

A Case of Lenition-Fortition and Honorific Asymmetry in Limbu Native's Nepali Speech

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Abstract

This article aims to observe why deviations occur in the Limbu natives' speech while speaking the Nepali language. The objective of the study is to find out the factors which are responsible for the distorted form of Nepali speech uttered by the Limbu natives. Basically, the analysis is based on the phonological and sociolinguistic theories. The phonological aspect is concerned with the sound system of both languages. From the sociolinguistic aspect, Nepali and Limbu languages have a sharp contrast in the use of honorific expressions. In the process of analysis, the study has revealed that the Limbu language has less number of sounds than the Nepali language. In addition, eight consonants play a crucial role to cause the deviation in Nepali speech uttered by the Limbu natives. The Nepali language exhibits the five-layered honorific pronominal subjects with parallel verb conjugations. In contrast, the Limbu does possess only one form. The article can be useful to create a way for interested individuals to deepen their understanding of the reasons behind the deviations committed by the native of one language-speaking another language.

Keywords: deviation, honorific terms, Limbu natives, Nepali language, phonetic alphabet

Introduction

a:re-ni, dero ga:pa:l to setai po hunu phoyechha (Oh, your hair has grown grey!)

a:re, gukkur kina: po phukyo pha:neko ta phaisi bhukechha! (Oh, the reason why the dog barked was the buffalo became untied to its rope!)

kha:r zuyo rogha:r ga:tnu cha:daichhung hao chetha: (the roof is leaking and to mend this I'm going to cut the hey)

pa:ra:lharu ba:ra:l poknu cha:ndechha (The Baral Brahmins are going to carry the straw bundle)

The above are the utterances used by the Limbu natives while speaking the Nepali language. If anyone wants to know who these people are speaking such deformed structure of the Nepali language, one will come to know that these people designate themselves as 'Yakthungba' or Nepali ethnonym 'Limbu'. This tribe is recognized as one of the ethnic groups in Nepal. The traditional abode of this ethnic community is popularly known as the 'Limbuwan' or 'Pallo Kirat' (Far Kirat) which covers the hilly districts i.e. Sankhuwasabha, Tehrathum, Dhankuta, Taplejung, Panchthar, and Ilam of the eastern Nepal. The Limbu people are found to be residing in the Terain districts such as Sunsary, Morang and Jhapa. Likewise, they are living in three districts of Kathmandu valley. Across the border of the nation, the Limbus are found to be living in West Bengal, Asam, Sikkim, Bhutan and even Yangon (Burma), and Thailand. According to the National Census Report 2011 AD, the total population of the Limbu people is 387,300 and the speaker's number is 343,603 which is 1.46 and 1.29 in the total population of the nation. The Limbu language is developed language with its own writing script known as 'Sirijanga'. This language possesses a considerable number of the written documents as well as texts such as dictionary, religious scripture, grammar books and literary writings.

The Limbu language falls under the Tieto-Burman language family. Among the ethnic languages spoken in Nepal, the Limbu language is considered as the second language after the Newari language in terms of its writing development. Regarding its dialectal variants, Weidert and Subba (1985) hold the opinion that there are four (Panchthare, Taplejung, Phedape and Chhathare) dialects in it (p. 7). Of these four varieties, Panchthare which is locally called as 'Panthare' is considered as having the status of lingua-franca of the rest varieties. On the basis of the number of speakers, the Panchthare dialect has the largest number then Taplejung, Phedape and Chhathare respectively. The Chhathare dialect is the smallest number of speakers and said to be quite distinct from the rest dialects. In this regard, the foreign linguist Hansson (1990) and native linguist Tumbahang (2007) state that the Chhathare is not a dialect of the Limbu language but it is a separate language. The linguistic differences that lie between the Chhathare dialect and the other dialects are based on the phonemic, morphological and lexical issues. Apart from the day-to-day communicative form of language, the Limbu language does have another variety of language - the Mundhum, that is commonly employed across the all dialects speaking areas and unifying these dialects as one. The language of the Mundhum is distinctly different from the ordinary language variety in many respects. This type of language which has special use in ritual performances and religious ceremonies is socio-linguistically termed as 'diglossia' (also see Hudgson, 2000; Wardhaugh, 2002; and Holmes, 2008).

The Limbu language is one of the dominant members of the Tibeto-Burman language family. This language is spoken by the Limbu ethnic community who reside in the eastern part of Nepal. The Nepali language is the national language which belongs to the Indo-European language family. The Nepali language being the national language has to be spoken by the

people of various language groups or the non-Nepali natives. Like other non-Nepali natives, the Limbu speakers also find it very difficult to utter the national language properly. When the Limbu natives speak Nepali, certain phonological deviations occur in their speech. The problems that need to be considered are: why are the Limbu natives unable to utter the Nepali sounds correctly? What are phonological reasons for the occurrence of such deviant pronunciations? What are the reasons that make Limbu speakers unable to address the Nepali audience with due honor?

To obtain the desired answer to the above questions, the following objectives have been set. The objectives are:

Phonological reasons which are responsible for the deviation of Nepali pronunciations of the Limbu natives will be pointed out;

The sociolinguistic reason will be analyzed to find out the reason as to why Limbu natives are unable to address the Nepali audience with due honor.

In order to analyze the pronunciation aspect, the phonological theory has been applied. This theory looks into the sound system and process of articulation. Moreover, this theory observes the number of sounds (phonemic alphabets) available in two different languages, and calculates the number of similar sounds, different sounds and lacking sounds as well.

The next issue of honorification is concerned with sociolinguistics. The problem linked to the honorific process when any one language possesses grammaticalized variations in the pronominal system. Such honorific system is analyzed through subject-verb agreement process which comes under the sociolinguistics. Thus, the analysis is based on the two different branches of linguistics i.e., phonology and sociolinguistics.

Context of Pronunciation Deviation for Nepali Speaking Limbu Natives

It sounds odd and unusual as a Limbu native speaks the Nepali language in front of the Nepali native. More or less, that sort of feeling must have been experienced by the non-Limbu natives who reside in the eastern part of Nepal. As we consider the above expressions uttered by a Limbu native while speaking Nepali, generally questions arise as to what factors cause the Limbu native to produce such unusual form of expressions! In order to find the justifiable answer, one should be acquainted with the structure and feature of the Limbu language. It is a general fact that each language is essentially different from the other language in some kind of linguistic issues. Regarding the world's languages, Crystal (2007) states, "there are altogether 6604 languages existing in the world". No two languages can be exactly the same and the distinctive features can determine the language separate from other languages. Without having the different linguistic features such as phoneme, lexeme, syntactic structure or grammatical patterns, a language cannot be prescribed as independent language. In this way, a native speaker of a particular language happens to use the next language unusually or even wrongly to

some extent. The difference in only phonological system can result in linguistic deviation while using the language other than native language or the mother-tongue. Now, let us first consider the phonological system of the Limbu language and see how much the sound pattern affects the utterances in the Nepali speaking.

The Sound System in the Limbu Language

In the Limbu language, we can find variations in the number of consonant phonemes proposed by different researchers from both natives and non-natives. Amid the debates of the accurate number of the alphabet especially the consonant ones, the following table based on the latter linguists such as Weidert and Subba (1985), and van Driem (1987), has been presented:

Table 1

Limbu Consonant Phonemes

		Bilabial		Dental		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal	
		Vl.	Vd.	Vl.	Vd.	Vl.	Vd.	Vl.	Vd.	Vl.	Vd.	Vl.	Vd.
Stops	Non-asp.	P	[b]	t̥	[d̥]					k	[g]	ʔ	
	Asp.	p ^h	[b ^h]	t ^h	[d ^h]					k ^h	[g ^h]		
Affric Affricatives	Non-asp.					t ^s	[d ^z]						
	Asp.					[t ^{sh}]							
Fricat	Fricatives			s									ɦ
Nasal	Nasals		m		n						ŋ		
Liqui	Liquids				l		[r]						
Glide	Glides		w						j				

Note. Tambahang, 2013, p. 113.

*Abbreviated forms used in the table are as Vd. = Voiced, Vl. = Voiceless, Asp. = Aspirated

*The phonemes within the square brackets do not occur in the word-initial, and they are treated as allophone.

In the above table, there are 25 consonant phonemes. As we compare them with the Nepali phonemes, we can find certain phonemes are different and the number also differs between these two languages. The presence of the glottal stop sound (ʔ) and its frequent use in the Limbu language is the most striking thing and it can serve markedly different from the Nepali language. In this context Weidert and Subba (1980) write that it (ʔ) has the multifaceted use in the Limbu language. They further state that its role is quite contradictory because it is not so much used as phoneme but it is profusely employed in the singing/chanting. Like Weidert and Subba, Yadava and Regmi (2002) opine, "The use of this kind of sound (ʔ) is only found in

the Tibeto-Burman language family especially in the Limbu and Dhimal languages" (p. 89). Moreover, the reference of multidimensional use of the glottal sound is assumed from considering its function as the tense marker. Let us see the following examples:

hiptuŋʔ = I beat (present or future tense); *tʰʊʔ* = He eats/will eat (present or future tense)

hiptuŋ = I beat (past tense) *tʰʊ* = He ate (past tense)

About this glottal sound (ʔ), Kainla (1993) maintains, "The Limbu language is glottal stop prominent language so it has been considered as free consonant phoneme by testing it from the contrastive analysis of the phonemes" (p. 35). He further specifies that it has been treated as only the sound symbol in traditional grammar.

Now the time has come to decide whether these 25 consonant sounds are all distinct phonemes or not. Linguistically, they are decided by the test called the minimal pair contrast. On the basis of pair contrast, it has been revealed that the certain Limbu consonants are not phonemes but they are allophones. Here, the allophones, as Bandhu opines (1986), "are the different sounds of the same phone produced differently in various contexts" (p. 48). In the Limbu language, the following consonant sounds, which occur in the post-nasal context or intervocalic position, are considered the allophones. Such sounds (allophones) have been given within the square brackets [] and their respective base sounds precede them. The sounds within the square brackets (allophones) though their sounds get changed under certain phonetic contexts, do not bring a change in the meaning. For that reason, they have been categorized as the allophonic variants. The common consonant allophones in the Limbu language are as follows:

/k/ [g]; /k^h/ [g^h]; /t̪/ [d̪]; /t̪^h/ [d̪^h]; /p/ [b]; /p^h/ [b^h]; /tʰ/ [dʰ]; /l/ [r]; /s/ [tʰʰ/ᄀᄁ] = nine phonemes and nine allophones (phonemes are within slashes // and allophones within square brackets [])

In the above mentioned phonemes and allophones, the last pair /s/ (tʰʰ) has distinctly different phonetic context than the rest ones because the phoneme /s/ is pronounced as (tʰʰ) when it occurs after the dental-stop /t̪/ or nasal sound /n/. e.g. t̪n s = tʰʰ || saʔ (son/daughter) *ken* (your)+ *saʔ* (offspring) = *ketʰʰa* (your offspring)

Causes of Phonic Deviation in Nepali Speech from Limbu natives

Table 1 shows that there are altogether 25 consonants in the Limbu language, out of which 16 consonants are phonemes and nine consonants are allophones. These allophonic variants never occur in the word initial, but they can occur in the middle position of the words. However, they are allophones of nine different phonemes that occur in different phonetic environments. They are as below:

/k/ [g]	<i>kɔʔk</i> (load) <i>sɪŋ</i> (firewood) + <i>kɔʔk</i> = <i>sɪŋkɔʔk</i> (load of firewood)
/k ^h / [g ^h]	<i>k^he</i> (yam) <i>pa:ŋ</i> (house) + <i>k^he</i> = <i>pa:ŋg^he</i> (home yam)
/t̄/ [d̄]	<i>t̄aru</i> (bring) <i>ke</i> (you) + <i>t̄aru</i> = <i>ked̄aru</i> (you bring)
/t̄ ^h / [d̄ ^h]	<i>t̄^heba</i> (grandpa) <i>a:</i> (my) + <i>t̄^heba</i> = <i>a:d̄^heba</i> (my grandpa)
/p/ [b]	<i>pa:n</i> (talk) <i>p^hen</i> (bad) + <i>pa:n</i> = <i>p^henba:n</i> (bad talk)
/p ^h / [b ^h]	<i>p^ha:</i> (bamboo) <i>hanj</i> (great) + <i>p^ha:</i> = <i>hanjb^ha:</i> (a larger species of bamboo)
/t̄ ^s / [d̄ ^z] <i>t̄^sa:</i>	(food/meal) <i>yun</i> (evening) <i>t̄^sa:</i> = <i>yund̄^sa:</i> (evening meal)
/l/ [r]	<i>la:m</i> (road) <i>ma:</i> (main) + <i>la:m</i> = <i>ma:ra:m</i> (main road)
/s/ [t̄ ^s sh]	<i>saʔ</i> (son/daughter) <i>ken</i> (your) + <i>saʔ</i> (offspring) = <i>ket̄^ssh^a</i> (your offspring)

The then Royal Nepal Academy and the present Nepal Academy have published Limbu-Nepali-English Dictionary in which sixteen alphabets (k, k^h, ŋ, t̄, t̄^h, n, p, p^h, m, n, j, l, w, s, h, ʔ) are listed as phonemes. Out of sixteen phonemes, only fifteen alphabets have given in the word entry excluding the glottal stop (ʔ). The glottal stop (ʔ) is not used in the word-initial, but its significance and role is not less than the other phonemes in especially Limbu and Dhimal languages. The Limbu authentic dictionary has the word-entry of 15 alphabets, however different experts and linguists such as Benjamini Schulzii (1745), A. Campbell (1840), B. H. Hodgson (1874), G. A. Grierson (1909), Bajbir Thalang and Iman Singh Chemjong (1930), Chemjong (1961), Subba and Subba (1978), Subba (1979), Weidert and Subba (1985), Van Driem (1987), and others have prescribed variously regarding the number and types of the Limbu consonants as well as vowels.

Directly the effect and role of the vowels in the Limbu language is not felt, yet like other languages of the world, the role of the vowel sounds cannot be ignored in relation to the process of compounding the morphemes and words. The phoneme /k/ gets changed into /g/ due to the vowel phoneme around it or at least if phoneme /k/ is preceded by the vowel. Regarding the Limbu vowels, Subba (1993) states, "the Limbu vowel has only one base phoneme, but in order to pronounce its different sounds, certain signs are attached to its over, under or after" (p. 14). By attaching different signs to the alphabet (vowel phoneme), there are seven vowels and each consists of one form of vowel length, thus the Limbu has 14 vowels. The vowel length is marked with colon just after the short vowel. In other words, the unmarked with colon is the short and the marked one is perceived as the vowel length. e.g. 'i' (short), i: (long)

Many Nepali natives find a Limbu native quite unusual while speaking Nepali language. The Nepali natives mainly find two unusual aspects in the Limbu natives as the Limbu speakers speak Nepali. These two aspects are concerned with phonological as well as sociolinguistics or more especially pronunciation and honorification issues. These issues are discussed in the upcoming paragraphs.

First of all, it is to discuss about the aspect of unusual pronunciation of the Nepali terms by the Limbu native speakers. This esoteric issue is directly linked to phonological aspect. The phonemes of the Limbu language are essentially different from the Nepali language. The Nepali words that start with consonants such as /k/ [g]; /k^h/ [g^h]; /t̪/ [d̪]; /t̪^h/ [d̪^h]; /p/ [b]; /p^h/ [b^h]; /t̪ʰ/ [dʰ]; /l/ [r]; are pronounced or uttered almost oppositely i.e. if the Nepali word starts with the consonant /k/ the Limbu natives pronounce it as /g/, and on the contrary, when the word begins with /g/, they pronounce it as /k/. Likewise, the Nepali consonants /g/, /g^h/, /d̪/, /d̪^h/, /b/, /b^h/, /dʰ/, /r/ are phonemes, but they, in the Limbu language, allophones of their respective counterparts so, the [g] is the allophone of the phoneme /k/. These allophonic variants (/g/, /g^h/, /d̪/, /d̪^h/, /b/, /b^h/, /dʰ/, /r/) never occur in the initial position of the Limbu lexical items. But in Nepali, they occur in the word-initial position in order to create contrastive feature /k/ and /g/. The surprising thing but reality is that the Nepali words that begin with the alphabets such as /g/, /g^h/, /d̪/, /d̪^h/, /b/, /b^h/, /dʰ/, /r/. For example:

Nepali word	Limbu pronunciation
gəmɔla, (flower clay-pot)	kəmɔla/kamala (Nepali female's name),
g ^h ɔr (house)	k ^h ɔr/k ^h ara (hay for making roof)
dʰɔhan (family)	t̪ʰahan
d̪ɔhi (yogurt)	t̪ɔhi/t̪ahi
d̪ ^h ɔni (rich)	t̪ ^h ani
bɔndɔ (closed)	pɔnda
b ^h ok (hunger)	p ^h ok
r̪ako (torch)	l̪ako

The above example of consonant alteration ('g' into 'k' or vice-versa) is termed as 'lenition' in linguistics. The term 'lenition' literally denotes 'sound change' that it involves the change of voiced consonant /g/ into voiceless consonant /k/ or it is related to the change of stronger into weaker one. The Limbu natives, however, confine within the process of 'lenition' (sound weakening or softening) but they also use the other process of sound strengthening which is linguistically termed as 'fortition' and it is opposite of the more common 'lenition'. The linguistic process of altering consonant sound stronger is not used from the point of view of grammaticalization. The fortition is mainly used to create the contrast between two similar consonants such as /k/ and /g/, and /p/ and /b/. These are similar consonant pairs because both pairs involve the same articulatory places and organs of speech to produce these sounds. Only the difference lies between them is the process of voicing that is, the former ones (/k/ and /p/) are voiceless whereas the latter (/g/ and /b/) ones are voiced. As I have said that the Limbu natives employ the 'fortition' only to make contrast between two similar consonants. For example:

g^hɔr t^{sh}aunɔ k^hɔr katne (to cut the hay for leaking roof) *k^har z^haunja g^har gatnja*
bɔralko pɔral bokne (carry the straw bundle to Baral) *paralgo barala pokja*

When a Nepali native happens to hear such deviated version from a Limbu native while using the Nepali language, does the Nepali native not feel any surprised? Exactly, he or she is not only surprised but also shocked at this. The shocking situation has been created by the transposition of the sounds/letters. In the above two fragments or utterances, we can find the both lenition and fortition involved to create contrast. When a Nepali word *g^hɔr* is pronounced as *k^har* (/g^h/ = /k^h/) by a Limbu native then how does he/she pronounce the Nepali word *k^hɔr*? Obviously, he/she turns to the process of fortition changing the voiceless /k^h/ into voiced /g^h/. Otherwise, there is no options for him/her to distinguish between *k^har* and *g^hɔr*. So he/she goes on pronouncing *poka* (package) as *boka* (un-castrated he-goat) and conversely *boka* as *poka*.

The Limbuized or Limbunized Nepali expression shows not only the change in the consonant but also in the vowels. The basic thing about the Limbu vowel is that there is only rounded /ɔ/(ʘ). It is pronounced by making the lips round and for this reason; non-Limbu natives think it like the phoneme /o/. Many Limbu clans using rounded /ɔ/are now being spelt as /o/. This change is due to the influence of the Nepali language. Some of such Limbu clans which were originally pronounced the round /ɔ/, and now pronounced as /o/ are *Chongbang* (tʰɔŋbaŋ), *Chemjong* (tʰɛmdʰɔŋ) or *Samsohang* (samsɔhaŋ). Except the rounded /ɔ/, the Limbu does not have the rest unrounded /ə/ or /ʌ/ vowel. Giving the original as well as historical facts about the Limbu consonants, Subba (1993) holds the view that Sirijanga Hang first invented twenty different consonants (ka, pa, a, ma, ŋa, ja, tʰa, na, sa, ɲa, ʃa, wa, ha, la, tʰa, pʰa, kʰa, ra, tʰa, ɲa) (p. 15). He further states that the Tibetan alphabets are still articulated as the Limbu's original form but the Limbu has dropped its prototype form and has adopted the production of sound as the Hindi or Nepali language. Some traces of prototype form of articulation are still found in the present Limbu speech. For instance, the word '*gɔmɔla*' (flower clay-pot) is pronounced as *kamala* that means not /ɔ/ but /a/. Similarly the Nepali verb form *gɔreko* (done) is pronounced as *kɔryako*. Most probably this distorted version *kɔryako* from *gɔreko* can be due to the influence of Gorkha king Prithivi Narayan Shah's (1723-1775) time language. At that time most Nepali verbs were pronounced in that way. It might be so because the Limbu community had come to closer contact with king Prithvi during the time of unification of Nepal kingdom.

The next amazing issue regarding the Limbunized Nepali expression is concerned with the subject-verb agreement. This type of deviation has caused many non-Limbu natives feel uneasy and unusual. The notion of subject-verb agreement is challenged by three distinct aspects related to the Limbu grammar. The first point is the pronominal system which is markedly different from the Nepali system. Unlike the Nepali, the Limbu has three categories

in the number system i.e. singular, dual and plural. Moreover, the pronouns are of inclusive and exclusive forms in the first person dual and plural numbers. For example:

<i>ant^{shi}ʔ</i>	dual first person inclusive pronoun (we two)
<i>ant^{shgɛ}(gya)</i>	dual first person exclusive pronoun (we two)
<i>aniʔ</i>	plural first person inclusive pronoun (we more than two)
<i>anigɛ(gya)</i>	plural first person exclusive pronoun (we more than two)

The three number system and inclusiveness or exclusiveness which are essentially different from the Nepali language make it difficult for the Limbu native to sort out the accurate pronoun and number in Nepali speaking. A Limbu native may say "hami k^hant^{sh}u" (we eat) or "mɔ k^hant^{sh}ɔu" (I eat). The English translation in the parentheses appears to be correct but the Nepali form is absurd because there is subject-verb agreement according to the Nepali norms of grammar.

The second issue that triggers the deviation in the subject-verb agreement in Nepali expression is the gender system. Unlike the Nepali two or three-gender system, the Limbu has only one. It does not make any distinction between masculine and feminine genders in the verb conjugation. From the mother-tongue influence, a Limbu native may utter as *mɔ k^hant^{sh}ɔ* (I eat) or *bahini k^hant^{sh}ɔ* (sister eats).

The third point of deviation in the Nepali subject-verb agreement is related to the case of honorification system in the Nepali language. The Nepali speaker employs five (*t̄ɔ*, *t̄imi*, *t̄ɔpāi*, *hɔjur*, and *mɔsup^h*) different layers of honorific pronominal terms on the basis of participant's social status, rank, age factor, the relation between the addresser and addressee, situation, or context. The lowest honorific pronominal term starts from *t̄ɔ* and culminates to the term *mɔsup^h*. The term *t̄ɔ* is supposed to be employed to the person having the lowest social status junior in the relation and the addresser is in a rage or wrathful situation. Likewise, the highest honorific pronominal term *mɔsup^h* is used to address the member of the royal family or more especially the queen and the king. The verb must agree with the level of the honorific pronouns used in the subject position. Let us see below:

	Nepali	English	Limbu
1.	<i>t̄ɔ k^hant^{sh}ɔs</i>	(You eat)	<i>(k^hɛnɛʔ kɛdʔɔ)</i>
2.	<i>t̄imi k^hant^{sh}ɔu</i>	(You eat)	<i>(k^hɛnɛʔ kɛdʔɔ)</i>
3.	<i>t̄ɔpāi k^hanu hunt^{sh}ɔ</i>	(You eat)	<i>(k^hɛnɛʔ kɛdʔɔ)</i>
4.	<i>hɔjur k^haisint^{sh}</i>	(You eat)	<i>(k^hɛnɛʔ kɛdʔɔ)</i>
5.	<i>mɔsup^h dʔjunar gɔribɔksint^{sh}ɔ</i> (You eat)		<i>(k^hɛnɛʔ kɛdʔɔ)</i>

The above given example shows that a Limbu native can find it the most difficult to maintain the balance between five different kinds honorific subject pronouns and their relevant verb conjugations.

The Conclusions

The Limbu language is one of the dominant languages of the Tibeto-Burman family. This is the native language of the Limbu ethnic community who reside in the eastern part of Nepal. The Limbu natives face a great problem while speaking the national language Nepali. The analysis regarding their Nepali speech deviation, certain clues have been explored. Mainly the deviations were found in the pronunciation processes and honorific system. The pronunciation related problem has arisen due to the phonological process results in the two languages. Like the case of pronunciation, the Limbu natives find it much difficult to express the Nepali honorific orders appropriately because there are dissimilarities in the second person honorific subject pronoun between the two languages. The Limbu has only one form of second person pronoun whereas the Nepali has five-layer pronouns to show status hierarchy, and they agree to the corresponding verb forms. These two causes have made the Nepali expressions employed by the Limbu natives quite odd, unusual and deviant.

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