

## An Exploration of Linguistic Anthropological Expression:

### Reading rē (/ɾ/) in Nepali Language and Culture

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#### Abstract

This research explores the various uses of the particle rē (/ɾ/) in Nepali discourse, emphasizing its role as a marker of uncertainty, politeness, and affective nuance. The research employs linguistic anthropology and discourse analysis as theoretical frameworks, such as Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The analysis of expressions of rē (/ɾ/), as a versatile linguistic device, reveals that the particle conveys uncertainty, mediates assertions, and fosters social harmony. The study underscores the cultural and social importance of what might otherwise be perceived as trivial linguistic features. It also infers the usage of rē varies across geographic regions, social contexts, and gender identities, reflecting broader cultural values such as collectivism, indirectness, and face preservation. The study contributes to ongoing discussions in linguistic anthropology regarding the interaction between language, culture, and power, emphasizing the necessity of understanding local linguistic features to appreciate the complexity of human communication.

**Keywords:** particle rē, linguistic anthropology, uncertainty, culture, discourse analysis

## Introduction

Language is not a medium to an end of communication; rather, language has the spell of social and cultural life. In Nepal, the widespread use of the particle rē (/ɾ/) in spontaneous speech provides an engaging window through which to view the interstices between language, culture, and social interaction. This paper investigates the significance of rē in Nepali discourse, highlighting its use as an index of uncertainty, politeness, and emotional elaboration. By examining the performative dynamics of rē in different communicative settings, this study aims to reveal the social and cultural meanings of this linguistic phenomenon, which is so thoroughly ingrained in the structure of Nepali society.

The motivation for the present study arises from the potential for misunderstanding and communication problems associated with the particle rē. For example, its utilization in conveying uncertainty or indirectness can result in ambiguity, especially among non-native speakers or individuals who are not well acquainted with Nepali cultural norms. This type of misunderstanding has profound consequences in both informal communication and formal contexts, from casual conversation to political communication. Besides, this research is motivated by the necessity to record and examine linguistic behavior in a rapidly evolving sociocultural context, characterized by the growing impact of globalization and new media on established communication norms. By exploring the concept of rē, this study enhances our knowledge of how language reflects and constructs cultural values, especially in a collectivist culture such as Nepal, where indirectness and face maintenance are appreciated.

This study adopts a linguistic anthropological methodology, founded on ethnographic field research and discourse analysis, to explore the multifaceted uses of rē. The main data were collected through informal conversation, interviews, and participant observation, all primarily among the village populations of Nepal. These were conducted in Nepali, the lingua franca, and in the traditional ethnic languages, the majority of which are endangered. The analysis reveals that rē is a multifunctional linguistic

device, conveying uncertainty, politeness, and social harmony. Its meaning is context-dependent, ranging over epistemic uncertainty and more subtle modalities like invitations to participate, check questions, and markers of politeness. These are highly embedded in cultural practice, constituting a distinct Nepali mode of communication with an emphasis on indirectness and social harmony.

This study is theoretically informed by the works of some of the prominent scholars in linguistic anthropology. Dell Hymes' (1974) ethnography of communication offers a most significant analytical framework for *rē* analysis in terms of the SPEAKING model, which examines various dimensions of communicative events like setting, participants, purposes, action sequences, key features, instrumentalities, norms, and genres. Using the model, there can be a rich appreciation of *rē* operations in a range of social interactions from spontaneous conversations to structured debates.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital adds depth to this analysis. He speculates that language is not just a neutral means of communication but rather a means of symbolic power that mirrors and recreates existing social structure. Applied to *rē*, this framework accounts for how the particle functions to negotiate power relationships, preserve social coherence, and convey respect or deference. For instance, the employment of *rē* to minimize claims or convey uncertainty can reflect a cultural inclination towards indirect communication, and this plays a role in maintaining group harmony in collectivist cultures such as Nepal.

Moreover, the study draws upon Edward Sapir's (1921) and Benjamin Lee Whorf's (1956) linguistic relativity hypothesis which contends that language influences thought and perception. While the strong version of this hypothesis (linguistic determinism) has been largely criticized, the weak version (linguistic relativity) still holds good in the sense that it accounts for how *rē* conditions Nepali speakers' hesitation and doubt usage. The particle *rē* not only marks but also actively constructs

ambiguity in the cultural context of Nepali communication, where politeness and indirectness are highly appreciated.

By situating *rē* within these theoretical models, this study aims to describe the social and cultural meaning of this linguistic marker. Secondly, it aims to contribute to general debates in linguistic anthropology on the intersectionality of language, culture, and power. Finally, this study recognizes the value of examining apparently trivial linguistic features such as *rē*, which carry profound information about the cultural rules and social relationships of communities that speak with it.

### **Fundamental Methodological Concepts**

This research uses a linguistic anthropological methodology to analyze the function of the particle *rē* (/ɾ/) in Nepali discourse. The data were collected using ethnographic field research, such as informal interviews, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation in rural as well as urban Nepali society. The goal was to capture spontaneous usage of *rē* in daily life interactions, whether these occurred in Nepali (the lingua franca) or in indigenous ethnic languages. This method of study aligns with linguistic anthropology's concern with studying language in its natural social context and not in isolation (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

The research uses discourse analysis (Gee, 2014) to examine the function of *rē* in particular communicative contexts. This involves examining patterns of use, for example, its use in conveying ambiguity, softening claims, or expressing emotional subtlety. The research also uses indexicality theory (Silverstein, 2001) to examine how *rē* indexes social identity, relational dynamics, and cultural norms. For example, the use of *rē* in political discourse or neighborhood rumor could indicate deeper social dynamics, such as power hierarchies, consciousness of caste, or cohesion of the community.

In this research, *rē* is not only grammatically defined but as a means of social action that fulfills certain communicative purposes. For example,

rē may be employed in the expression of doubt in a polite way, thus evading hostility or direct confrontation.

### ***Contextualization***

The study emphasizes the importance of context in shaping the use of rē. This encompasses both the immediate interactional context (e.g., interlocutors' identities, location of the situation, and purpose of the conversation) and the wider sociocultural context (e.g., historical, political, and economic contexts). For instance, rē use in computer-mediated communication may be substantially different from that in face-to-face interaction, embodying the dynamic evolution of Nepali language and culture in the age of the internet.

### ***Indexicality***

The study discusses how rē indexes social meaning, such as regional identity, gender, and social class. For instance, the particle may be used more by specific demographic groups (e.g., women or rural speakers) or in certain regions of Nepal, indicating cultural variation in communication styles.

### ***Multimodality***

The multimodal analysis of rē involves not just linguistic features but paralinguistic features, like intonation, tone, and gestures. The multimodal features are crucial for the interpretation of how rē expresses emotional overtones and social undertones in interactional contexts.

### **Particle Rē: Social, Cultural and Historical Situatedness**

Drawing upon linguistic anthropological approaches, this research aims to shed light on how rē constructs and constitutes social and cultural practice in Nepal. Not only does the research offer a perceptive analysis of the functions of rē, but it also contributes to general theoretical discussions concerning the function of language in social reality construction. Lastly, the research highlights the value of considering local linguistic phenomena,

such as rē, to interpret the wider significance of language in social life, particularly in the framework of online communication.

Language is a strong indicator of social stratification and group membership (Bourdieu, 1991). One's speech can indicate geographic origin, economic standing, and cultural or ethnic belonging. This project is concerned with the cultural indexicality of rē, a Nepali particle that, though not classified as a formal grammatical item, serves a significant function in the language. Rē indexes socially and politically significant values such as confidence, certainty, and politeness, and is regularly used to refer to positive qualities such as social harmony and non-confrontation.

Language and culture are closely interconnected, with language influencing and being influenced by cultural structures and attitudes (Chiang, 2015). The present study discusses the role of rē in the Nepali language and culture, with the hypothesis that it differs from equivalent discourse markers in other languages and is worthy of special consideration both for its pervasive inter-sentential roles and for its relatively understudied sociolinguistic meaning. The frequent employment of rē in daily communication has caused a widely accepted convention for its application, even in informal contexts. The research explores the syntax, semantics, and usage conventions of rē, which are crucial for Nepali grammar and communication comprehension.

Central to this research is the idea of uncertainty, central to the operation of rē. Uncertainty is a complicated and frequently elusive idea to measure and define. In this section, I detail some of the most frequent meanings of rē that have come out of my research and through other literature on the subject. This study explores the nature of rē and the discursive properties facilitating the recognition of its presence and engagement in texts dealing with uncertainty or risk.

Rē encapsulates the notion that a statement can never be entirely accurate or true, with some degree of uncertainty regarding the truthfulness or preciseness of the statement. Such uncertainty can be expressed in single words, phrases, sentences, or even whole texts. One example would be

applying *rē* to explain an event that happens abruptly or irregularly, where its result cannot be precisely predicted. While the concept of risk would typically involve probability and seriousness, uncertainty can reflect a complete lack of credible information, conflicting information, or merely incomplete information. Sometimes a new and unique situation will arise, challenging otherwise reliable indicators and introducing uncertainty.

### ***Ambiguity or Indecision***

The particle *rē* (/ɾ/) is perhaps the most frequent and adaptable of Nepali communication devices. Its effects are generally experienced prior to arriving at Nepal, especially on long overseas flights that are mostly laden with Nepali passengers. Under these situations, *rē* is often employed for responding in surprise or disbelief, particularly as the passengers respond to the outrageous prices of food items and beverages indicated on the overhead displays of the aircraft. This gives rise to exclamations like *b]vL /]* (Look, *rē*!), which stresses the speaker's surprise or doubt.

In its primary function, the particle *rē* tends to express doubt or incredulity, as a grammatical mechanism for questioning the truth of an utterance or requesting an explanation. For instance, in *cf]nLsf] ;/sf/ 9Ng nUof] /]* (It seems Oli's government is on the brink of collapse, *rē*), the particle adds a hint of doubt and thus converts the statement into guesswork or speculation. The use of *rē* can potentially open up new discussions since it can be interpreted by hearers as an invitation to confirm, challenge, or expand on the statement.

***Rē as a Rumor-Spreading Instrument.*** The particle *rē* is pivotal in the transmission of rumor, especially in Nepali society, where face-to-face communication and informal networks form the foundation for information sharing. For example, one may analyze the assertion *b]paf / k|r08sf] 5nkmn cfh eof] /]* (It appears that Deuba and Prachanda had a discussion today, *rē*).

In this context, *rē* introduces uncertainty, which gives the speaker an excuse to mention the information as gossip and not as a known fact. The uncertainty gives the speaker a safety net, under which they can renounce

responsibility in the future by inquiring, /ɾ sʃ s'/f xfdL s] hfGg' (What do we know about rē?). In conversation groups, rē may also be employed to divert the direction of a conversation. For example, if individuals are talking about how the Swatantra party has made gains in recent elections, then a person would interrupt and say an]gn] t af8Ldf vt/f sfd uof]{ /ɾ (It seems Balen did risky work in the field, rē). The claim made through rē opens up a new line of discussion while allowing the speaker to avoid accountability for the claim being made. When confronted, the speaker can easily deflect criticism by attributing the utterance to hearsay, thus demonstrating how rē functions as a shield within linguistic systems.

**Rē and Ideological Discourses.** The particle rē has an extent that is beyond colloquial usage, as it greatly influences the creation of ideological discourses in Nepali society. A case in point is the recent racialization of the Marwari group, which has been greatly affected by the usage of rē in statements made by individuals such as Durga Prasai. Phrases such as b'uf{ k|;fO{n] eGof cf]nL / df/jf8Lx? ldNo 5g\ /ɾ (Durga Prasai said that Oli and the Marwaris have joined forces, rē) or df/jf8Lx?sf] ;DklQ /fli6«os/Of ug]{ /ɾ (It seems that the wealth of the Marwaris is going to be nationalized, rē) show how rē can be used as a means of spreading rumors which eventually become widely accepted truths. Here, rē serves to offer a possible certainty p x'g klɡ ;Sg] clɡ x'g klɡ g;Sg] oxL g} xf] (it may or may not happen), which, through repetition and dissemination, comes to be a fact (oxL g} xf] /this is exactly the case). This process is an example of the way rē can set ideological currents in motion, transforming speculative statements into effective means of shaping public opinion.

**Rē in Village Gossip.** Use of rē extends beyond political rhetoric; it is also pervasive in rural rumors, where it is often used to defame individuals or spread bad news. For instance, expressions such as w]/} 3'; vfG5 /ɾ (It appears that he accepts substantial bribes, rē), of] t Ps gDa/sf] e|i6rf/L xf] /ɾ (He is allegedly regarded as the foremost corrupt individual, rē), or kmnfgf]n] af6f] agfpg] sfddf olt k};f vfof] /ɾ p Tof] cfOdfo t af]S;L /ɾ t]:n] t aRrfx?nfO{ k'mlslbG5] /ɾ (It appears that so-and-so misappropriated

funds in the road construction initiative, *rē*) are frequently encountered in rural contexts. Similarly, *rē* is used to sensationalize superstitions or label individuals, as in *p To f] cfOd fO t af]S;L /] t]:n] t aRrfx?nfO{ k'mlslbG5] /]* (That woman is supposedly a witch; it seems she harms children, *rē*). These claims, often without proof, can have extensive social repercussions, highlighting the capacity of *rē* to influence attitudes and communal relations.

**The Influence of *Rē*.** Analyzing these examples, we can conclude that *rē* is not just a simple linguistic particle; rather, it is an effective means of constructing narratives, gossiping, and influencing social interaction. That it can bring about doubt, defend the speaker, and change speculation into taken-for-granted facts indicates how important it is in Nepali communication. From political discourse to village gossip to everyday discussion, *rē* is central to the creation and exchange of ideas and is a fundamental part of the Nepali language and culture.

### *Softening or Politeness*

The Nepali speech particle *rē* is utilized to soften utterances so that they become more indirect or polite. Through the addition of *rē* at the sentence-final position, speakers can convey uncertainty or respectfully elicit confirmation. Such addition tends to preserve social harmony as it prevents directness or confrontation, which may be interpreted as impolite in the Nepali social context. For instance, the sentence *dn go{ yxf 5}g /]* (I do not know, in fact) employs the word *rē* to temper the speaker's acknowledgment of their lack of knowledge. Without *rē*, the utterance can be interpreted as rude or dismissive. By adding *rē*, however, there is more humility and politeness, making the speaker's doubt more polite and less absolute.

**Expressions of Doubt.** The conjunction with additional particles such as *xf] s]* (is it?) allows *rē* to enhance the expression of doubt further. This particular construction transforms the statement's role from a mere inquiry to a more sophisticated expression of uncertainty, simultaneously reflecting apprehension regarding the veracity of the circumstances. For

example, the inquiry @ ;ftf xɸ] s]? The sentence (Is this really two weeks?) employs the word xɸ] s] to convey doubt; further, the addition of *rē* would render the statement even more polite and tentative: @ ;ftf xɸ] s] /]? (Is it really two weeks, maybe?). This wording not only challenges the truth of the given timeframe but also leads the listener to entertain the likelihood of the information being untrue. By expressing doubt in these terms, the speaker does not come across as aggressive or accusatory, thus maintaining the harmony of the conversation.

**A Polite Way of Raising an Issue of Concern.** The coupling of *rē* with s] (what/how) can also convert a direct question into a polite means of expressing a concern. This linguistic approach enables speakers to bring up possible problems gently and respectfully so that the listener does not feel criticized or attacked. A good example is the use of the expression— of] klg ;d:of xɸ]Og /]! (Isn't this also a problem, perhaps?). Here, the particle /] is used to soften the directness of the question, thus making it more indefinite and less confrontational. The speaker does not conclusively assert that there is a problem but is instead nudging the listener to reflect on the situation. It is particularly useful in cases where social harmony must be maintained, as it makes it easy to express worry without escalating the potential for conflict. Analysis

The employment of *rē* to make utterances gentler or show politeness testifies to its significance as an essential linguistic mechanism for interpersonal relations management in Nepali society. By employing uncertainties or hesitations, *rē* enables speakers to approach sensitive topics cautiously without directness, which could be interpreted as impolite or aggressive. This feature of *rē* is particularly crucial in a collectivist culture such as Nepal, where upholding group unity and conflict avoidance are greatly desired. Furthermore, the amalgamation of *rē* with additional particles, such as xɸ] s] or s], exemplifies its adaptability in articulating doubt or apprehension in a sophisticated and culturally sensitive way. Such constructions not only communicate the speaker's ambiguity but also signify a wider cultural inclination towards indirect communication,

wherein politeness and respect take precedence over directness or assertiveness. In summary, the particle *rē* is an important linguistic device that softens claims, expresses doubt, and raises concerns politely and indirectly. Its ability to modulate the tone of conversation makes it an essential element of Nepali communication, capturing the cultural values of humility, respect, and social harmony.

### ***Emotional Expression***

Sometimes, particle *rē* can express surprise, incredulity, or excitement. For instance, *hō mēi ko milē* (I actually met you!) In information retrieval: When *rē* is employed to retrieve information or to express a sense of wonder, its speech duration is significantly longer than when it is utilized in other forms of interactional contexts. Further, *rē* is uttered with rising intonation and is marked by a breathy voice and greater loudness. The speaker experiences an increase in the degree of loudness in the first half of *rē* and reaches a peak intensity after the last syllable. With children and novices to interactional practice, *rē* is playfully interesting to use and is typically pronounced longer and with a more extreme rising intonation than with fluent speakers.

**Cultural Impacts** The particle *rē* is firmly rooted in Nepal's cultural and linguistic life, reflecting wider social values and communication norms. It is used differently across regions, social settings, and genders, and as such, it is a complex issue for cultural and linguistic study. The complexity of *rē* cannot be understood merely through a quantification of its linguistic functions; rather, it needs to be unpacked through an analysis of the cultural norms and values that govern its use.

This part explores the cultural significance of *rē*, based on theoretical frameworks and academic literature, to situate its meaning within Nepali society.

### ***Regional and Social Inequalities***

The application and shades of meaning of the term *rē* differ considerably from region to region in Nepal, demonstrating the linguistic

and cultural diversity of the country. In certain locations, *rē* is employed more commonly as a politeness or indefiniteness marker, whereas in others, it may encompass other meanings pertaining to regional identity or social stratification. For example, in cities such as Kathmandu, *rē* would be employed in a less formal situation in daily interactions, but in rural communities, its employment would be highly associated with conventional communication structures. Such geographical variation underscores the need for context to establish the meaning and purpose of *rē*.

The social context is significant in shaping how *rē* is employed. Various elements, including the nature of the relationship between interlocutors, the degree of formality inherent in the context, and the subject matter of discourse, significantly affect the utilization and manner of employing *rē*. For instance, in formal environments, the use of *rē* may be limited to uphold a sense of decorum, whereas, in casual discussions with peers or relatives, it can be utilized more freely to convey uncertainty, mitigate assertions, or elicit affirmation.

Gender can also indirectly influence the use of *rē*, with some studies suggesting women use it more frequently as a marker of politeness, though such generalizations need to be carefully avoided as not stereotyping (Acharya, 2018).

### **Cultural Norms and Values of Communication**

The idea of *rē* is closely interwoven with the general cultural values in Nepal, particularly the emphasis on collectivism, politeness, and indirect communication. Hofstede (1980) states that collectivist cultures prioritize group harmony over individual self-expression, a value that is reflected in the Nepali preference for subtle and non-confrontational communication styles. *Rē* is a linguistic device that enables speakers to negotiate these cultural norms, communicating uncertainty or doubt in a manner that preserves social harmony and sidesteps the risk of offense.

Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) offers a fruitful approach to the understanding of how *rē* is used as a marker of politeness. In this theory, speakers employ strategies to soften face-threatening acts

(FTAs), e.g., disagreement or uncertainty. In Nepali culture, the particle *rē* is frequently employed as a mitigative strategy, reducing the perceived face threat to the interlocutor through framing claims tentatively or welcoming multiple interpretations. For instance, *dnfO{ yxf 5}g /* (I do not know, actually) employs *rē* to soften the speaker's acknowledgment of ignorance so that it sounds less assertive and more polite.

**Uncertainty and Indirectness in Nepali Communication** The articulation of doubt is a key characteristic of the usage of *rē*, indicative of wider cultural orientations to ambiguity and indirection. Indirectness rather than directness is prized in Nepali culture, as it avoids fixing things in a way that might cause social discomfort (Sharma, 2015). This cultural bias can be seen in the utilization of *rē* to convey doubt or caution, such as in the question *@ ;ftf xf] s] /* < (Is it actually two weeks, possibly?). In this case, *rē* indicates the speaker's doubt while encouraging the hearer to entertain the potential that the information may be untrue. Linguistic relativity, as outlined by Sapir (1921) and Whorf (1956), provides additional insight into how *rē* constructs and indexes cultural understandings of uncertainty. By this theory, language shapes and constrains thought and perception such that the prevalent use of *rē* to signify doubt or hesitancy potentially supports cultural expectations of indirectness and ambiguity. This is especially applicable in a collectivist culture such as Nepal, where upholding group harmony frequently supersedes individual clarity or assertiveness.

### ***Rē in Digital Communication***

The social implications of *rē* extend from face-to-face communication to computer-mediated communication, where it still plays an important role in online discourse. On social media platforms, *rē* is frequently employed to express feelings, establish rapport, and delineate relationships, as seen in the example, *cf]nLsf] ;/sf/ 9Ng nfUof] /* (It seems that Oli's government is going to fall, *rē*). In this case, *rē* introduces a degree of doubt, enabling the speaker to frame the information as hearsay information and not as a fact. Such use demonstrates the same cultural values of politeness and indirectness that mark face-to-face communication,

thereby indicating how rē serves as a bridge between face-to-face and online communication. Still, it may prove tricky for those who are not native Nepali speakers to include rē in internet communication, as it might be hard for them to discern its intricate nuances. For example, if the term rē were included in English translations of Nepali tweets or Facebook comments, then others outside of this culture may find it sounding off-base or irrelevant. This emphasizes the need to know the cultural context under which rē is employed because it offers a great deal of insight into the nuances of communication practice in Nepal. Wider Views of Nepali Cultural Attitudes The comprehension of rē is not possible without examining the wider cultural orientations to uncertainty, collectivism, and relational dynamics. In Nepali culture, group solidarity tends to take precedence over individual expression, and therefore affect how uncertainty is communicated. The employment of rē to sidestep claims or signal uncertainty, for instance, is indicative of a cultural preference for indirect communication where face-maintenance and politeness take precedence over honesty or clarity. Social relationship dynamics figure prominently in the utilization of rē. In communication between people of unequal social ranks, rē may be used more as a mark of respect or deference. In peer-to-peer communication, on the other hand, it might be used more casually to convey doubt or to solicit confirmation. These differences underscore the necessity of context in interpreting the cultural meaning of rē.

## **Conclusion**

The particle rē (/ɾ/) is not only of linguistic interest but also a window to the social and cultural life of Nepali society. As demonstrated in this research, the multitude of functions of rē as a means of conveying doubt, hedging claims, and conveying nuances of emotionality, therefore, indexes more general cultural norms such as collectivism, politeness, and indirect communication. Through the application of ethnographic fieldwork and discourse analysis, this study has illustrated the workings of rē across a variety of contexts, from ordinary conversation, community rumors, political arguments, and internet forums. The potential of rē to introduce doubt, safeguard the speaker's interest, and make speculation into known

fact highlights its role in building narrative and social cohesion. Theoretical frameworks like Dell Hymes' SPEAKING model, Pierre Bourdieu's idea of linguistic capital, and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis have also been instrumental in looking at the social and cultural meanings of *rē*. Such frameworks point out that *rē* not only depicts but works to produce uncertainty in Nepali communication culture, a culture in which indirectness and face-saving are extremely valued. In addition, the study has shed light on the challenges of translating *rē* into other languages, particularly in digital communication, where its nuanced connotations could be lost on non-Nepali speakers. Through the investigation of *rē*, this project adds to long debates in the field of linguistic anthropology regarding the part language plays in building and mirroring cultural realities. It emphasizes the importance of analyzing regional linguistic features to understand the subtleties of human interaction and the cultural precepts that underlie it. Future research could build on this study by comparing its findings with those of *rē* and similar particles in other South Asian languages or by studying its emerging role in online communication. Finally, this research beckons us to marvel at the beauty of linguistic diversity and the immense way language encapsulates culture, tradition, and history.

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