

Phonology and Fieldwork in Nepal: Problems and Potentials

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A number of recent developments in linguistic description and analysis, including the publication of exhaustive reference grammars, the increasing availability of fine-grained online typological databases, the growing trend of reports on linguistic rarities, and rapidly evolving approaches to language contact, have underscored the continued importance of access to detailed accounts of linguistic phenomena. One particular area in which such accounts are crucial to “larger-level” analysis is the study of the prosodic organisation of heretofore under-documented languages of South and Southeast Asia. The phonological properties of these languages (including their complex tone and accent systems) lend themselves to the development and/or revision of major avenues of linguistic explanation, including the dynamics of the Prosodic Hierarchy, the diachronic development (and decay) of suprasegmental contrasts, fine-grained phonological results of contact, and new dimensions of sociolinguistic (including dialectal) variation. However, such contributory potential is not without extreme complications, especially in the domain of on-location data collection and examination in such parts of the world. This talk aims to provide two case studies in which the methods and findings of tonal structure and variation in two Tibeto-Burman languages of Nepal (Manange and Gurung), while intriguing at a “local” level of analysis, have remained problematic for consideration in the wider linguistic field. These case studies will be discussed within the context of the larger issues outlined above, with an overall goal of encouraging sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic oriented fieldwork projects with wider-reaching significance, despite the complex realities of “on-location” research.