

RESULTS FROM THE LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF SIKKIM: MOTHER TONGUES IN EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

From September 2005 to November 2006, I directed the first phase of a modern linguistic survey of Sikkim under the auspices of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology and in close partnership with the Department of Human Resource Development (formerly Education) of the Government of Sikkim.

My research team and I visited most of the government and private secondary schools across the state to administer an extensive questionnaire to the senior students.¹ The preliminary results of these 16,500 completed survey forms were presented for the first time at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology Jubilee Conference in October 2008 and this is the first publication based on the research project.

THE LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF SIKKIM AND THE NEW LINGUISTIC SURVEY OF INDIA

When initially planned in 2004, the linguistic survey of Sikkim was designed with four main objectives:

- (i) to compile an inventory of all of the languages spoken in Sikkim;
- (ii) to determine the geographical distribution and genetic affinity of each language spoken as a mother tongue in this Himalayan state;
- (iii) to estimate the numbers of speakers of each language on the basis of disaggregated census data, roof counts and on-site field investigation;
- (iv) to visit all government and private senior secondary schools in the state to distribute a survey questionnaire of 30 questions on language learning, retention and use to students in Classes 8 and above.

We hoped that the analysed survey data would provide the first representative picture of language use and language shift in modern Sikkim, with a particular focus on languages being used in the educational context. Just as the project began to take shape, and pilot funds were being secured, I received the welcome news that the Government of India was launching a much anticipated and sorely overdue *New Linguistic Survey of India*, the first comprehensive survey of Indian languages since independence in 1947.

As noted in the XIth plan (2007-2012) published in the Recommendations of the Working Group on Languages and Book Promotion of the Language Division of the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India:

...more than a century has passed since Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India (henceforth, LSI) was begun and 80 years have passed since it was last revised, and the need for a fresh linguistic survey of India is being urgently felt, particularly at the official level, as planning documents as

well as Census reports (including 2001 Census reports on language data which is under preparation) still make reference to the LSI Reports, which are nearly a century old. (GOI 2007: 1)

According to the Government, the new survey was of ‘national and international significance’ (ibid., 2) and the impetus for this initiative:

... springs from the conception of India as a linguistic landscape distinguished by pluralism and inclusiveness, and a definition of linguistic and cultural identity that is both complementary and contested, but nevertheless negotiable. Independent India has, through its literary and cultural agencies and the departments of languages, sought to preserve not only languages but also these enduring principles of diversity and dignity. (GOI 2007: 2)

Correspondent Sharath S. Srivatsa of *The Hindu* noted that the New Linguistic Survey of India was:

... a gigantic exercise involving at least 10,000 language and linguistic experts, the survey ... will be conducted over a period of 10 years at a cost of Rs. 280 crore. The ambitious project will involve nearly 100 universities [and] ... is expected to examine the different speech varieties in the country, their structures, functions, scripts, history and demography as well as their spread, including diasporas, literacy and education, digitality, literatures and all the linguistic artefacts and media products that these speech varieties produce. (November 16, 2006)

According to interviews at the time with Udaya Narayana Singh, then Director of the prestigious Mysore-based Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) charged with leading the initiative, the survey would take a decade to complete on account of India’s massive population and great linguistic diversity (we would do well to remember that George Abraham Grierson had taken 17 years a century ago). ‘Each village in the country will be the basic unit for our study in this project,’ Professor Singh told *The Hindu*.

This chronology is salient because with the news that this massive national linguistic initiative was under way, the Linguistic Survey of Sikkim was accordingly scaled back to avoid reduplication of effort and we immediately refocused on a single, unique opportunity outlined in point (iv) above: a targeted survey of language instruction and education in Sikkim’s schools. With this aim in mind, the survey team was in place to begin. Only in September 2008, when our fieldwork was complete, did we learn from Tanka Bahadur Subba, Professor of Anthropology and Dean at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, that the required funding for the New Linguistic Survey of India had not yet been released, with the result that the whole plan was on indefinite hold. It is essential that work on this national linguistic survey commence soon, as the findings are urgently needed for the formulation of progressive language policies. We hope that the results of our own modest undertaking may be of some use to this much larger initiative.

CENSUSES AND SURVEYS AS CLASSIFICATORY TOOLS

A census is the single most important statistical operation for most nations, even if the techniques used vary widely. Before addressing the methodology used in the survey, and our findings, it is pertinent to reflect for a moment on the process of enumeration itself. For example, while the methodology and motivations for the decadal censuses in Nepal and India

are similar, the questions that are posed are different. The Indian census enumerates for mother tongue but not for ethnicity, while the Nepali census seeks responses in both categories, and has recently added an additional question on bilingualism. For those interested in the Tibetan cultural world, it is relevant to note that the 1990 census of China collected fifteen categories of information for each individual, one of which was ‘nationality’, but that there was no question on language (Jianfa Shen et al. 1999: 176).

According to census enumerators and statisticians, only a census can provide ‘uniform information both about the country as a whole and about individual areas’ as the continuity of statistics from census to census ‘shows how conditions are changing over time’ (Sillitoe and White 1992: 142). A baseline linguistic survey can be a complementary tool for effective policy planning in education, media and the public sphere, particularly as the decadal Indian census returns very little data on monolingualism, bilingualism and multilingualism, and does not investigate levels of retention of officially recognised minority languages.

Most censuses and surveys rely exclusively on respondent statements and are almost by definition non-ethnographic. The literature on the formulation of census questions indicates a movement towards recognising the virtues of respondent-led classification rather than concealing it as a methodological flaw. As Collins has noted, making a distinction between etic statements and emic experiences is not new: ‘interviews fail to get at the difference between peoples’ professed and actual behavior’ (1988: 304). While organisations, states, census bureaus, politicians and dominant social groups may assign identities, individuals and groups are ‘not merely passive recipients in the process’ (Croucher 2004: 40), and some consciously choose to subvert classificatory systems that are imposed on them. Permitting, or even encouraging, respondents to classify themselves works to equalise relationships of power and, as the discussion below illustrates, may even generate a more interesting dataset.

In Mauritius, for example, the ‘onus of ethnic classification was thus shifted from the enumerator to the individual’ making the census far more effective (Christopher 1992: 59), while a report on the configuration of the 1991 census of Great Britain recommended that the form of a question ‘should enable people to identify themselves in a way acceptable to them’ (Sillitoe and White 1992: 148). Returning to linguistic surveys, Paul Brass endorses such realignment:

I believe that the only fair and honest census of languages is one that accepts what the respondent says and notes it down. My point is simply this: the decisions concerning grouping, classification, recognition, are ultimately political decisions, not scientific linguistic ones. (2004: 367)

Throughout this discussion, we should not lose sight of the hegemonic side of classification through surveying and census taking, described so elegantly by N. Gerald Barrier in his writing on Imperial India:

Thus from its beginning a census acts to reshape the world it will examine and in this way is not simply a passive instrument ... individuals find themselves firmly fixed as members in various groups of a particular dimensions and substance. Thus the census imposes order, and order of a statistical nature. In time the creation of a new ordering of society by the census will act to reshape that which the census sought merely to describe. (1981: 74-75)

As the data below illustrate, the preliminary results of the Linguistic Survey of Sikkim should not be read as objective, scientific evaluations of competence in languages, but rather more as statements of a form of linguistic attachment, heritage and emotional belonging.

SIKKIM'S SOCIOLINGUISTIC CONTEXT

Landlocked Sikkim, India's least populous and second smallest state, has a geopolitical significance far beyond its size. Bounded to the north and northeast by the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, to the west by Nepal, to the southeast by Bhutan, and to the south by the Darjeeling district of the Indian state of West Bengal, Sikkim occupies an important niche along one of the oldest Himalayan trade routes. The population census of 2001 records Sikkim as being home to only 540,000 residents, of which the indigenous Lepcha and Bhutia make up only a tenth each. The remainder are mostly of Nepalese ancestry or have migrated from other parts of India for work or service.

Recent improvements in Sino-Indian relations, China's recognition of India's claim over Sikkim in official government maps and the opening of a direct trade route between India and China across Sikkim's Nathu-La pass in 2006 have seen Sikkim's strategic significance further underscored. This erstwhile Buddhist kingdom has entered a period of rapid socio-economic change and cultural transformation. The ethnic tongues of the state, not to mention the communities who speak them, are fast becoming minorities in areas in which they were once dominant. Education, economic opportunities, media and migration all contribute to the transformation of traditional Sikkimese livelihoods and lifestyles. Our survey aimed to document this moment of transition through the prism of language use.

AN OVERVIEW OF SURVEYS AND CENSUSES IN SIKKIM'S HISTORY

Every ten years, the Government of India conducts a detailed census. This decadal Census of India is an increasingly robust and carefully constructed survey, and a massive logistical undertaking. The findings from the 2001 census are being released in stages until the next census takes place in 2011. One of the domains enumerated is language, but only the most basic information on language is collected, through one question about self-ascribed mother tongue and two questions on bilingualism. There is much more to understand about language use in Sikkim. If called upon to encapsulate our whole survey in two questions, they would be: 'who speaks what language to whom, and under what circumstances?'

The first census of Sikkim dates to 1891 when Sikkim was under British colonial rule. The total population of Sikkim was then recorded as 30,458, of which a little over one third was made up of the indigenous Lepcha and Bhutia populations. This early census and some later surveys recorded ethnic affiliation only, and contained no explicit data on which languages were spoken or by how many people. According to the 1931 Census, out of a total population of 109,808, 12% were Lepcha and 11% were Bhutia, the rest mainly Nepalese. The 1961 Census reported that 43 mother tongues were spoken in Sikkim, while the 1971 Census Report gave the percentage of population by language, according to which speakers of the Nepali language constituted about 64%, while the Lepcha and Bhutia languages were each spoken by about 11% of the total population. On October 17, 1977, the Sikkim Official Language Act was passed by the Governor of the State, adopting Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha as 'the languages to be used for the official purposes of the State of Sikkim'.

Two issues become apparent from this cursory overview. First, data on language has not been returned with any consistency in the census; and second, the linguistic reality of the state of Sikkim has been in constant flux over the last 100 years.

Risley's 1894 Gazetteer

First published in 1894, but drawing on the findings of a census conducted in February 1891, H.H. Risley's *Gazetteer* of 'Sikkim' contains some of the first official population statistics for the state and is therefore of historical and comparative interest. Risley's survey enumerated individuals who self-identified as members of ethnic communities, not speech communities. So while 5,762 individuals or 19% of the population self-reported as Lepcha, and 4,894 or 16% of the population as Bhutia, over 60% of the population were classified as 'Nepalese'. While the Nepalese (but not necessarily Nepali-speaking) community were already well settled in Sikkim in the 1890s and also numerically dominant, we would expect that many of them still spoke their mother tongues or ethnic languages at that time, such as Limbu, Tamang [sometimes referred to as Murmi in the gazetteer], Rai and many others. We will never know to what extent Nepali as a language was already widely used as a *lingua franca* in the 1890s for communication between members of different ethnic communities.

1901 Census of India

Ten years later, when the 1901 Census of India enumerated speaker numbers rather than ethnic group membership, the returns were significantly higher. Revealingly, all communities were recorded as having more speakers in Darjeeling than in Sikkim. The census returned 7,945 Lepcha speakers in Sikkim, but 11,252 Lepcha speakers in Darjeeling; 5,910 Limbu speakers in Sikkim, but 14,359 Limbu speakers in Darjeeling; 5,315 Murmi speakers in Sikkim, but 25,165 Murmi speakers in Darjeeling; 912 Sharpa [Sherpa] speakers in Sikkim, but 3,477 Sharpa speakers in Darjeeling and 8,825 speakers of 'Dänjongkä', now more commonly known as Bhutia or Sikkimese, across India. It should be noted that even today, the Indian census classifies a number of distinct and unrelated communities of ethnically Tibetan origin who speak Tibetan or Tibetoid languages from both the eastern and western Indian Himalayas by the collective ethnonym 'Bhutia', leading to terminological as well as statistical confusion.

Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India

Grierson's linguistic survey, published sequentially between 1904 and 1908, offered estimates of the number of speakers, with far higher figures than those recorded in the 1901 census. Reading between the lines in Grierson's notes, it appears that he was sceptical of the accuracy of the 1901 data. He believed that there were far more Lepcha and Bhutia than were recorded in the 1901 and 1891 censuses, about three times the number in fact, although the source of these estimates are not made explicit. Grierson's estimates were as follows: 25,000 Lepcha speakers in Sikkim, but 9,894 Lepcha speakers in Darjeeling; 10,000 Limbu speakers in Sikkim, but 14,045 Limbu speakers in Darjeeling; 15,000 Murmi speakers in Sikkim, but 21,848 Murmi speakers in Darjeeling; 900 Sharpa [Sherpa] speakers in Sikkim and 20,000 speakers of 'Dänjongkä' across India.

1931 Census of India

The 1931 census returned 13,060 Lepchas (11% of the population), 11,955 Bhutias (10% of the population) and 84,793 Nepalese (77% of the population) from Sikkim. While the census of 1931 indicated ethnicity and not language, we may surmise that a fairly close correlation between the two would have existed at that time, at least for the Lepcha and Bhutia

communities. In the 40-years between the 1891 and 1931 census, the proportion of the Nepalese population had increased by 16%.

1961 Census of India

In 1961, the enumerated category reverted to language once again, returning 14,847 Lepcha speakers (or 9% of the population of Sikkim), 36,577 Bhutia speakers (22% of population) and 74,319 Nepali speakers (46% of the population). Comparing the 1931 and 1961 data, we can comfortably suggest that a significant percentage of the population who previously returned themselves as ‘Nepalese’ (77% of the population in 1931) were not ‘Nepali-speaking’, as their associated speech community was 20% less thirty years later. Most intriguingly, the Bhutia speech community appear to have bounced back, asserting themselves at nearly one quarter of the total population of Sikkim in 1961.

1991 Census of India

By 1991, the category had changed once again, with respondents this time enumerated for ‘mother tongue’. While the reasons behind the flip-flopping between language and ethnicity in the census questions over the decades is unclear, the implications of this methodological irregularity are that robust comparisons remain difficult. Yet by 1991, the number of Lepcha and Bhutia speakers continued to be in decline, Hindi is on the map for the first time and on the up, and Nepali was also gaining ground. In 1991, the returns were as follows: 29,854 mother tongue speakers of Lepcha (or 7% of the population of Sikkim); 32,593 mother tongue speakers of Bhutia (8% of the population); 26,985 mother tongue speakers of Limbu (6% of the population); 19,868 mother tongue speakers of Hindi (5% of the population) and 256,418 mother tongue speakers of Nepali (63% of the population).

Comments on 100 years of census data

There are a few general points worth making about the census statistics for language and ethnicity collected from Sikkim at decadal intervals over the course of a century. First, there is no doubt that many Lepchas and Bhutias, two of Sikkim’s Scheduled Tribes (ST), are now speaking ever more Nepali and Hindi. Second, many of those individuals more recently recorded as speaking Nepali as their mother tongue are members of non-caste and non-Hindu ethnic groups of Nepalese origin, i.e. Tamang, Gurung, Rai and others. Third, disaggregated language data from 2001 are expected to confirm the trend towards Nepali, a linguistic shift occurring across other parts of the Indian northeast as well as within Nepal itself. Finally, we may wonder why the Bhutia speech community decreased since the 1960s while the Lepcha speech community remained relatively stable, according to government figures, at least. A working hypothesis is that the difference between the speech patterns and language retention of these communities can be attributed to their different economic statuses and locations. Many Bhutias have had better access to education over the last 40 years, and some of their larger population concentrations are increasingly urban (correlated with a decreased use of their ethnic mother tongue). By contrast, the Lepcha community is still largely rural, providing an ongoing context for the mother tongue to be spoken, particularly in protected or remoter areas such as Dzongu.

METHODOLOGY IN THE LANGUAGE SURVEY OF SIKKIM

Our linguistic survey field team travelled to each of Sikkim's four districts to visit schools and administrative offices. We sought to better understand the complex linguistic reality of the Sikkimese state.

From October 2005 to November 2006, we visited 105 government and private schools and asked the higher classes (VIII-XII) to complete a survey of 29 questions on language use. In total, 16,527 survey forms were completed by 8,662 female (52%) and 7,803 male (47%) students in a period between 15 November 2005 and 21 November 2006. The resulting dataset totals 479,283 completed fields (number of questions multiplied by the number of returns). These survey forms were then numbered, photographed and entered into a FileMakerPro database. The database will be anonymized and returned to the Government of Sikkim and the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology once the verification and rechecking is completed.

Included in the survey were questions on which language(s) the respondent speaks with his or her parents, grandparents and siblings; which languages a respondent's kin speak with one another; how many languages the respondent could speak and write, and which ones; questions on the different domains and registers of language use (songs, lists, letters, numbers, TV), and which language the respondent identifies as his or her mother tongue. A survey form is enclosed as an appendix to this paper.

Sikkim's schools and educational curriculum

Our team managed to visit most secondary and senior secondary schools in Sikkim's four districts. As of October 2002, Sikkim was home to 1,949 schools, 1,478 of which were government establishments while the remaining 471 were private institutions. This point is significant because private schools are not required to abide by the government curriculum that includes a provision for vernacular instruction in the mother tongue. The educational pyramid can be broken down into 978 Pre-Primary, 297 Lower Primary, 390 Primary, 153 Junior High Schools, 90 Secondary Schools and 41 Senior Secondary Schools. It should also be noted that Gangtok's schools are a particularly diverse range of institutions, from government schools providing free education to exclusive elite schools that are known across India, with many of Sikkim's ethnolinguistic groups represented.

While there is no space in this preliminary article to address the wider curriculum in detail, I will simply note that English is the medium of instruction in all of Sikkim's state government and private schools. In the government curriculum, three languages are taught up to Class 8, one of which has to be Hindi. Thereafter, the students only have to take two languages, one of which must be national (English, Hindi or Nepali) and one regional (Nepali, Lepcha, Bhutia, Subba or Hindi). An important distinction emerges between regional languages, which are included in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution of India (Nepali is now included) and state languages which are non-scheduled languages but which may be recognised by the regional state government, such as Lepcha, Bhutia and Limbu. It will be noted, however, that in Sikkim, the national and regional language schedules and requirements overlap. Text Book Officers (TBOs) in the State Department of Human Resource Development in Gangtok have developed curricular teaching materials for all officially recognised state languages for Classes I-XII. The content is drawn in part from the culture of the community of speakers (myths, oral history, local diet, etc.) and in part from wider Indian culture and history.

PRELIMINARY SURVEY FINDINGS

In the following sections, I outline the principal findings of the survey and draw brief comparative conclusions.

Sikkim's youth are remarkably multilingual, with around 75% of both male and female students responding that they spoke at least three languages. Around 20% of students reported that they spoke four languages, and a handful five or more. While this plurilingualism will be of no surprise to those familiar with the region, the data provide empirical evidence that Sikkim is a linguistically heterogeneous state. Even more students, over 90% in total, reported that they could write in at least three languages. The 15% disparity between speech and writing in favour of writing is indicative that much of the impetus for multilingualism comes from the educational context in which, as noted above, all students are expected to study at least three languages in the lower grades. Education systems around the world routinely emphasise written ability over spoken competence in language, and Sikkim is clearly no exception.

As to which languages students spoke, over 44 different speech forms were returned, not including variations in spelling of commonly known languages. Well over 90% of male and female students reported speaking Nepali, around 75% professed to speak English and around 65% reported speaking Hindi. A noticeable gender gap emerged between male and female respondents for English and Hindi: in both cases female students reported 5% less speech competence than their male counterparts. Sikkim's traditional, tribal languages, such as Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu were spoken by well under 10% of the school-going population surveyed. There is a stark disparity between the clustering of the big three languages above 65% and Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu—Sikkim's ethnic tongues—at under 10%.

In terms of self-professed written competence, while the results for Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu are notably low, the results for Nepali and English are inverted, with close to 90% of students able to write English but only 80% competent in written Nepali. This result, while unremarkable, does reaffirm the status of English as the medium of instruction and illustrates that Nepali, while almost universally spoken, is not so widely used in written form.

Responding to the question of what language respondents spoke with their grandparents, Nepali was unexpectedly high. Over 75% of male and female students returned Nepali as their language of choice to communicate with grandparents, with Hindi, Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu hovering under 10% and English almost negligible. This result alone indicates that language shift from indigenous vernaculars and ethnic mother tongues to Nepali did not occur in the grandparents' generation but some time before. As expected, both Nepali and English rose by at least 5% in response to what language students spoke with their parents, with Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu decreasing still further. The similarity in the returns for parents and grandparents' generation was surprising, as we had predicted a greater degree of difference. To be clear, then, these results indicate that already two generations ago, around the time of Indian independence, Nepali was a well established *lingua franca* and widely spoken by members of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds.

Having noted the gender variation in the returns, we asked students about the language(s) they spoke with their mother and father in separate questions, and were interested once again by the near total correspondence in the results. Aside from a minimally higher percentage of students who reported speaking Nepali with the mothers (over 80% for each), the more noticeable difference in the results related to English, which jumped about 5% higher as a language spoken with fathers.

80% of those surveyed returned Nepali as the language that their parents spoke together, with English, Hindi, Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu all between 5-10%. The response to the question of what language students' grandparents spoke together was also overwhelmingly Nepali, at 70%, with an increase of about 2% points on the figures returned for parents for Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu. The results in response to the question of what language parents spoke with grandparents were virtually identical to the responses received to the question about what languages students' parents spoke with one another. In short then, there was very little difference between the returns for these two generations.

Well over 80% of boys and girls surveyed reported speaking Nepali with their siblings, while fewer than 40% of males and over 50% of females reported speaking English with their brothers and sisters. This is a marked gender difference of over 10%, and is not immediately attributable to any causal factor other than social prestige. While a little over 10% of students stated speaking Hindi with their siblings, very few spoke Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu with their brothers and sisters.

When asked what languages students spoke with their friends, Nepali came down to under 80% and English increased to almost 60%, indicating that English was more associated with life outside the nuclear family (school, the market place, wider society) while Nepali was perceived more as a language of the home.

While close to 90% of students stated that they would write a letter or a shopping list in English, 35% offered Nepali as a language in which they would write a letter and 20% said that they would use Nepali to write a shopping list. While it would be premature to say with any certainty what lies behind the 15% difference, the presence of many English-termed or Hindi-labelled items in the bazaar may be a contributing factor.

Close to 80% of male and female respondents reported knowing songs in Nepali, with a noticeable gender disparity for English and Hindi: male students reported being more confident with English songs (55% versus 50% for female), while female students were over 10% more likely to know songs in Hindi than their male classmates (80% versus under 70%).

Poems were far better known in English (over 80%) than Nepali (60%) and Hindi (around 38%), while around 40% of students of both genders reported watching TV in Nepali. Television viewing was dramatically gender marked for English and Hindi. Well over 60% of male but closer to 48% of female reporting watching TV in English, but only 80% of males surveyed claimed to watch in Hindi while the female viewing figures were well above 90% for Hindi language programmes.

English was overwhelmingly selected as the most important language by almost 80% of respondents, with Nepali coming second at just under 20% and Hindi at under 10%. The most interesting results related to the question of mother tongue, which generated considerable confusion and disagreement in the answers, as is addressed in detail below.

First conclusions based on the above survey findings

There are five main conclusions that can be drawn from these preliminary findings. First, Nepali is the lingua franca for most people in Sikkim, no matter what their ethnicity, and the language appears to have had this position for at least two generations. Second, despite some creative state government plans that support local mother tongues, the spread and dominance of Nepali shows no sign of slowing down. Third, the mother tongues of the communities whose ancestors came from Nepal are particularly under threat. Most of the descendants now no longer speak any Mangar, Tamang or Newar, but only Nepali. Fourth, in the Lepcha reservation of Dzongu, where Lepcha is still spoken by all generations, Lepcha was often

returned as both the mother tongue and as the most important language. Outside of Dzongu, however, 95% of all students surveyed chose English as the most important language and some Bhutia students even returned English as their mother tongue. Finally, the teaching of local languages as subjects in school is very encouraging and helps to give symbolic value to the mother tongue, even if this does not necessarily ensure or result in any spoken proficiency. Let me now turn to the important issue of mother tongue in more detail.

What is a mother tongue?

Question 7 of the survey asked respondents ‘Which languages can you speak?’ while question 22 asks ‘Which language is your mother tongue?’ The results of these two questions are shown in the below table:

	<i>Can speak the language</i>	<i>Mother tongue</i>
Nepali	94%	67%
English	74%	1%
Hindi	67%	7%
Bhutia	7%	10%
Lepcha	5%	6%
Limbu	3%	4%

The table can be divided into two categories: languages with more speakers than mother tongue claimants, versus languages with more mother tongue claimants than speakers. The first cluster includes Nepali, spoken (to some degree) by nearly all surveyed school-going students in Sikkim, but claimed by only two-thirds as a mother tongue; English, claimed as a mother tongue by only 1% of the school-going population, but spoken by three-quarters; and Hindi, which follows a similar pattern to English, albeit less polarised.

The most interesting results are to be found in the second half of the table in the responses for Bhutia (also known as Denjongke, Lhoke and Sikkimese), Lepcha (also returned as Rongaring) and Limbu (variously spelled as Limboo, but also returned as Subba): all three languages are claimed by more young people as a mother tongue than can speak them. At first glance, this claim appears to be contradictory, at least from the perspective of linguistic competence: How can an individual profess to have as a mother tongue a language in which he or she has no declared proficiency? Are these respondents, particularly the Bhutia students for whom the differential is the greatest (3%), not subverting the survey to bolster their numbers for political gain? Unpacking this apparent inconsistency lies at the heart of understanding the social prestige of heritage languages and linguistic identities in Sikkim.

The autochthonous languages of modern Sikkim—Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu—are at present severely endangered. Aside from a few notable areas (parts of North Sikkim for Bhutia, the Dzongu reservation for Lepcha and West Sikkim for Limbu), these three languages are spoken by an ever-dwindling number of people, and the majority of children from these communities have only basic proficiency at best. As competence in these

traditional mother tongues has declined, however, their status has begun to shift from spoken vernaculars forming a part of a lived ethnic identity, to symbolic markers of an ancestral heritage that contribute to emotional belonging. Yuval-Davis' observation that belonging 'becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way' (2006: 196) is very pertinent to the language shift observed in Sikkim, in which a growing attachment to the 'idea' of a mother tongue is directly related to its decline in use as a speech form.

Alongside these emotional attachments are important political motivations that underlie claims of linguistic belonging. Even though the Lepcha, Bhutia and Limbu languages are on the wane as spoken vernaculars, these speech communities were accorded 'Scheduled Tribe' status: in 1978 for the Lepcha and Bhutia, and in 2002 for the Limbu and even, for the Lepcha, 'Primitive Tribe' status in the state of Sikkim as of November 2006. An integral component of such applications is the existence of a mother tongue. Declining utility and diminishing speaker numbers, then, do not necessarily threaten the perceived connection between a tribe and their traditional language, and their 'right' to have a mother tongue.

From observations during the survey process and analysis of the returns, students answered question 22 on their mother tongue in a number of different ways. Some wrote down what language they spoke at home, others wrote down the name of the language that they thought they should speak at home, some read the question as another way of asking for their ethnicity (mother tongue in lieu of caste or tribe), and some understood it to be a question on heritage and origin. Others simply asked their teacher what to put down. In other words, respondents answered this open-ended question by filling it with whatever meaning they attached to the concept of mother tongue.

Language shift in Sikkim

Language shift has been variously understood by different writers, but is traditionally characterised as a process in which both *langue* and *parole* are systematically simplified. Individuals move from functioning as full speakers with complete grammatical and pragmatic command to being 'semi-speakers' with reduced verbal dexterity. Eventually, all competence drains away, leaving only a residual smattering of specialised vocabulary (food words, kinship terminology or elements of ritual vocabulary), and often a strong sense of attachment to a heritage identity as a former speaker. 'Language shifts are inextricably tied to shifts in the political economy in which speech situations are located' writes Urciuoli (1995: 530), and Sikkim is indeed undergoing a period of profound social, economic and political upheaval.

There are effectively three *linguae francae* in Sikkim—Nepali, English and Hindi—all of which operate in different functional domains of use, yet constantly intersect with one another. The pragmatic utility of all three languages in Sikkim—Nepali in the bazaar, English in school, Hindi on television and in Central government offices—prevents any one of them from becoming overly dominant. In the process of language shift, then, a region like Sikkim can experience an explosion of plurilingualism.² In anything other than abstract models, one language does not give way to another overnight, and a number of speech forms remain in use for long periods of time until the linguistic residue settles. Data from the linguistic survey of Sikkim support this analysis.

The speech of some Sikkimese students would offend the ear of a language purist: young men and women pepper their Lepcha or Bhutia with Nepali verbs, English sentiments and Hindi conjunctions, in much the same way that educated elites in Nepal can be heard to do. The resultant amalgam is a heterogeneous blend of elements joined together through a

performative strategy that is rapidly gaining ground in Sikkim as well as in Nepal's urban centres. Is this but another indication of language shift or a sign of the emergence of a hyphenated linguistic identity? And what do such linguistic fusions mean for identity and belonging?

In Sikkim, language competence and purity do not have primary roles in the maintenance of individual identities and in the construction of a sense of group belonging. But then Sikkim is not one of India's 'linguistic states' in the model of Gujarat, Tamil Nadu or West Bengal, where the 'internal reorganization of much of its territory...has been a deliberate attempt to consolidate populations of speakers of regional languages and concentrate these in administrative units, helping promote the strength of [these] languages' (Simpson 2007: 25). In Sikkim, ethnic and linguistic identities are not oppositional (i.e. 'he is Tamang, but he doesn't speak it'), rather they are more incorporative (i.e. 'although she's Lepcha, she speaks Nepali pretty well').

Additionally, linguistic identities are increasingly understood and expected to be complex. Perhaps as a consequence of massive in-migration, considerable intermarriage between groups, an administration which recognises and rewards diversity, the presence of sufficient resources to avoid intense ethnic competition, or a combination of all of these conditions, there is an acknowledgement of the 'multiple, shifting and, at times, nonsynchronous identities' that are the norm for individuals (May, Modood and Squires 2004: 10). In Sikkim, then, speaking a language—or perhaps more saliently, 'not' speaking a language—is not a diagnostic marker of ethnic identity or belonging. Linguistic belonging increasingly lies not in performance, but in heritage. As one student answered my clearly naive query on the apparent disconnect between his avowed lack of proficiency in a language and his answer to question 22 of the survey: 'Of course we have a mother tongue, I just don't speak it.'

Languages in education: the case for symbolism

If spoken or written competence is not so highly prized, why are so many students learning their ancestral languages in schools across Sikkim? Along with other commentators, I have congratulated the Sikkimese government for offering minority languages as subjects in the school curriculum. To be clear, the medium of instruction across Sikkim remains English, but Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu, Newar or Rai may be taken as additional subjects by students who hail from these communities. Yet we should not assume that the students who opt for these classes are actually being taught the language in order to use it, or that they are being steeped in the performative skill that true competence entails. Rather, they are learning heritage, culture, history and ancestry through the prism of language. In fact, these students are learning 'belonging', because the utility of such languages to young Sikkimese are now as markers of belonging rather than vernaculars for daily use. It is precisely because these languages now have primarily emotional and symbolic value rather than strategic and practical importance, that the Government of Sikkim can afford to teach them.

We should therefore not be surprised when initiatives to bring Newar teachers from Kathmandu to teach Newari in Sikkim fail, as the aims of the instructors and the students are at times quite different: Newar teachers come to these classes to revive their language among migrant Newars in Sikkim, while the latter attend the classes to learn the symbols and metaphors of heritage.³ In Nepal, by comparison, where minority languages are still spoken, language competence continues to be a core marker of ethnic identity for many individuals.

One notable difference between Nepal and Sikkim is in their experience of migration: Nepal has a tradition of ‘sending’ migrants, while Sikkim is a state that has ‘received’ them, even building itself on their labour. Peter Sutton observes that:

As migration increases and monocultural nation-states become obsolete, cultural identity becomes more complex, less tied to a geographical location, more individualized, and less static. (1991: 136)

The different historical experiences of migration may in part account for the different expressions of linguistic belonging that are articulated in Sikkim and Nepal. In Sikkim, the loss of speech forms and the processes of language shift are popularly presented as unavoidable by-products of the juggernaut of global progress and development, while in Nepal, the continued vibrancy of minority mother tongues has been associated with their remote and sequestered status. This opposition, at least in the popular imagination, is fleshed out to the extent that Sikkim is often portrayed in the press as modern, literate, educated and connected, while ethnolinguistic homeland areas in Nepal are widely described as remote, backward and traditional. My point here is not to endorse such descriptions, but to reflect on them for what they tell us about the forms of linguistic belonging that individuals and communities may invoke or be subjected to.

CONCLUSION: ELITES, CLASS AND BELONGING

The results of the Linguistic Survey of Sikkim offer interesting insights into a number of issues, including correlations with gender, region, age and kind of school (government or private), but there is no space to address these here. The full results will be published and provided to the Sikkimese government. For now, I would like to conclude with a few thoughts on elites and their relationship to language.

David Gellner (1997) has noted the incongruity in the positions taken by linguistic and cultural activists in Nepal who promote the use of indigenous languages but pay for their own children’s education in Nepali or even English medium schools. As Simpson has noted, this reflects a wider trope across South Asia, and may even hold true for national languages, where one finds ‘elite groups in many countries who may function almost fully in English and are perceived as being considerably detached from other members of their ethnic groups and may not be not proficient in the national language of their country’ (2007: 16). This inconsistency has not escaped the attention of more grassroots language campaigners, who perceive the urban, ethnic elites to be jealously guarding their proficiency in the languages that have helped further their own advancement (such as English and Nepali) while at the same time wanting the homeland language to be maintained by their rural cousins. For many non-speakers of a language, a sense of emotional belonging is all that can be rescued from the ashes of dwindling linguistic proficiency.

In Nepal, for Tamangs who speak Tamang, or among Newars for whom Nepal Bhasa is still the reality of daily familial interaction, language remains embedded in practice, and the belonging that it indexes continues to be implicit. However, for members of such communities who have little or no competence in their traditional mother tongue, what matters is the existence, ongoing vitality of and even belief in the language rather than their ability to speak it. Language has now become heritage, divorced from any performative competence.

Related to the issue of competence is that of purity, which once again appears to matter more to non-speakers than it does to speakers. How often does one hear a fluent speaker of Bhutia complaining about the pervasiveness of Nepali loan words in his language? Not very often, because the incorporation of loan words from Nepali may not even be noticed, or if it is, then it is promoted as a practical strategy for linguistic survival. In fact, the incorporation of loan words can be viewed as a key adaptation for ensuring the continued vibrancy, relevance and longevity of smaller languages whose lexical inventories were historically modest.

Where does this leave English as it is spoken in Sikkim? The short answer is that English continues to be a language of class and education, its strong position in education being fired by ‘pragmatically driven public demand’ (Simpson 2007: 15). English is not a language of territorial identity in traditional terms, but is very much a language of globalised access, which makes English almost anti-territorial. English is also a language of belonging and group attachment, but belonging to a class rather than an ethnicity. As the medium of instruction in all schools in Sikkim, English is breaking down elite associations to some degree, although not entirely. The range of aptitude in English is enormous, illustrated by the fact that only 74% of all students surveyed in Sikkim claim to speak English while 88% write it. Which language the remaining 12% write in when their teachers are instructing them in English is up for debate.

While the borders between Nepal and India are very real, they are also very thin, and in some ways the countries are converging in how they approach attachment and linguistic belonging. In Nepal in particular, the identity landscape is fast changing. In his study of Chantyal over a decade ago, Noonan observed that ‘knowledge of the language is no longer at the core of ethnic identity, as it once must have been’ (1996: 135) and that ‘Chantyalness’, therefore, does not include the ability to speak Chantyal among its characterizing features’ (1996: 133). It is only a small step from this to having a mother tongue in which one has no mastery.

Paul Brass’ statement that ‘it is probably more often the case that one defends one’s mother tongue when one cannot speak at all or well a language of wider communication’ (2004: 365-366) is not borne out or supported by the examples I have provided in this paper. To the contrary, I would suggest that it is usually the elites who defend languages—sometimes even languages that need no defence such as English and Nepali—while marginalised monolinguals aspire to bilingualism. Battles for linguistic representation are not primarily fought by the politically weak and linguistically competent, but waged rather by the politically strong (if linguistically incompetent) who invoke the rights of the disenfranchised in order to construct their own sense of belonging to a community of speakers whose language they may not even speak.

NOTES

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- ² I am grateful to Charles Ramble for reminding me that such evocations of multilingualism with different speech forms accorded different domains of use is not new. Charles V, the King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor (1500-1558), is alleged to have remarked 'I speak Spanish to God, Italian to Women, French to Men, and German to my horse.'
- ³ This point grows out of a discussion with Bal Gopal Shrestha who has recently conducted ethnographic research among the Newar communities of Sikkim.

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**Linguistic Survey of Sikkim:
Part I - Language in Education and Schools**

Date: _____

1. What is your full name ? _____ Male / Female
2. What is the name of your school ? _____
3. In what class do you study ? _____
4. How old are you ? _____
5. How many languages can you speak ? _____
6. How many languages can you write ? _____
7. Which languages can you speak ? _____
8. Which languages can you write ? _____
9. Which language(s) do you speak with your mother ? _____
10. Which language(s) do you speak with your father ? _____
11. Which language(s) do your parents speak together ? _____
12. Which language(s) do you speak with your grandparents ? _____
13. Which language(s) do your grandparents speak together ? _____
14. Which language(s) do your parents speak with your grandparents ? _____
15. Which language(s) do you speak with your brothers and sisters ? _____
16. Which language(s) do you speak with your school friends in break ? _____
17. If you have to write a letter, which language do you write it in ? _____
18. If you have to write a shopping list, which language do you write it in ? _____
19. If you know any songs, in which language(s) are they ? _____
20. If you know any poems, in which language(s) are they ? _____
21. If you watch TV, in which language(s) are the programmes that you watch ? _____
22. Which language is your mother tongue ? _____
23. Which languages are you now learning in school ? _____
24. Which of these languages is most important to you, and why ? _____

25. If you could study only one language, which one would you choose ? _____
26. What do you want to do when you graduate from school ? _____

27. Where are you from ? _____
28. How many brothers and sisters do you have ? _____
29. What is your religion ? _____