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Finding Success while Losing Culture: Language, Education and the Diasporic Lenticularity of Nepali Identity

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Abstract. *This study explores the liminal dynamics of language, identity making, and diasporic experiences among Nepali communities, both within Nepal and abroad. Using an anthropological approach, historical analysis, and theoretical linguistic frameworks, the study examines how English functions as a marker of upward mobility in Nepal, contrasting with the cultural languages that gain symbolic capital in the diaspora. It challenges the dominant narratives that conceive diasporic identity through nostalgic or passive lenses. Instead, it analyses the multiplicity of inhabitance, employing Lebanese anthropologist, Ghassan Hage's concept of "diasporic lenticularity," to assert that diasporic Nepaliness is plural, present, and fragmented yet cohesive. Relying on this framework, this study argues that the valorization and marginalization of English and vernaculars shape identity navigation in both spaces. Language is not merely a tool for communication but a vehicle for negotiating belonging, agency, and legitimacy in a transnational context. Drawing upon cases from interviews, media, and educational discourse, this study situates Nepali identity as translingual and multiply inhabited across space and time.*

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Introduction

> *Dashain ma barsa ma ek choti bhetne nata haru le pani sadhai dherai padhnu, thulo manche bannu ani bau ama ko naak rakhnu ani America janu bhandai ashirwaad dinthey.*[1] (Interview with Tilla conducted in New York in October 2022)[2]

1 The quote translates to "During Dashain, extended family members who you only meet once a year would also bless by saying ' study hard, become successful,' 'keep your father's nose'" – meaning maintain your family's honor, and go to America.

2 To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used for all interviewees.

Migration shapes the Nepali identity even inside Nepal, where life is calibrated against the prospect of relocating abroad. This orientation surfaces in the apparent Anglophone predilection, the upsurge in English child names, parents hankering for expensive English schools and choosing to move abroad for their child's future. Even before a child is born, a hallmark of "good" parenting is the ability to enroll children in private schools (Phyak et al., 2022, p. 437; Giri, 2015). When choosing schools, parents rank the quality of English instruction as a decisive criterion (Phyak & Sharma, 2021, p. 218). Thus, preference for English is widespread in both urban and rural areas, as parents desire "boarding schools[3]," despite the higher expenses, since they assure English fluency and by extension mobility (Giri, 2015; Gautam, 2021).

Students' success or growth is often measured by their English competency (Phyak, 2015). "*Thulo bhayera bidesh jane ho* (When I grow up, I will go abroad)" is a student's goal, even before realizing what opportunities or possibilities lie beyond the walls of a classroom. At festivals, elders repeat the blessing captured in the epigraph: "Study hard now so you can go to America later." Family gatherings reinforce this, filled with stories of relatives abroad, framing migration as both desirable and achievable.

By high school graduation, many youths are determined to leave the village, if not the country. They actualize the societal aspirations in their strolls around Dillibazar, Putalisadak and Baneshwor, three urban centers heavily marked by colorful billboards representing many "educational brokers" colloquially called consultancies.[4] The street tapestry of "IELTS prep" centers, "foreign language" centers, and "immigration support" services makes navigating immigration systems abroad seem seamless. The lack of job opportunities at home is directly compensated with the possibilities that these consultancies sell. Thus, the collapse of rural-urban migration into outmigration allows many people to imagine a near future in a foreign land and acquire skills, like English, as a preparatory medium. Across childhood, youth, and adulthood, Nepalis confront the same dilemma: how to find modern opportunities at home, or a way out of it. Success is imagined elsewhere and narrated through English, making mobility, real or anticipated, the primary index of belonging.

However, once in the migration, we see a direct renegotiation of cultural and linguistic heritage in the form of observing holidays and festivals, supporting

3 Boarding school is a colloquial reference to private schools. It is well established that these schools are better funded, often have better quality of education and resources compared to their public counterparts and have English as the mode of instruction.

4 These places almost work as a site for career counselors, but come at a high price. In many cases, they help youth and families find schools, navigate admissions, scholarships and visa applications.

Nepali cultural and educational efforts, and maintaining active social networks in Nepal and within the greater diaspora (Subedi, 2015, p. 34). Success in many ways becomes measured in a diasporan's ability to give back and maintain their cultural fluency - thus shifting the locus of recognition once again to an "elsewhere." The irony at the heart of Nepali modernity is that both home and diaspora define success in reference to the other.

This research[5] anthropologically explores the intricate dynamics of language, modernity, and diasporic experience among Nepali communities both in Nepal and the diaspora.[6] Drawing on ethnographic interviews and historical analysis, it examines the main questions: What cultural costs accompany migration, and how do Nepalis, at home and abroad, negotiate heritage through language choice and cultural practices? Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, this research explores the moments of disjuncture between the multifaceted identities of the Nepali public by analyzing languages of use and the role of language in concretizing or challenging predispositions and identity frameworks that characterize people within Nepal and the diaspora. The study shows that the idea of leaving and becoming a diasporic subject starts at the very essential infrastructure of the Nepali society, particularly education, which is the starting point for diasporic becoming. Likewise, the study critiques the dominant narratives that frame diasporic identity through nostalgic or passive lenses and instead embraces Ghassan Hage's concept of "diasporic lenticularity" to assert that diasporic Nepaliness is plural, present, and fragmented yet cohesive. By tracing moments of disjuncture and convergence across Nepal and its diaspora, the paper argues that both realms can coexist within the hazy margins of nation, culture, and language.

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5 This study is based on my Master's thesis submitted to the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University in May 2024. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between October–December 2022 and March–November 2023 in New York City and the DC–Maryland–Virginia area, along with remote interviews with Nepalis in Nepal and Australia to incorporate broader diasporic voices. Influenced by Abu-Lughod's (1988) reflections on studying one's own community while participating as an insider in some settings but not in all, I similarly benefited from rapid access and trust. However, this positioning also presented nuanced difficulties–such as repressing my own views and allowing most interviews to remain unstructured. In conversations conducted in Nepali–about being in Nepal and elsewhere–a shared sense of home emerged in the digital conversations making the internet a site for diasporic study. Baker's (2012) work further shaped my methodology by foregrounding how positionality and relational dynamics unfold across ethnographic interviews, especially in transnational and digitally mediated contexts. These conversations required constant self-reflection on my openness and embeddedness, particularly in virtual settings.

6 Here, the Nepalese diaspora will primarily mean the Nepalese communities in the US, specifically in New York City and the DMV area, where I conducted my fieldwork, with occasional glossing over other English-speaking countries like the UK and Australia, which are also major destinations for Nepalis.

The discussion unfolds in four parts. The first section explores the "at-home" language attitudes and praxis. The second section explores their "diasporic counterpart". The third section then delves into the contentious delineations that keep these two spatialized identities in mutual suspense, and the final section uses Ghassan Hage's approach of diasporic lenticularity to envision a more hospitable identity framework where the time-space bind collapses and cultural heritages and modern competencies can thrive without mutual compromise.

Being in Modern Nepal

In Nepal, the trend is growing among the young individuals that one's success is more understood by the capacity to leave than to achieve within. The interplay of development, globalization, and modernity has resulted in both estrangement and plurality, significantly impacting Nepali culture, identities, and social behavior. In a nation where progress is slowed by poverty, political instability, and fragile infrastructure, cities stand out as dreamlands of possibility, quickly eclipsed by the still-brighter prospect of going overseas. The distant and less modern idea of villages and rural areas, combined with the effects of (post) colonialism and geopolitics on Nepal's socioeconomic environment, makes "village" or "Nepal" less favorable places to work and encourages people to find opportunities elsewhere. The idea that "anywhere is better than at home" is omnipresent in all interactions and relationships.

If departure is the ultimate horizon, English is the linchpin of this imagined success overseas. Children learn A, B, C alongside *ka, kha*, *ga*; urban streets and textbooks overflow with English, and most subjects are taught in it. A mother of two kids, who grew up during the 1990s, a period that marked the flourishing of private schools, summarized:

> When our children became of age for schooling, we were looking at private schools only, though we barely had enough money for one of our three children. [We parents] knew that the private schools offer good English programs and we knew that our children needed that to grow into competent individuals… English seems to be the language that is running all the big decisions of the country and the world at large. So, English would be a way to educate our children, who would then educate the family… We wanted to make sure our children were set up for success in the world beyond Nepal. There is nothing in Nepal, so we knew we wanted our kids to go abroad even before they were born. (E-interview with Rara conducted in Nepal on December 2023)

Stories like hers are common. Even before an individual learns about what it means to be from a nation and move abroad, the discourse of transnationalism seeps into the everyday making of their identities by the people around them, from teachers to families. In Hage's account of Lebanon, he says that migration is in the Lebanese blood, and many find it hard to think of a Lebanese mode of being that is only sometimes a transnational diasporic being (Hage, 2021, p. 2).

A similar imaginary and allure of the "foreign" is felt in all realms of Nepal, starting at the family level and in English classes.

Education in Nepal offers the clearest window onto this dynamic. The very architecture of education renders English the currency of aspiration. The expansion of English-medium schools and the soaring demand for them signal that to be "educated" now means to be proficient in English–or at least in Standard Nepali–with English occupying the more aspirational, transnational slot. Individual and institutional preferences for the language enact the broader logics of globalization: English not only enables but actively structures diasporic[7] longing. Kapoor's (2019, p. 100) study of British-era renaming practices in India shows how postcolonial identity, university internationalization, and public Englishization intertwine. Her framework helps explain why Nepali society tilts toward English and its paradoxical counterpart diasporic Nepalis "Nepalicize" their everyday spaces to resist total Anglicization. Decades of scholarship on language standardization and the global spread of English explain why certain tongues confer power and mobility (Irvine & Gal, 2000; Milroy & Milroy, 2002; Silverstein, 1979). Through print media, globalization, the "universalism of science," and terminological standardization, Western scholars cast English as the neutral language of modernity. Loanwords entered non-Western vernaculars, hardening hierarchies that still marginalize many dialects (Elshakry, 2008, p. 726). If, as Hage argues, Nepal's modernity is underwritten by migration, then English–or, more precisely, standardized English–inevitably dominates public life. Mastery of it promises resources, jobs, and the very capacity to imagine a future beyond one's village.

With more than 100 languages spoken nationwide, linguistic practice reflects social hierarchy. While official rhetoric celebrates multiculturalism, standardization–fueled by socioeconomic mobility–discourages languages other than English and Standard Nepali in public arenas. Most administrative business and formal schooling occur in these two tongues, structurally marginalizing others (Gautam, 2021, p. 367; Giri, 2015). As one interviewee noted:

> I still teach my mother to use her phone. It is all in English. A small task like paying the utility bill becomes a full family group chat chore. I was getting very frustrated that my mother always required hand-holding until I realized that the app is in English and she was never educated in English. When we were paying the bills through e-sewa (online wallet), I noticed that she would haphazardly touch buttons whenever it looked green. Why make these things in English? It only makes it harder for them. (E-interview with Raunak conducted in Sydney in November 2023)

7 Diasporan or diasporic subjects are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to the Nepalese subjects in the Nepali diaspora.

This example illustrates the layered difficulties introduced by English-language dominance in Nepal's digital and public spheres. These challenges are compounded by the multilingual realities of daily life, where communication rarely occurs in a single, standardized language. Most people navigate a fluid mix of English, Nepali, and their mother tongues, a complexity that becomes especially visible in diasporic contexts but is equally pervasive within Nepal. Such translingual practices, particularly in verbal communication, constitute a critical yet often under recognized feature of Nepali society. One reason for this erasure lies in the dominance of standardized discursive modes, especially in print media, which typically require linguistic uniformity. This formal constraint creates a disjuncture between representational norms and everyday language practices. Such stories reveal how digital life compounds linguistic exclusion. Everyday communication rarely happens in a single standardized language; instead, most people navigate fluid mixes of English, Nepali, and their mother-tongue.

These translingual practices remain under-recognized because print and bureaucratic platforms demand uniformity, creating a gulf between representation and reality. Historically, English defined group membership and upward mobility (Green, 2014, p. 19; Phyak & Sharma, 2021). Even after the 2015 Constitution proclaimed all spoken tongues "national languages," state business still favors English and Nepali (Phyak & Sharma, 2017, p. 234). The neoliberal economy and labor migration magnify English's value: most private schools and companies use it for instruction and paperwork (Gautam, 2021). The prestige dates to the Rana period, when English signified status and upward mobility (Giri, 2010, pp. 92–93; Rana, 2006). This fostered a precedent for conservative public obsessions with English and reinforced the marginalization of local dialects and indigenous languages (Giri, 2010, pp. 89-90). Oral vernaculars–many of which lack written scripts–remain largely unrepresented in mainstream Nepali culture (Turin & Yadava, 2007, p. 22).[8] Contemporary linguist enthusiasts and activists interpret constitutional relaxation of vernacular language use as still allowing covert discrimination (Phyak & Sharma, 2021) and do not trust the effectiveness of these constitutional changes (Awasthi, Turin & Yadava, 2022). What started as a symbol of the rich is now permeated across class lines, though it affects different groups differently.

Research on linguistic ideology in Nepal has typically followed two trajectories: scholarship on education and state language policy (Gautam, 2021; Phyak & Sharma, 2021; Rana & Rana, 2019), and studies focused on cultural preservation and multilingualism within Nepal and its diaspora (Bruslé, 2012; Gurung et al., 2018; Jung, 2015; Kunreuther, 2006; Nath, 2010; Niamir, 2017). Expanding on both discourses, this study draws on Saul Mercado's conceptualization of linguistic ideology as a heuristic tool: a methodological approach to understanding how communicative practices is shaped by and shape human

agency, materiality, ideation, and institutional power (Mercado 2011, p. 44).[9] This approach goes beyond just understanding the projection of them on the user community. Crucially, Mercado challenges the notion of ideology as a static "concept," proposing instead that it be understood as an analytic methodology that people and institutions apply to communicative practices to look at the nuanced effects and application of ideologies to discover and evaluate subjectivities and positionalities (Mercado, 2011, p. 64).

This lens is vital to this study, where every conversation about language becomes both a site and method of analysis. Mercado's claim that ideology is rooted in practice enables us to examine the everyday negotiations of linguistic citizenship in contemporary Nepal. For example, the decision of returning migrant workers and ex-British Gurkhas to enroll their children in English-medium schools illustrates how English becomes a vehicle of aspiration. Gautam (2021, p. 367) notes that such parents find English essential to accessing opportunities withheld from them. Similarly, Phyak and Sharma (2021, p. 219) recount the experience of an indigenous ex-migrant worker who explained: "For him, speaking English is essential for fostering "competitive quality" and providing "competent individual" with better opportunities in the job market." By foregrounding ideology as method, we reveal how language mediates identity, mobility, and belonging in ways static models obscure.

These choices highlight the power-laden "English–Standard Nepali–Non-Standard Languages" triad that governs linguistic hierarchies. However, despite this dominance, many continue to speak or write in Romanized Nepali (Nepali in English script) or fluidly mix multiple languages. These hybrid practices resist the standardizing logics of formal writing and policy, yet they remain largely unrecognized in institutional discourse. By treating linguistic ideology as a heuristic framework, examples in the upcoming paragraphs uncover

8 While analyzing linguistic hierarchies, it is crucial not to marginalize or essentialize non-dominant language communities. Efforts to document oral traditions, promote mother-tongue education, and engage youth in cultural preservation are longstanding (Moisala, 2019; Sherpa, 2019, p. 20; Gurung et al., 2018, p. 67; Regmi, 2012), from resisting Nepali-language imposition in Newari-speaking Kathmandu (Regmi & Regmi, 2022) to challenging the Panchayat-era "one nation, one language" discourse (Gautam, 2021, p. 359), such communities have continuously pushed back against linguistic hegemony. Today, youth activism, art, and media further contest deficit narratives and assert the vitality of non-standard language users. This research aligns with those efforts while also seeking to unravel the persistent, obscured structures of dominance that trace back over a century.

9 Mercado expands "Ideology is an epistemologically oriented theory of semiotic construal that involves the articulation of the following factors: (1) human praxis, (2) subjectivity and agency, (3) ideation and materiality, and (4) institutional and discursive forms of power. Linguistic ideology, therefore, must be a heuristic tool that generates objects, concepts, and units of analysis that shed light on the juncture between these valences in communicative practice" (Mercado, 2011, p. 44).

how language mediates identity, mobility, and belonging in ways that static frameworks often obscure.

The "Diasporan" Counterpart

With this collapse of understanding the success at home through the proximity of a foreign land and ways of being, new notions of identity and belonging form while estranging many older, established forms of understanding oneself and their communities. The first complication stem from the aspiration to master a foreign language and lifestyle, while the another one manifests upon departure, marked by the connection and sentiment of the place one has left. Diasporans, by definition, are "detached" and "displaced," positioned far from home, and are thus often under represented in their roles in the social and cultural transformation of present-day Nepal (Adhikari, 2022, pp. 16–19). Given the significant reliance on remittances for daily expenses, national GDP, and overall development, the diaspora's connection to Nepal is often reduced to their financial contributions. This disjuncture between Nepal and the diaspora is discursive, fueled by the incompatibility of urban characteristics with traditional cultures in places like Nepal.

Yet diasporans continually contest this displaced narrative. Through remittances, knowledge transfer, and dense social networks they reshape Nepal's socio-economic landscape. Through these contributions, active engagement in Nepal's epistemological and socio-economic practices and maintenance of social ties within extended networks through remittances, the diasporans continually challenge the displaced narrative. Education and language emerge as ideal focal points for renegotiating identity. Language here becomes both the medium and the index of that estrangement. Language draws the contours of belonging and departure, making visible the affective and structural distances that shape diasporic subjectivities.

Having outlined Nepal's linguistic and sociopolitical landscape, it is now necessary to situate these dynamics within the diasporic context. Dominant representations often frame diasporic identities as mono-realistic and static–frozen in time and space, and detached from the homeland (Hage, 2021, p. 187). Much of the literature conceptualizes diaspora through a binary logic of "before and after," or "here and there," anchoring identity in a nostalgic relationship to territorial origin (Hage, 2021, pp. 3–4). Even attempts to include diasporas in both "home" and "host" communities frequently fall back on memory-driven imaginaries, casting diasporic identity as "real or imaginary" but ultimately rooted in the past (Hansen, 2015, p. 268).

Such framings consign diaspora Nepaliness to a passive and liminal register, where Nepal is merely remembered rather than actively lived. This reduces migration to a cultural freeze-frame, halting migration, and overlooks the ongoing, everyday renegotiations of identity. Even scholarly attempts to capture diasporic presence often reproduce disjuncture, such as interpreting

transnational engagement as a "fantasy of presence." The "ghostly presence of the diaspora" becomes a trope that denies diasporic communities' full recognition (Kunreuther, 2006, pp. 337-345) of their evolving subjectivities.

Questions like "How was life in Nepal?" or "Would you go back?" reflect this disconnect, casting Nepal as a virtual space–accessible only in memory. Yet, such portrayals overlook the cultural work actively undertaken by diasporic families. The findings and representations of such works indicate a disjuncture from Nepal, overlooking processes of personhood that continue to change and persist even after physically leaving Nepal. They overlook the active efforts that we see in the families and groups' efforts in the diaspora, like seen in the example from an interviewee describing an engagement party game in the US:

> There was an engagement party. We went to play BINGO. But this time, they would say words in Nepali or English and we would guess the word in Newari. BINGO is such a western game, but they made it Newari. Creative, don't you think? They made it child-friendly. (Interview with Ruiz conducted in New York in November 2023)

While in Nepal, Nepalese strive to attain English fluency; in the diaspora, Nepalese are using their cultural language skills as currency to ensure mobility. For example, many children and youth in the diaspora become connected to different social and cultural organizations if they have some cultural competency. One of my interviewees describes her life in the US as an international student and later as a permanent resident through her family's Diversity Visa. She explains,

> As a student, I was more inclined to make international friends and celebrate festivals and Nepali cultures purely through nostalgia. Once my parents came to the US, the Nepalese community took more interest in us, invited us to different gatherings, and recommended being members of different cultural organizations. The uncles [people who are in leadership positions within these organizations] are always impressed by my Nepali speaking skills, which many of their children lack. I just got to emcee for an event online, which my Nepali skills would have never allowed in Nepal. (Interview with Tilla conducted in New York in October 2023)

Another interviewee explained how, being a part of another Newari group in the US, they have been able to undertake essential projects and meaningful experiences. They said they are a part of this working group, which allows anyone to join the project at any time and are working on incorporating the Newari language into Google Translate. They are creating a Newari database of common phrases and diction from the Google Translate inventory to "bring our language into the daily vocabulary of people with Newari heritage" (Interview with Turk conducted in New York in November 2022).

These aforementioned examples illustrate that cultural organizations consciously embed the language efforts into the lifestyles of their children born and raised in the US and weave heritage into children's everyday lives, positioning their Nepaliness as contemporary, not archaic (Sherpa, 2019, pp. 24–27). They showcase how Newari, a vernacular language, is not a language of the past by putting it in the context of the contemporary world through popular games and technology of the present. As Turk said, "the goal is not to make them fluent in Newari and make them prioritize our language over others. It is to teach them all simultaneously." (Interview with Turk conducted in New York in November 2022). Such co-presence within a single utterance exemplifies the layered, shifting foregrounds of diasporic identity–what Goffman (1956, pp. 33–34) and Hage (2021) describe as a multiplicity that resists neat binary frames.

Disconnect between Nepal and Its Diaspora

Across both homeland and diaspora, Nepalese confront a shared "idealized other" – the culturally competent speaker – yet this ideal take shape in divergent, often conflicting ways. In Nepal, English fluency is valorized early: students who excel in English become the "smart ones" and teachers' favorites, while those shining in Nepali or social studies fade into the background (Interview with Shrey conducted in Maryland in December 2023). English proficiency serves as "an index of social capital, and part of the purchase price for a ticket out of Nepal" (Liechty, 2003, p. 231), visible in private–public school divides, English signage even in semi-rural areas, and job ads demanding "fluent spoken and written English" (Khatri, 2013, p. 81).

The dream of many upper-middle-class families is to raise an "ideal" English-speaking student – a future diasporan destined for success abroad. In discussing the capital of the English language in Nepal, one interviewee said,

> I remember going to my relatives' place during Dashain. One of the most common blessings I remember receiving every Dashain was "dherai padhnu, thulo manche bannu ani bau ama ko naak rakhnu ani America janu" [Wish you study hard, become successful, maintain your family's honor, and go to America]. It is funny how many people might have received this blessing but did not think of leaving Nepal and probably never left. Did they really succeed at home then? Or is it terrible that they actually never left? (Interview with Tilla conducted in New York in November 2022)

This example illustrates the idealization of the foreign land and the connectedness of the home within everyday conversations and social realities of Nepal. The fact that elders in the family speak of this imagined future of the younger generation and assert the relevance of family in the future behavior of a diasporan directly speaks to the potential of moving abroad as a lived thought process of Nepal. When subjects are excluded from categories of humanity,

it not only strips them of identities (including language) but also convinces these subjects of their lacking identities. Fanon's warning that "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" illuminates these pressures (Fanon, 1967, p. 38). His concept of deculturation–the internalized sense that one must abandon native ways to master the colonial tongue–illuminates the pressures Nepalese face. At home, children who code-switch or adopt English intonations are celebrated. The extent of desperation to become as close to the "ideal" is illuminated in the reward and punishment system that governs language learning spaces and cultural institutions: spaces where the idealizing starts and is most visible: the classroom (or informal learning spaces). In Nepal, there are schools where English is the sole language of instruction and communication: you get demerits and fines for speaking in Nepali (Sherpa, 2019; Rana & Rana, 2019, p. 23).

In the diaspora, however, pressures flip. Authenticity hinges on reclaiming Nepali or vernacular tongues and the ideal for the diasporan becomes the culturally competent migrant. Families in the diaspora sending their children to Nepali-language schools and video chatting with the families and extended networks in Nepal to socialize their children in the Nepali language and culture is the reality of the diasporic counterparts (Interviews with Ayu conducted in Virginia in May 2023, with Krisha conducted in Maryland in January 2024). Even parents who are not fluent in their native tongue want their children to learn it and will look for tutors who are proficient in the Nepali language. An interviewee talked about her experiences as a Newar, a member of an ethnic group with its own language. She explained,

> I come from a Newari family where many of our older family members do not even speak Nepali. My grandfather was a businessman, so he spoke some Nepali. My older brother speaks in Newari with my parents and close family members. On the other hand, I cannot really speak or understand Newari… When I started school, my teachers advised my parents to speak with me in Nepali or English, and not in Newari. They told my mother and other parents that speaking a different language at home would confuse the children and affect my performance in school. For this reason, my parents did not teach me my own language. Now, fifteen years later, I am in New York, and so is my family, and now I am taking Newari lessons. It is ironic, but it makes sense. I was already made fun of at school for my Newari accent without me even being able to speak in Newari. (Interview with Tracy conducted in New York in March 2023)

Depending on one's stance, expectations of linguistic competency point in opposite directions. The English–Nepali–other-languages triad idealizes each endpoint, yet the lines never converge, given Nepali identity's discursive and social separation and fragmentation along the geographic lines. In one of the Sherpa communities in New York City, students, who were mostly second-generation English speakers, made a rule that they would be fined

a dollar or two if they spoke in English or even Nepali within the *Lapta*[10] (Sherpa, 2019, p. 25).

> Such contradictory pressures create fragmented subjectivities. New migrants hear they must drop "Nepali time," avoid Nepalese friends, and abandon festivals to thrive in the US –only to meet community leaders who insist on ritual participation as proof of genuine Nepaliness. (Interviews with Oskar conducted in DC in January 2023; with Tracy conducted in New York in October 2022)

Fanon's analysis (1967) of Antillean shame around Creole echoes here: English is exalted while native languages are stigmatized and vice versa in the diaspora, producing perpetual cycles of deculturation and re-culturation. This oscillation leaves many Nepalese–and their children–in liminal spaces where no single linguistic identity feels whole. As one interviewee observed,

> A Nepali child in a school in Nepal will never be an American, and a Nepalese American will also never really be an "American" American…We are already mixing the two so smoothly that it doesn't even feel like we are projecting two different cultures right now…also, our English is not like a white English. Well, this is confusing! (Interview with Tracy conducted in New York in June 2023)

Ultimately, the disconnect lies not merely in geography but in the historical legacies that govern language: mastery of English at home demands unlearning local tongues, while diaspora life demands re-learning them. Each arena upholds its own "ideal," producing subjects whose fluency in one sphere renders them "incomplete" in another. In Fanon's terms, they are caught between worlds, embodying the very deculturated condition he describes–never fully at home in either, yet traversing both.

In a nutshell, the idea of ideal breeds incompatibility. The estrangement that one experiences within families and communities, the language barriers between non-English-speaking parents and English-speaking young adults and the loss of identities and space for representation are as debilitating as the institutions meant to bridge them. The multiple of Fanon's concept of deculturation creates the lack of representation of the people and the language and, in turn, puts a facade as the liberating other (Fanon, 1967, p. 6). This facade ties back to the point that a faulty linguistic system spreads estrangement while touting its integration the society's institutions, which will provide stability and refuge to the fragmented subject.

Is Diasporic Lenticularity a Middle Ground?

Diasporic lenticularity indicates the multiplicity of realities experienced by the diasporan by foregrounding the overlapping realities (Hage, 2021, pp. 90-92).

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10 *Lapta* refers to Sherpa Culture and Learning Centre in Queens, USA.

Hage argues that the obsession with monorealism, which asserts that a subject can exist in one place at a given moment and the homeland identity exists only through memory, is both inadequate and reductive (Hage, 2021, p. 8). Like Hage's Lebanese interlocutors, Nepalese in the diaspora also experience Nepal in their food consumption, socialization, use, and preservation of their Nepali heritage, among many everyday practices. One is in the diaspora as much as they are in Nepal. They keep it alive in the quick flicker of a code-switched sentence.

The fragmented subject, often reinforced by hyphenated identities like Nepali-American and French-Nepali, holds contestable personhood. However, they are neither opposites nor mutually exclusive; they are differently situated yet equally "literal" experiences (Hage, 2021, p. 90). Because language, identity, and their boundaries blur and sharpen at once, this research treats identity as temporal–a moving target–rather than a preset category.

While acknowledging their fickle nature, it focuses on lenticular multiplicity, distinguishing multiplicity from uncertainty. Rapid language-switching is treated as legitimate, and memory is understood not merely as a static reference to the past but as an essential component of the present. Nepali aesthetics within immigrant homes illustrate how memory helps create diasporic landscapes (Hage, 2021, p. 92). Hage's lens reveals that speaking English is not simply a sign of future migration, and celebrating Nepali festivals in the United States is not merely a replay of memories. Each act inhabits both realities simultaneously. By shifting analysis from personal traits to the lifeworld people inhabit, the framework legitimizes multiple inhabitances and positions Nepal-based and diaspora-based identities as equally significant.

This vignette from a community holiday gathering illustrates this flickering, space-bound identity:

> Tracy said the event started at 11 a.m.; it was already noon when we arrived. I was worried about being late, but she laughed, "It's Nepal time now–we are in Nepal." An hour later, as several rice and pressure cookers ran, the power kept going out. Those who had lived through civil-war load-shedding in Nepal immediately recognized the moment. Three people mentioned "load-shedding," recalling the power cuts of that decade. Mira Aunty joked, "The lights are making sure we don't miss Nepal too much. We're in Nepal's load-shedding even if we aren't there." (From Field Notes, October 2022)

Both examples here indicate that the participants experience Nepal within their festival experiences in the US– each code-switch weaving rural memory and urban reality into a single moment. Although the associations made with Nepal sprout from one's memories, the participants in further interviews explained that they often find themselves experiencing Nepal quite literally. In these split moments, one experiences inhabiting Nepal. They express such experiences as "[They] are in Nepal time. [They] are in Nepal." It is not simply

the idea of an American place giving a Nepal-like feeling. Instead, it is the reality in which the diasporans experience parts wherein they situate themselves in Nepal.

Recognizing the fleeting, split nature of language and identity does not cast individuals as passive. Instead, everyday praxi–conscious and unconscious acts of "languaging"–makes identity a state of multiplicity. Centering agency (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112) reveals how Nepalis stitch together their realities: weekend hiking clubs in Virginia, momo pilgrimages to Jackson Heights, basement Nepali classes, Instagram reels, and festival snapshots counter accusations of cultural amnesia. Diasporic organizations run events and language classes that reinforce this multiplicity (Subedi, 2015, p. 34). Images capture lenticular experience, while idealized festival photos defend against claims that diasporans forget their roots.

Idealizing English no longer fully displaces heritage. Childhood ABCs drilled before *ka-kha-ga* mirror the diaspora routine–layers of culture shed and reclaimed, one lexical choice at a time. Remittance-fueled migration foreshadows routes to the Anglo world, yet the result is not a cultural void. Multilingual liminality animates Nepal's multicultural future.

By validating these lived, language-infused practices as constitutive components of identity, lenticularity moves beyond reductive binaries and allows us to see Nepalese diasporans as whole, co-present subjects rather than "incomplete" voyagers. It attends to the fragmented nature of identities within Nepal and the diaspora, of language and speech in particular, where English words seamlessly become a part of a sentence in Nepali, and the disjuncture between Nepal and the Nepali diaspora, the fragmented mode of writing which lacks a seamless, smooth flow between sections allows a suspension from attempting to create a holistic picture of the Nepali society and the diaspora.

Instead, this approach deliberately attempts to encapsulate the fractured speech and dissect aspects of identities. That way, one can find meaning in moments where one experiences a mixing of English and Nepali and non-standard dialects and languages as trilingual fluency is not confusion but evidence of dual rootedness – it is a legitimate linguistic presence, and the back-and-forth between Nepaliness and otherness experienced in Nepali schools, Nepali public and the diaspora, which otherwise would seem fractured and diverging. Moving away from the standard goal of finding a coherent pattern, this research delves into the moments of splitting of identity and belongingness that are experienced by multitudes of Nepali subjects. The diasporic subject, detached from the Nepali soil, unhinged from the sociopolitical fabric and the realities of Nepal, which require people to give up and compromise aspects of their – the before-after narratives that shape socialization in Nepal, that detach the diasporic subject and the generations apart are experienced as sudden moments of loss embodied in speech and demeanor.

To acknowledge the splitting and fleeting nature of language and identities by no means intends to present the individuals and populations in Nepal or the diasporans as passive humans subject to shifting environments. Instead, this study recognizes the everyday human praxis, the conscious and unconscious acting and languaging in diverse ways, as the source that makes identity a state of being in multiplicities. Human action and agency remain at the core of studying Nepalese subjects' language attitudes and practices. Challenging the normative discourse that the social and cultural context drive the way people living within these ecosystems use language, language is understood as inherently social to explore how linguistic practices and attitudes which shape these practices constitute the social contexts and vice versa (Ahearn, 2012, pp. 7-8) Ahearn's definition of agency as a socio-culturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112) allows to view individuals choosing how to stitch together their split realities.

> This definition aids the interpretation of Nepalis' conscious choices to assert their Nepalese identities outside Nepal and their global identities through English and engagement with international discourses, even in Nepal. The conscious efforts to self-represent as Nepalese and speakers of English express their multiple realities and unite their two spaces. Let us take the following examples: a group of Nepalese diasporans come together on weekends to explore the new land of residence; another group of Nepalese students in New York go to Jackson Heights to have momos and experience Nepal. (Niamir, 2017, p. 169; Interview with Tracy conducted in New York in November 2022)

Conclusion

Against the dominant idea that success for a Nepali means leaving Nepal and adopting a language and style distinct from one's heritage, I argue that what happens at home–when parents teach their children the ABCs before Nepali culture and when schools obsess over English–is merely a snapshot of a future diasporic lifestyle. In that future, cultural layers are shed one after another, with language often the first to fall away once education begins. If this ideal were not fractured from the Nepalese identity framework at home, the resulting cultural transformation might be acknowledged for its heuristic nature. Most importantly, people would not view themselves or others as lacking language or culture through a lens of loss. Even the remittances that drive internal migration to urban centers suggest that these groups will soon head to the Anglophone world in search of better opportunities than their labor-migrant parents.

While English use and usefulness affect Nepal's regions and communities differently, the language's perceived value now transcends geography, class, caste, and status–yet it no longer grows at the absolute expense of cultural roots. The losses felt at school and home foreshadow the future: heritage becomes suspect, and culture is remade in every conversation, one English word at a time. In the liminal space between Nepali and English–in the hesitation when addressing

a monolingual Nepali speaker, in the natural "Love you, Mama" at the end of a Face Time call, in the Nepali-accented "*Wed-nes-day*"- our multilingual identities come to life and our multi-spatial presence is acknowledged. Because Nepali multiculturalism emerges in this linguistic mixing, individuals and institutions must offer more hospitable platforms to represent the diversity at hand.

Discriminatory migration discourses and nostalgic public narratives force diasporans to struggle for cultural identity and active positionality. Structural limits restrict, if not deny, their Nepalese personhood, so it is imperative to problematize the lack of representation. One way forward is to examine how Nepalese diasporans negotiate agency and belonging while remaining abroad. Epistemological categories shape realities, reinforcing or challenging the labels that define them. Despite the investment in mastering "other" languages and cultures, reality remains fragmented and plural. Findings suggest that Nepali speakers desire English and English speakers desire Nepali (or another language); this impossibility of perfection lies at the heart of modern Nepal's identity crisis. Future research might explore what qualifies as "standard" Nepali and how that standard operates within broader language hierarchies. Meanwhile, the narrative of diasporans as passive is daily challenged by those who embody their languages and customs in places such as New York's dynamic sociocultural fabric.

So long as we celebrate English fluency and cosmopolitan competence in Nepal while urging diasporans to embrace cultural and linguistic heritage, Nepali identity will remain stretched between *modern-in-Nepal* and *Sanskari*[11]*-in-the-diaspora*. To break that bind, we must examine how diasporans negotiate belonging despite structures that question their Nepaliness and how Nepalese in Nepal negotiate cultural compromise happening at schools and public institutions. Ultimately, Nepali speakers want English, and English speakers want Nepali; perfection is impossible, and that impossibility drives Nepal's ongoing identity crisis. Whether on Kathmandu's streets or in American parks, speaking curated English or so-called "pure" Nepali, the essence of identity lies in that lenticular flicker–learning English "to keep Father's nose" while preserving heritage "to keep Mother's tongue."

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11 "Culturally competent" although often used in an informal humorous setting.

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