritage languages: a language contact approach**, by Suzanne Aalberse, Ad Backus and Pieter Muysken, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2019, xix + 302 pp., €99.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-9-02720-471-4; €36.00 (pbk), ISBN 978-9-02720-470-7

I dove into this book, very excited at the prospect of having a text for a graduate course on language contact in a variationist sociolinguistic perspective. While it cannot be a stand-alone book for that course – not having enough detail about methods – it will serve admirably as a well-rounded introduction to language contact, bringing together research perspectives that are often isolated from each other. By combining psycholinguistics, descriptive linguistics, generative linguistics and sociolinguistics, it is a welcome and timely innovation. Students and scholars with research training in only some of these areas will get just the necessary introduction to other areas, along with guidance about where to follow up for additional detail.

The book's focus on 'not just reduction, simplification and loss, but also on addition of or changes in linguistic features' (vii) is a strong feature. This emphasis on speakers' agency and creativity leaves space for (and suggests how to study) heritage speakers' need to perform identity work (just like all other speakers). While much of the book is devoted to 'incomplete acquisition' and proficiency issues, via measures of quality and quantity of input, this portrayal of heritage-language (HL) variation in a positive light is a welcome approach.

The book is written in a casual, simple, accessible style. Its few figures receive little discussion in the prose. A useful glossary is included, as well as subject and language indices. I found many errors in the text, ranging from typos and infelicitous grammar to incorrect citations. For example, I can attest to five errors in the summary of one case study with which I'm familiar, and several instances