

Language Contact Studies in Nepal: Trends and Prospects

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Abstract	Article Info
<p>This paper is a review of major language contact studies in Nepal especially focusing on Noonan (2003) and Gautam (2021) based on different aspects. Furthermore, the paper aims to summarize language contact studies in Nepal and discusses its trends and suggests possible areas of language contact studies, which is based on various secondary sources published in this area of study. However, language contact studies can be carried out either focusing on various socio-cultural processes, conversational constraints and role of different pragmatic elements in languages that shape different language ideologies, which motivate contacts or outcomes of language contact based on lexical and grammatical levels of language. Furthermore, it visualize the future trends and prospects to shape Nepal’s language policy in different diversified contexts.</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i> language contact, language use, language attitude, contact-induced changes</p>	<p><i>Email</i> br.gautam42@gmail.com</p> <p><i>Article History</i> Received: 2025, June 26 Revised: 2025, July 22 Accepted: 2025, September 06</p> <p><i>Cite</i> Gautam, B. R. (2025). Language contact studies in Nepal: Trends and prospects. <i>Gipan</i>, 7(1), 137–144. https://doi.org/10.3126/gipan.v7i1.84241</p>

Introduction

Nepal is a multilingual country with many languages co-existing together for a long time in the history. There are found languages belonging to four different language families, namely, Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian as well as a language isolate, Kusunda and a Sign Language. There are total of 124 mother tongues spoken in Nepal, forty-five languages belonging to Indo-European language family, seventy-three languages from Sino-Tibetan language family, three languages from Austro-Asiatic language family and one language from Dravidian language family (National Statistics Office, 2023, 2025). Among these, in terms of number of speakers, Indo-European language family is dominant in Nepal, and the Nepali language belonging to this family is

a spoken by 44.64% people as a mother tongue, and 46.2% people use it as a second language.

The use of multiple languages belonging to different language families in Nepal has brought these languages in contact for a long time. This contact among languages leads to influences in a language from other languages. So, to understand the actual situation of language spoken in Nepal, it is quite important to study the phenomenon of language contact. Such kind of study allows to situate the language and its characteristic system in socio-historical and pragmatic context.

In its simplest term, language contact can be defined as, “the use of more than one language in the same place at the same time (Thomason, 2001).” In this sense, the language contact could understood as the natural outcome of bilingualism

and multilingualism. Such use of languages has several consequences. The users of language use more than one language in their communication. This may lead to code-switching and code-mixing, language shift, pidgins and creoles, mixed languages, etc. Similarly, the languages or varieties of language in contact can influence each other and acquire the features of other languages or varieties of language. The languages in contact can introduce in its repertoire the vocabulary items from other languages. Moreover, at the deeper level, the languages can also acquire grammatical features of other languages in course of language contact. The contact effects among languages in contact could be either in one direction only or the languages in contact may influence each other in both directions.

The phenomenon of language contact can be understood from different perspectives. It can be conceived in terms of the outcomes of the processes of contact among languages, where one linguistic system changes under the influence of another linguistic system. This outcomes-based approach to language contact is generally referred to as 'contact-induced language change' (Auer, 2021). In contrast to this, which focuses on outcomes of language contact, it can be understood in terms of processes involved in language contact and factors affecting the language contact as well as the role of users of as the real carriers of language contact. In this sense, language contact studies focuses on role of broader social context or factors like language ideology, language attitudes, language identity, migration, media, marriage etc. which shape the degree and types of contact among languages. In this situation, language contact happens because of specific pragmatic needs. In addition to this macro-social factors affecting language contact, the role micro-social factors like needs of conversational encounters or exchanges can also be focused on language contact studies. Furthermore, the language contact studies can be begun from pragmatically sensitive elements of language like discourse markers, deixis etc. which are more prone to be borrowed in course of languages in being

contact. Therefore, the contact studies can range from focusing on outcomes of language contact, or broader social factors contributing language contact, or factors of conversational exchanges affecting language contact or contextually sensitive elements of language themselves affecting the processes of one language affecting another. Moreover, the studies on the role of cognitive factors as well as typological factors in language contact can be considered important.

This study summarizes language contact studies carried out in Nepal, especially focusing on Noonan (2003), also briefly including Genetti (1993), Regmi (2013), and Dhakal (2014). Not only this, Gautam (2018, 2021, 2024), Gautam and Giri (2024) focuses the different socio-linguistics aspect of language contact with various languages such as Newar, Sherpa, Tamang, Gopali, Maithili, Tharu, Jumli and Dotyali that assesses their relevance and suggest directions for further research on contact linguistics in Nepal. These research works will be summarized and discussed in terms of their scope, approaches and importance in studies in language contact.

Summary of Major Language contact studies in Nepal

The major language contact studies which I selected for this paper are summarized in this section. Among them, I focus on the study "Recent language contact in the Nepal Himalaya", authored by Noonan (2003), and I will also briefly include other studies, especially studies on contact-induced changes, and finally I will review the book by Gautam (2021).

Recent Language Contact in the Nepal Himalaya, by Noonan (2003)

The important study on the contact effects on sixteen Tibeto-Burman languages, especially from the Nepali language, was carried out by Noonan (2003). The study was confined to grammatical borrowing and excluded lexical borrowing. For the study, he chose, six Bodish languages and ten Himalayish languages. The six Bodish languages are: Chantyal, Gurung, Nar-Phu, Thakali, Ghale

and Baragaunle. Among them, four languages, Chantyal, Gurung, Nar-Phu and Thakali belong to Tamangic group of languages. The Himalayish languages he selected for the study are: Limbu, Athpare, Camling, Hayu, Chepang, Kham, Syangja Magar, Tanahun Magar, Kathmandu Newari and Dolakha Newari. Using various descriptive works published in these Tibeto-Burman languages, he compared the three genetic groupings, i. e., Bodish, Himalayish and Nepali, in terms of thirty-one different structures parameters/features comprising eleven phonological features and twenty-one morphosyntactic features, and established structural profiles for each of the language groups. Then, he assigned values to each of the individual languages and compared the language pattern against the norms of language group. In such comparison of individual languages to the group pattern, he identified deviations in individual languages from group norms and showed whether deviations in individual Tibeto-Burman languages match with the Nepali system or not. The deviations of individual languages in structural features from group norms, and their similarity to structural features with the Nepali language was used as a metric to show the effect of Nepali system on the systems of individual Tibeto-Burman languages, and this was attributed to the consequences of long-term contact with the Nepali language.

Among the thirty-one structural features, eleven phonological features are: phonemic voicing contrasts, tone, murmur, voicing opposition in liquids and/or nasals, retroflex series, fricatives, affricates, phonemic nasalized vowels, Λ - ν allophony, word-initial / η / and stress. Similarly, the twenty one morphosyntactic features used for language comparison were: prefixes, person/number marking, reflexive, adjectival word order, demonstrative word order, numeral word order, ergative syntax, antidative syntax, dative subjects, compound case, vertical case, vertical verbs, morphological valence increasing strategies, morphological valence decreasing strategies, evidentiality expressed by verbals in

verbal complex, honorific verb and noun stems, numeral classifiers, verbal with nominal and adjectival functions, finite subordinate clauses, and correlative construction.

By comparing values for structural features of sixteen different individual Tibeto-Burman languages with the structural profile of respective language groups, it was found that, among thirty structural features (feature 'correlative construction' was dropped for lack of data on all languages), Baragaunle conformed to Bodish pattern in twenty-two different features, and these are distinct from values for those features in the Nepali language. There are six features in this language which conform to both Bodish and Nepali pattern. But, in this language, there is one feature valued differently from both Bodish and Nepali pattern, and one feature that is differently valued from Bodish pattern, but conforming to Nepali pattern. Nar-Phu has the same pattern as that of Baragaunle. Gurung shared seventeen features with Bodish structural profile, which are distinct from Nepali system, eight features conforming to both Bodish and Nepali pattern, and five features deviated from Bodish pattern and consistent with Nepali pattern. Thakali has nineteen features valued according to Bodish norm, and different from Nepali norm, seven features conforming to both Bodish and Nepali pattern, one feature valued neither conforming to Bodish nor to Nepali and three features, and five features deviating from group norm but consistent with Nepali pattern. Chantyal valued only seven features according to Bodish pattern distinct from Nepali pattern, it has six features valued consistently with both Bodish and Nepali pattern, two features valued neither conforming to Bodish nor to Nepali, and fifteen feature values deviated from Bodish pattern and but were consistent with Nepali pattern. Ghale has eighteen features valued according to Bodish pattern and distinct from Nepali. Nine features valued consistently with both Bodish and Nepali. Only three features deviated from group norm and but consistent with Nepali pattern.

Among the Himalayish languages, Kham has twelve features valued according to Himalayish pattern distinct from Nepali pattern, thirteen features conforming to both Bodish and Nepali pattern. Two features deviated from both Himalayish and Nepali pattern and three features deviated from group pattern and valued consistently with Nepali pattern. Tanahun Magar and Syangja Magar each shared only eight features of group pattern valued distinct from Nepali pattern, and each has thirteen features valued consistent with both Himalayish and Nepali pattern. However, Tanahun Magar deviated from both Himalayan pattern and Nepali pattern in two feature values while Syangja Magar different on only one feature value. Tanahun Magar deviated from group pattern in seven feature values while Syangja Magar deviated in terms of eight feature values, both deviations being consistent with Nepali pattern. Kathmandu Newari and Dolakha Newari share the similar valuing of structural features to Tanahun Magar and Syangja Magar. Kathmandu Newari and Dolakha Newari each value seven and eight features respectively according to group pattern and distinct from Nepali pattern. Likewise, there are thirteen and fourteen features in Kathmandu Newari and Dolakha Newari respectively which have the values consistent with both Himalayish and Nepali pattern. In Kathmandu Newari, two features are valued differently from both Himalayish and Nepali and eight features deviated from Himalayish pattern and were consistent with Nepali pattern. For Dolakha Newari as well, eight features deviated from group pattern in its values and were consistent with Nepali pattern. In Chepang, there are twelve features valued according to group pattern, distinct from Nepali pattern, ten features valued consistently with group and Nepali pattern, three features were valued distinctly from both group and Nepali pattern and five features deviated from group pattern and were consistent with Nepali pattern. For Hayu, there are thirteen features conforming to group pattern distinct from Nepali pattern, nine features conforming to both, three features conforming to

neither group pattern nor Nepali and five features deviated from group norm and were consistent with Nepali system. Athpare shares fourteen of the group features valued distinctly from Nepali, thirteen features conforming to both group pattern and Nepali pattern and three features deviated from group pattern in its values but were consistent with Nepali pattern. Camling and Limbu share the similar pattern. Camling has thirteen features valued according to the Himalayish group pattern distinct from Nepali, eleven features valued consistent with both group and Nepali pattern, two features conforming to neither group nor Nepali pattern and four features different from group pattern and were consistent with Nepali pattern. Finally, Limbu has fifteen features valued according to group norm, but distinct from Nepali, eleven features valued consistent with both group and Nepali pattern, two features not consistent with both group and Nepali pattern and two features not consistent with group pattern but consistent with Nepali pattern.

The values for different structural features showed that Chantyal is the most deviant from the structural profile of its group. Following this are the Magar and Newari dialects which have influences from Nepali, as indicated by the number of deviations from the group. Within Bodish, Gugung is the most influenced by the Nepali language after Chantyal. Among these languages, Baragaunle and Nar-Phu were least influenced by the Nepali language. The least number of feature values not conforming both to group pattern and Nepali pattern, and higher number of deviant pattern from group norm but consistent with Nepali pattern shows that the direction of convergence is towards the Nepali system.

Studies on Contact-Induced Changes in Individual Languages

Focusing on the structural or grammatical features in language contact, Genetti (1993) attempted to study variation in the agreement pattern in Nepali finite verbs especially in terms of number and gender agreement. For this study, she used quantitative method, collected and analyzed spoken narratives in Nepali and found that gender

and number agreement on verb is less marked in spoken Nepali than in written Nepali. Even in spoken narratives, there is seen variation among speakers regarding number and gender marking on verbs. These changes in Nepali agreement system was attributed to internal markedness effects as well as the possible impacts from contact with Tibeto-Burman languages.

To show the contact effects on the Bhujel language, Regmi (2013) presented several instances of contact-induced changes in Bhujel, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken mainly in Tanahun, Gorkha, Chitwan and Nawalparasi. He found that the Bhujel language has acquired features of Nepali language at all the levels of the language including lexical, phonological, morphological and syntactic features and presented several instances of borrowing in Bhujel language. He presents several examples of lexical borrowing including number of nominals and adjectivals. According to him, the Bhujel language shares many features with the Nepali language. It has six vowel system as of Nepali, and has lost its tone and phonemic glottal stop. Similarly, it has also developed 'dative subject construction', correlative construction, classifier system to differentiate non-human nouns etc. with contact from other languages, coordinating conjunctions like *ka*, *ki* etc. He attributes the main reason for contact-induced changes in the Bhujel language to effects of Bhujel speakers being bilingual in Nepali.

The article written by Dhakal (2014) presents a number of examples of contact effects in both lexicon and grammar of the Baram language from the Nepali language. Baram language is severely endangered language which belongs to Himalayish group within Tibeto-Burman language family, is spoken only in few places in Gorkha district. For his study, he used Baram spoken corpus and drew examples from the transcribed data to show that the Baram language has heavily borrowed from the Nepali language in different levels within its system. He reports that in the large collection of transcribed spoken corpus, there is found only few words native to the system and all other words were

borrowed from the Nepali and other languages. The study showed that among 3,652 Baram words, there are only 10, 22 native Baram words. Among the various categories of words the borrowed are numerals, adverbs and particles, adjectives, nouns, verbs and pronouns. Regarding the morphosyntax, Baram has borrowed Nepali plural suffix *-haru*, non-human numeral classifier *-ta*, comparative marker *bhanda*, equative copula *ho*, relative-correlative pronouns, co-ordinating conjunction *ra*, sentence co-ordinator *ni* etc. These features are used in Baram along with its native system or they are the only means for making various constructions available in the language. The study claims that these changes in Baram are impacts of Nepali language on Baram system through the language contacts.

Language Contact in Nepal: A Study on Language Use and Attitudes, by Gautam (2021)

The language contact study focusing on the role of broader socio-cultural, ideological and contextual factors for shaping the language use, establishing language contacts and leading to language shift, was carried out by Gautam (2021) in his book, "Language Contact in Nepal: A Study on Language Use and Attitudes". The book contains eight different chapters. The first chapter is introduction and the second chapter deals with sociolinguistics of multilingualism in Nepal. The third chapter is comprehensive overview of language contact phenomena in Nepal. The fourth, fifth and sixth chapter deal with language contact in Sherpa, Maithili and Newar, respectively. The seventh chapter deals with language shift in Dotyali, Jumli, Tharu and Nepali. The seventh chapter is about language contact and its implications to language policies.

For the study, he used mixed method for data collection using a variety of data collection tools and procedures like questionnaires, focused group discussion (FGD), interviews. He collected data about the attitudes and perceptions of Sherpa, Newari, Maithili, Dotyali, Jumli and Tharu, and Nepali speakers towards their own mother tongues as well as towards other languages, including,

Nepali, English and Hindi, to show existing patterns of language use, language contact as well language shift.

In his book, Gautam (2021) shows how speakers of different mother tongues used different languages in different situations and activities. The major domains of language use he introduced for discussion are informal situations involving behavioral activities and personal activities, formal situations/activities, cultural and religious activities, family and friends, and media and entertainments. The speakers of different mother tongues varied in terms of their choice of languages especially, mother tongue, English or Hindi for performing activities in these different domains of language use. This situation created different patterns of language contact and language shift among the languages.

The need to use more than one language to perform various activities arose from various causes. In the book, the main causes of language contact are identified as media, migration and marriage (M3), education, travel and tourism, market forces and economic benefits and political-ideological interventions. Similarly, the impacts of language contacts were discussed mainly in terms of ideological/attitudinal impact and motivational impact.

From the various case studies on individual languages it was found that the domains of use of mother tongues in Sherpa, Newar, Maithili, Jumli, Tharu and Dotyali have been restricted and people use Nepali, English and Hindi in addition to their mother tongues in different domains of language use. The mother tongues are highly restricted to cultural and religious activities and Nepali is being dominantly used in social, official, ceremonial and official activities. From the study it was also found that English has greater influence than Hindi among Newar and Sherpa people, perhaps due to influence of education, globalization and western traditions. The study on attitudes and perception of language users towards different languages and their use in different domains of language use in

addition to the mother tongues suggested that there is widespread language contact situation and the speakers of different mother tongues are gradually shifting towards dominant languages, namely, Nepali, English and Hindi and threatening the vitality of indigenous mother tongues spoken in Nepal.

Discussion

The available literature on language contact studies shows that there are different trends of language contact studies in Nepal and it can be discussed from various perspectives. One line of studies focus on outcomes-based studies and importance is given to borrowing of lexical or grammatical features in one language from other languages. The studies by Genetti (1993), Noonan (2003), Regmi (2013) and Dhakal (2014) belong to this group of studies. Even within this category, we can make a distinction between studies with a focus on borrowing features in individual languages from other languages and studies which make comparison of languages from different language groups and discuss their pattern in terms of (lexical and) various structural/grammatical parameters to show the extent of divergence from group pattern and the degree of convergence with the other languages. The studies by Genetti (1993), Regmi (2013) and Dhakal (2014) belong to the first group of studies as they studied contact effects on Nepali, Bhujel and Baram languages, respectively, from other languages, by Nepali in case of Bhujel and Baram, and by Tibeto-Burman languages on the Nepali language. The study by Noonan (2003) belongs to second category, as he compared various languages from different languages groups i.e. Bodish and Himalayish, and these languages with Nepali. In addition to this outcomes-focused approach, studies in language contact in Nepal has another line of study which includes the role of broader social and contextual factors on shaping language use patterns and for causing language contacts and language shift. In this sort of study, the factors like language attitudes, language identity, and language ideology, socio-historical forces, cultural religious activities, political

practices, markets and economy, education, media and entertainment etc. play important role in motivating and determining the choice and use of languages, and thus creating language contact and language shift. This line of study in language contacts in Nepal is represented by the work of Gautam (2021), who studied language use, language contact and language shift patterns in Sherpa, Newar, Maithili, Dotyali, Tharu, Jumli and Nepali, in broader socio-historical context.

The language contact studies in Nepal can be also be discussed in terms of direction of influence. The language contact studies can focus either on the influence on a language from dominant language or influence of non-dominant languages on the dominant languages. The studies by Noonan (2003), Regmi (2013), Dhakal (2014) and Gautam (2021) all focus on effects of dominant language, especially, Nepali on the other non-dominant languages. However, the study by Genetti (1993) could be considered as emphasizing the changes brought about in Nepali verb agreement system by the possible effect of Tibeto-Burman languages which are obviously not dominant languages in Nepal.

The language contact studies also differs based on methods used for such studies. The language contact studies can be carried out using secondary sources of data as was done by Noonan (2003) or it can be based on primary data collected through different qualitative methods like interview, focused group discussion (FGD), or survey as was done by Gautam (2021). Furthermore, it can also be carried out by collecting large amount of spoken corpus.

These various language contact studies suggest that contact linguistics is an emerging field of research in Nepal and language contact can be studied from a number of perspectives, with varying emphases, and using a range of research methods and techniques. The language contact studies can be carried out at the broader macro-social level focusing on various social, cultural, historical, political and ideological constraints

and motivations which lead to varying forms of language use, language contact and language shift patterns among various speech communities. Moreover, language studies can be focused on micro-social structure of conversational exchanges which lead to phenomena like code-switching. The requirements of the contexts of conversational exchanges may also lead to language contact situations. Furthermore, language contact studies can be carried out at the level of pragmatically sensitive elements of language which seem to have high chances of borrowability for example, the discourse markers. All of these studies from macro-social context to constraints of conversational interaction to pragmatic elements of language all focus on processes of language contact and emphasize the causes of language contact situation. However, the studies focused on outcomes-based approaches focus on features borrowed or acquired in one language from another language without looking for underlying processes or mechanism leading to such language influences. In addition to such studies, language contact studies can be carried out in terms of typological constraints of languages as well as in terms of cognitive factors.

Conclusion

The studies reviewed in this study and the possible theoretical avenues emerging in contact linguistics suggest that language contact studies in Nepal can be an important field of study within sociolinguistics. There are languages belonging to four different language families spoken in Nepal and they have coexisted here since long ago. In addition to these diverse languages spoken in Nepal, there are continual influences on languages from the dominant language in the world, that is, English, and from Hindi as well. Nowadays, it is very difficult to find monolingual speakers in our country. The widespread bilingualism and multilingualism has resulted in different patterns of language contact depending on various social factors.

The language contact studies in Nepal can be carried out from range of different perspectives. The studies which focus on language users as the

carriers of language change is more important to gain insights on how the language features are acquired from other languages.

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