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Phonetic drift in the Nepali songs: The cross influence of English in Nepali

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the presence of phonetic drift in both voiced and voiceless aspirated bilabial stops. The study focuses on Nepali 12 songs available on YouTube, where the pronunciation of aspirated bilabial stops is examined. The findings reveal both systematic and non-systematic deviations in the Nepali sounds within the observed cases. Crosslinguistic evidence of such deviations is noted in both Nepali and English languages. As is customary, the influence of one's first language (L1) on his/her second language (L2) is a widespread phenomenon. Conversely, the influence of L2 on L1 is relatively uncommon and is predominantly observed in younger speakers. The collected data is scrutinized through the lenses of phonetic drift (Chang, 2019) and language attrition (Schimid, 2011). The analysis indicates a deviation in the pronunciation of aspirated bilabial stops, with a frequent realization as labiodental fricatives. This deviation is observed at the micro-level or individual user level.

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INTRODUCTION

English has achieved the status of a global language, emerging as the most widely spoken international language in the 21st century, with nearly a quarter of the world's population utilizing it proficiently (British Council, 2013). Its influence has permeated the globe in recent times, establishing itself as an unparalleled lingua franca (Medgyes, 2001). Its expansion extends to various countries where it is adopted as a second or foreign language, providing a broad spectrum of communication opportunities in the realms of science, information technology, business, entertainment, diplomacy, and other avenues of employment and economic success (Tollefson, 2000).

Presently, English holds the distinction of being the world's most spoken language, boasting 1,132 million speakers, with Mandarin ranking second at 1,037 million speakers (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2020). A significant portion of English speakers, totaling 753 million, comprises second language users dispersed across the globe.

The global expansion of English can be traced back to the influence of the British Empire, which played a pivotal role in disseminating the language beyond European borders. The colonial dominance of the British significantly contributed to the diffusion of English, and this influence extended further with the rise of international trade in the adjacent regions of British colonies (Crystal, 2003).

The increasing prevalence of English has elevated language teaching to an appealing profession, drawing numerous individuals aspiring for improved prospects. Its widespread and accelerated use among non-native speakers globally has resulted in deviations from its standard form. These deviations, in turn, have given rise to various new varieties of English, collectively known as world Englishes. These divergent forms of the language, employed by individuals outside the UK or the US, distinguish them from native speakers in terms of language usage (Crystal, 2012). The emergence of these varied expressions reflects the dynamic evolution of English as a global means of communication, adapting to the linguistic preferences and cultural nuances of its diverse users worldwide.

In the Nepalese context, English has assumed the role of linguistic capital, as articulated by Bourdieu (1977, 1991), intertwining with cultural capital and conferring advantageous and privileged social status to its possessor. This elevation of English to the status of linguistic capital has led to its adoption as a medium of instruction in community schools. Simultaneously, English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has been prevalent in institutional schools, as documented by Shah and Li (2017). While English has been a subject in both school and university

education for an extended period, the surge in popularity of EMI has transformed it into an indispensable tool for general education. The recognition of English as a medium of instruction underscores its pivotal role in shaping educational practices and emphasizes its significance beyond the confines of traditional language learning.

In the contemporary landscape, the English language is increasingly intersecting with local languages more frequently than ever. This heightened interaction is a result of increased teaching, learning, and usage of English. The regular engagement between local languages and English has facilitated the exchange of numerous language features. This phenomenon, commonly observed as the influence of first language (L1) features on second language (L2) ones, is termed "transfer" (Lado, 1957, as cited in Lu, 2010). Many scholars synonymously refer to this as "crosslinguistic influence," adopting a broader term to encompass the mutual impact of languages. This broader terminology acknowledges not only the influence of the first language on the second language but also the reciprocal influence, encompassing the impact of the target language on the mother tongue or previously acquired languages (Pavlenko, 2000; Odlin, 2005; Altmisdort, 2016; Liu & Ni, 2016; Chunpeng & Hee-Don, 2017).

The pervasive influence of English in Nepal is evident in various domains such as academic discourse, print and electronic media, and everyday social interactions. This influence manifests itself through common usage, codeswitching, and code-mixing (Giri, 2014). While some literature explores the impact of Nepali on English, revealing the emergence of a distinct local variety with notable phonological and syntactic deviations (Jora, 2019), the examination of the deviation of Nepali sounds resulting from English influence remains unexplored.

This study endeavors to investigate potential deviations in Nepali bilabial stops and ascertain whether these deviations are attributed to the influence of the English language. To achieve this, we analyzed 12 Nepali songs available on YouTube, focusing on the pronunciation of aspirated bilabial stops by the singers. Across the selected 12 songs, encompassing a total of 2082 words uttered by the singers, 230 words contained aspirated bilabial stop sounds. Additionally, 35 words were identified as English loan words incorporating labiodental fricatives, which Nepali learners sometimes substitute with aspirated bilabial stops (Tuladhar & Akatsuka, 2018).

The chosen songs were meticulously transcribed, with words featuring aspirated bilabial sounds marked in bold for subsequent analysis. Subsequently, the identified words were documented, and the songs were attentively listened to, particularly focusing on sections where bilabial stops occurred. To enhance precision, the audio was repeatedly reversed, and the articulation was scrutinized to distinguish between stop sounds and fricatives. Audacity software was employed to isolate the vocals from the music, though its limitations influenced the results to

some extent, as it did not completely eliminate background music, impacting the subsequent analysis using Praat software.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the mechanical constraints of Audacity and the inherent differences in speech production during singing and normal speech may have introduced nuances that could affect the anticipated findings. Despite these challenges, the study aims to shed light on the nuanced influence of English on Nepali phonology, contributing to a deeper understanding of language dynamics in this multicultural context.

Cross-Linguistic Influence

Every bilingual individual inevitably encounters crosslinguistic influence, manifesting as the L2 interlanguage being shaped by features from their L1. The behavioristic school of psychology has long recognized transfer as a significant factor in second language learning (Odlin, 2003, 2005), with numerous research studies delving into this phenomenon. Initially, crosslinguistic influence, conceptualized as language transfer, was perceived as a pivotal factor in generating L2 errors (Ellis, 1994). However, more recently, it is recognized as a dynamic interplay where two languages mutually influence each other, particularly evident in bilingual acquisition scenarios, where a child is acquiring two or more languages. In such instances, the acquisition process of a specific language or languages may encounter certain constraints (Müller & Hulk, 2001).

Crosslinguistic influence can take various forms, ranging from the traditional concept of transfer (Corder, 1981; Müller & Hulk, 2001; Serratrice, 2013) to language loss or attrition (Hansen, 2001; Köpke & Schmid, 2004; Park, 2018). Language attrition is defined as "the (total or partial) forgetting of a language by a healthy speaker" (Schmid, 2011, p. 3) and occurs in settings where language use is infrequent. It is further described as "the non-pathological decrease in proficiency in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual" (Köpke & Schmid, as cited in Park, 2018, p. 1). The acknowledgment of these diverse manifestations of crosslinguistic influence provides a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play in bilingual language acquisition and usage.

Crosslinguistic influence manifested as the transfer of elements or patterns from the first language into the speech of the second language, can yield either positive or negative outcomes (Ghilzai, 2014). This term has been a subject of controversy in the field of second language acquisition (Lu, 2010). Nevertheless, linguists acknowledge that the first language (L1) plays a pivotal role in second language acquisition (SLA), particularly in contexts where foreign language learning occurs or when exposure to the target language is limited. In such instances, the influence of the learners' first language can significantly impact their acquisition of the target language (Ellis, 1990).

Typically, the influence of L1 on the performance of the second language (L2) is considered negative, as it involves the transfer of L1 features that differ from those of the L2. Negative transfer can render L2 expressions challenging to comprehend. Such influence of L1 on the performance of L2 is "considered negative as it makes learner's transfer L1 features which are different from L2 and this is why such transfer is negative and it may make the L2 expressions difficult to understand" (Crystal, 2003, p. 471). This perspective aligns with the behaviorist psychology view of language learning, which is "resulting from S-R-R: stimuli from the environment" (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 25). Responses to linguistic input act as reinforcement when they lead to a desired outcome. Some scholars argue that during the habit formation process, learners construct unique rules of the target language through creative construction, a phenomenon observed particularly during L1 acquisition (Ellis, 1994, p. 19).

In the context of Nepal, English Language Teaching (ELT) serves as a means for learners to respond to linguistic stimuli and receive reinforcement when their responses lead to desired outcomes. This interaction highlights the intricate relationship between crosslinguistic influence, habit formation, and language acquisition in the dynamic field of English language learning.

Similarly, the reduction of a previously acquired language in an individual or community, whether due to pathological or non-pathological reasons, is referred to as language attrition. According to Foughtnick (2007, pp.169-170), language attrition or loss can be categorized into three types. The first type is pathological, resulting from physiological damage to the brain, aphasia, amnesia, or agrammatism, leading to abnormal language production. The second type involves forgetting a language, and it is non-pathological, occurring due to reduced or no use of a previously acquired language. The third type is the hidden language, where language attrition is observed in first, second, or third language acquisition, resulting from underuse or insufficient exposure to the linguistic environment.

In this article, the focus is specifically on whether language attrition at the 'macro' or 'micro' level is manifested in the pronunciation of aspirated bilabial stops. The examination seeks to determine if language attrition is discernible in the articulation of these sounds, shedding light on the impact of reduced language use or exposure to specific phonological elements.

Is English being a cause of language loss or attrition of Nepali?

English, far from being just a foreign language, holds a pervasive and integral role in Nepal's education system, extending from school to university levels. Recognized as a language of influence, international communication, academia, and science and technology, English has transcended its foreign language status within the Nepali context (Giri, 2014). The recent trend among the middle-class Nepali population, showcasing an increased affinity for English, is evident in

the growing popularity of English Medium Instruction (EMI) (Shah, 2015; Ojha, 2018).

In the current global landscape, English's reach is unparalleled, with nearly 2 billion individuals using it either as their mother tongue or as a second language. This widespread adoption is reflected in the fact that almost all countries worldwide have incorporated English into their primary, secondary, or tertiary level curricula in various capacities. This integration not only significantly contributes to global academia but also plays a pivotal role in shaping the global economy (Andrade, 2006). The dynamic and pervasive nature of English is evident in its multifaceted impact on education, communication, and global interactions.

Numerous factors, including international job prospects, the burgeoning tourism industry, education, advancements in science and technology, and the pervasive influence of the internet, collectively underscore why English has assumed a paramount role in present-day Nepal. However, despite its prominence, English language teaching in the country faces several challenges. Notably, the interference or transfer from the learners' first language (L1) poses considerable obstacles. In urban areas, the continuous interaction between Nepali and English has perceptibly influenced people's proficiency in both languages. Despite the shared genealogical roots of Nepali and English, their substantial differences pose notable impediments to their mutual acquisition across all linguistic levels.

The reciprocal influence between English and South Asian languages traces its roots to the onset of British colonization in India. This influence is evident in the assimilation of English words into South Asian languages and vice versa. In the Nepali language, for instance, terms such as radio, television, computer, doctor, hospital, table, light, blade, among others, have been borrowed from English. Conversely, English has incorporated words from South Asian languages into its lexicon, including jungle, ghee, blighty (from Belayati), shampoo (from Champoo), chit (from Chitthi), cheetah, cot (from Khat), juggernaut (from Jagannath), mantra, karma, nirvana, thug, and more (Sherwani, 2016).

In recent years, the evolving landscape of technology and innovation has necessitated the addition of several new words to the Nepali lexicon, catering to the growing demand for terms related to newly invented or introduced concepts. This linguistic exchange exemplifies the dynamic interplay between English and South Asian languages, reflecting the historical and cultural intersections between these linguistic traditions.

Both the Nepali and English languages have undergone dynamic transformations over time. In Nepali, these changes are observable across various linguistic dimensions, including phonological, semantic, and lexical aspects. Conversely, in English, the evolution is evident through the expansion of World Englishes. Aitchinson (2001) characterizes such language change as an inevitable and intrinsic phenomenon.

In recent times, alterations in the articulation of bilabial stops in Nepali have been noted, displaying deviations from their natural place and manner. Specifically, the aspirated /p/ and aspirated /b/ are realized as [f] and [v] respectively. This departure from L1 norms, influenced by recent experiences in another language, is termed as phonetic drift (Chang, 2019). Sapir (as cited in Yao & Chang, 2016) corroborated this concept, stating, "We may suppose that individual variations arising at linguistic borderlands—whether by the unconscious suggestive influence of foreign speech or the actual transfer of foreign sounds into the speech of bilingual individuals—have been gradually incorporated into the phonetic drift of a language" (p. 433). This linguistic phenomenon reflects the fluidity and adaptability inherent in language, influenced by external factors and experiences.

Nepali and English Sound System: A Comparison

The Nepali sound system encompasses 29 consonant and 11 vowel sounds (Khatiwada, 2009). Conversely, English features 24 consonant and 20 vowel sounds, comprising 12 monophthongs and eight diphthongs (Roach, 2009). Despite their shared roots in the Indo-Aryan family tree, English and Nepali exhibit noticeable differences in their sound systems. These distinctions pose potential challenges for speakers attempting to learn one language after mastering the other. Focusing specifically on consonant sounds in both languages (as the article pertains solely to consonants), clear disparities emerge. These distinctions are prone to elicit crosslinguistic influences in the language acquisition process. The primary level of similarities and differences between the Nepali and English consonant systems can be gleaned from the following list of phonetic inventories:

Table 1

Nepali Consonants Sounds

	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b p^h $b^{ɦ}$	t d t^h $d^{ɦ}$		ʈ ɖ $ʈ^h$ $ɖ^{ɦ}$		k g k^h $g^{ɦ}$	
Affricate			ts dz ts^h $dz^{ɦ}$				
Nasals	m	n				ŋ	
Tap or flap			r				
Fricative			s				ɦ
Lateral			l				
Approximant	(w)				(j)		

(Khatiwada, R. 2009, p.373)

Table 2

English Consonant Sounds

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d			k g	
Affricate					tʃ dʒ			
Nasal	m			n			ŋ	
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Approximant	(w)				r	j	w	
Lateral approximant				l				

Source: Roach (2009, p. 52)

The tables above reveal that both languages share only 10 consonant sounds: bilabial stops /p/, /b/, dental stops /t/, /d/, velar stops /k/, /g/, bilabial nasal /m/, bilabial approximant /(w)/, alveolar fricative /s/, and palatal approximant /j/. This implies that 19 Nepali consonants are unfamiliar to native English speakers, and likewise, 14 English consonants are unfamiliar to native Nepali speakers. These disparities are notably significant and have the potential to induce crosslinguistic influence.

In environments dominated by the native language (L1), this influence often shapes the learning of the second language (L2). Since English is primarily used in formal settings in Nepal, many unfamiliar English sounds are substituted by approximate counterparts by Nepali language users. For instance, Nepali native speakers frequently articulate English phonemes /f/, /v/, /ʃ/, /dʒ/, and /θ/ as [pʱ], [bʱ], [s], [dz], and [t̪ʱ] respectively (Paudel, nd.; Adhikari, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As indicated in Table 1, the Nepali sound system encompasses only two fricative consonant sounds, specifically /s/ and /ɦ/. However, observations have revealed that Nepali aspirated bilabial stops are also realized as fricatives in continuous speech. This phenomenon was previously affirmed by Khatiwada (2009), who noted that in spontaneous speech, the voiced and voiceless aspirated labials and velars can be realized as corresponding homorganic fricatives (p. 366). The examination of 12 Nepali songs further substantiates these findings, particularly in the case of aspirated voiced and voiceless bilabial stops, which exhibited noticeable deviations, aligning with Khatiwada's claims.

Table 3

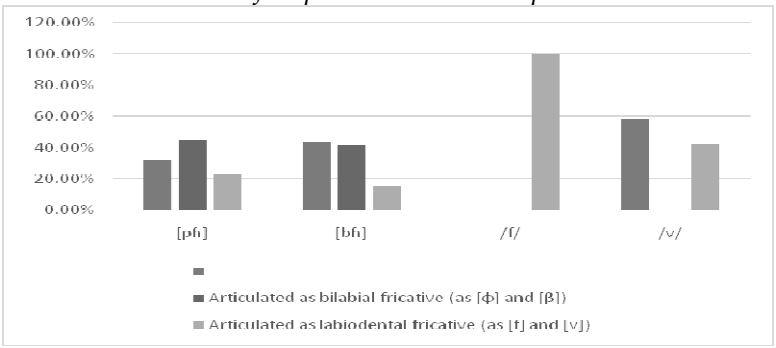
Frequency of Deviated Articulations of Aspirated Bilabial Stops

Articulated as bilabial stop	Articulation drifted to bilabial fricative (as [ɸ] and [β])	Articulation drifted to labiodental fricative (as [f] and [v])	Total
[$p^{ɦ}$]	33 (32.35%)	46 (45.1%)	23 (22.55%)
[$b^{ɦ}$]	56 (43.75%)	53 (41.41%)	19 (14.84%)
/f/	-	-	7 (100%)
/v/	22 (57.89%)	-	16 (42.11%)
Total	-	-	275

In Table 3, out of 102 articulations of [$p^{ɦ}$], in 32.5% of cases (n=33), it is realized as a bilabial stop, while in 45.1% of cases (n=46), it was realized as [ɸ]. Similarly, in 22.55% of cases (n=23), it was realized as a voiceless labiodental fricative [f]. Likewise, [$b^{ɦ}$] was realized as usual, i.e., as a bilabial stop in 43.75% of cases (n=56), as a bilabial voiced fricative [β] in 41.41% of cases (n=53), and as a voiced labiodental fricative [v] in 14.84% of the cases (n=19). While bilabial friction has been observed as a phenomenon in Nepali phonology, these sounds are not listed in the phonetic inventory of Nepali consonants (as shown in Table 1). However, the realization of voiced or voiceless aspirated bilabial stops as voiced or voiceless labiodental fricatives is a novel phenomenon. Typically, Nepali learners of English replace voiced labiodental fricatives with voiced aspirated bilabial stops and voiceless labiodental fricatives with voiceless aspirated bilabial stops (Paudel, nd.; Adhikari, 2017). This is partially supported by the finding that out of 38 observed cases of voiced and voiceless labiodental fricatives /f/ and /v/ in loan words, 57.9 cases of the pronunciation of /v/ sound deviated, while /f/ was realized labiodental in all 7 cases.

Figure 1

Status of Deviated Pronunciation of Aspirated Bilabial Stops

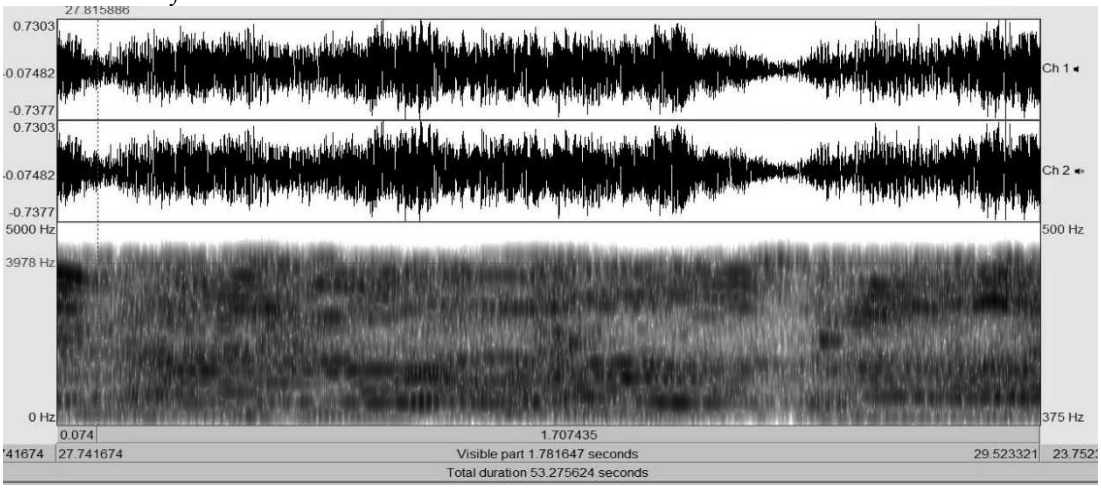


The figure illustrates that both voiced and voiceless aspirated bilabials were realized with significant deviations, with the more notable deviations having been previously identified in earlier studies. It is not definitive to attribute this to the influence of English language teaching, as such cross-linguistic influence typically requires a high degree of L2 experience (Chang C. B., 2010). Nevertheless, observations revealed that the deviation was more prevalent among younger singers, especially those performing songs with Western beats, suggesting a potential heavy influence from exposure to English phonology. Interestingly, two songs recorded over three decades ago showed no deviations, even though they contained 45 instances of such sounds. In contrast, a recently released song exhibited deviations in all 16 instances recorded.

In the study of language change, two fundamental categories are explored: changes at the lexical level, involving the borrowing of words, and changes at the structural level, encompassing aspects such as phonology, morphology, and syntax. Chang (2010) elucidates, stating, "Cross-linguistic influence at the lexical level is considered relatively common, whereas cross-linguistic influence at a structural level is thought to be less common, requiring a high degree of L2 experience among a large segment of the speech community" (p. 182). In the instances being examined, the observed phenomena of sound change fall into the latter category—change at the structural level.

Figure 2

Articulation of "bharosa"



In Figure 2, the spectrogram illustrates the articulation of the bilabial stop [bʱərosa], where [bʱ] is realized as an aspirated [β]. This realization is characterized by a less dense spectrogram compared to a plosive one, as evident in the leftmost part of the spectrogram.

During the observation, it became apparent that the deviation occurs somewhat at the community level and, to some extent, at the individual level. The same individual may pronounce the same sound differently, regardless of the phonetic environment. Conversely, instances of consistency were also noted. For example, in a song, [bʱ] in [bʱok], [bʱagtsʱa], and [bʱo] was heard as [β], and [p] in [dzʱarpʱuk] was realized as [ɸ] and [pʱ]. Notably, there was no deviation in the pronunciation of the [f] sound in loan words like [foto] and [fesbuk], where it was consistently realized as [f].

In some cases, such as [bʱet], [bʱənda], and [bʱatsʱəinə], [bʱ] was realized as [v], while the same singer's pronunciation of [bʱoli] was realized as a bilabial fricative [β].

In certain instances, the phonetic drift was observed specifically in the case of [ph], wherein [phulbutte], [pʱʌsi], [pʱul], [pʱeri], and [pʱatigʌe], it was realized as [β]. Interestingly, its voiced counterpart [bʱ] in [bʱʌidiyo] maintained a normal realization. Another notable case involved [pʱ] in [pʱeri], which was realized as both [f] (8 times) and [ɸ] (once). In a different song, the same artist pronounced [bʱ] in [bʱəyo] normally, [bʱuli] with [β], [bʱijeko] as [β], and [bʱetə] with variations in pronunciation.

An intriguing case was observed where English loan words [vɪzɪt] and [viːzə] were simultaneously realized as [bʱidzit] and [bʱisa]. In another song, a similar drift occurred in the voiceless [pʱ] sounds only, while the voiced counterpart [bʱ] was pronounced normally. For instance, [pʱule] became [fule], [pʱʌk.aune] changed to [ɸək.aune], and [pʱaler] transformed into [faler]. Conversely, [bʱ] in [bʱʌgai] maintained a normal pronunciation as [bʱ].

In certain cases, both aspirated bilabial stops, [pʱ] and [bʱ], were realized simultaneously as [f] and [v], respectively, as seen in [pʱiriri] becoming [firii], [pʱul] transforming into [ful], [bʱetne] changing to [vetne], [bʱəner] becoming [vəner], and [bʱəyo] shifting to [vəyo]. However, it's important to note that this phenomenon does not appear to follow a systematic pattern, making it quite unpredictable. The same singer pronounced [bʱ] in the same word at times as [bʱ] and at other times as [v]. This deviation does not seem to adhere to any discernible pattern and remains unpredictable. Nevertheless, in the repetition of recurring lines in songs, some singers intentionally introduced the drift, shifting from [pʱ] or [bʱ] initially to [f] or [v] in subsequent repetitions.

CONCLUSION

A discernible contrast exists between the speech production of monolinguals and bilinguals, a phenomenon also observed in L1 production (Chang, 2010). However, the extent of deviation varies based on the type of bilingualism. In the case of the Nepali language, systematic variations were previously identified

concerning the fricativization of stop sounds. The current observation reveals that the deviation demonstrates symptoms of phonetic drift at the individual level. However, in most cases, the deviation is non-systematic, indicating a lack of awareness among speakers rather than adherence to any fixed patterns in their subconscious minds.

English classes in Nepal often emphasize the pronunciation of [f] and [v] as these sounds are considered challenging. However, students rarely discern the differences between these sounds and the Nepali [$p^{ɦ}$] and [$b^{ɦ}$]. Labiodental sounds are absent in the Nepali language, and [f] and [v] are transcribed using Devanagari as [फ] and [भ], both being the aspirated counterparts of [p] and [b]. Sanskrit has a labiodental approximant [ʋ], represented by [व], but in Nepali, the same symbol [व] is used for bilabial approximant [w].

The collected evidence, based on repeated listening to sampled songs, highlights individual instances of phonetic drift, where [$p^{ɦ}$] and [$b^{ɦ}$] were realized as [f] and [v], respectively. This presents a potential challenge of attrition to the Nepali language, creating micro-level difficulties in distinguishing between English labiodental fricatives and Nepali aspirated bilabial stops. This may introduce pedagogical complications in teaching English pronunciation. A significant research gap exists in studying structural changes in Nepali and other languages of Nepal due to English language proficiency. Language attrition and phonetic drift emerge as promising areas for further exploration in this context.

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