



GEOLINGUISTICS MOVEMENT IN THE HIMALAYAN RANGE OF NEPAL

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Respected participants in the 2nd International Seminar on Linguistics & Polyglot Studies, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon and warm greetings from Nepal. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this academic endeavor. On behalf of the Geolinguistics Society of Nepal, I would like to extend our best regards and wish grand success to the seminar. I heartily appreciate the contribution made so far on linguistics and polyglot studies in Russia by the organizers and their critical role in enhancing research on polyglottery as a linguistic, cognitive and social phenomenon. On this occasion, I feel privileged to share the story of the geolinguistics movement in the Himalayan range.

Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual country in South Asia between China and India. Multi-ethnic communities comprised of 126 ethnic groups, and among them 123 plus 6 languages, have been identified here [3], [4]. Politically, the country is now defined as the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. It has diverse topography and climate stretching from east to west with an average length of 885 kilometers and widening from north to south with an average breadth of 193 kilometers. Geographically, Nepal has three ecological belts consisting of the northern mountain belt as the range of Himalayas, including the world's highest peak, Mount Everest. The middle hilly belt is enriched by beautiful hills, valleys and lakes, whereas the Terai belt is the plain area situated in the southern part of Nepal.

Linguistic diversity prevails here, including some unidentified languages. Lewis [2] recorded that 126 languages are spoken in Nepal whereas Yonjan-Tamang [6] claims that there are 144 languages spoken within its territory. The mother tongues enumerated in the censuses of 2011 and 2021 belong to four language families: Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian, while Kusunda is a language isolate consisting of a single language without any genetic relationship with other languages [3], [4], [5]. Linguistic diversity has become the lived reality of Nepal [1].

The geolinguistics movement in Nepal was inspired by the President of the American Society of Geolinguistics and its Tokyo affiliate, Dr Hikaru Kitabayashi, formerly Professor at Daito Bunka University in Tokyo, Japan. A conference organization committee of nine members was formed under the coordination of Aita Bishowkarma, a faculty member of Tribhuvan University, who worked as the Nepal Chapter of the American Society of Geolinguistics in Tokyo in 2018. Dr Tara Datta Bhatta and Dr Prem Bahadur Phyak were the chief advisors whereas Irene Kyffin was the foreign advisor. Dr Ravi Maharjan coordinated these activities from Tokyo while Mr Bishnu Kumar Sinjali, Mr Babu Ram Bishwokarma, Mr Amar Jung Limbu, Mr Man Bahadur Bhandari, Mr Surendra Bhatta and Mr Bharat Ram Bishwokarma worked as executive members in the team.

The committee organized the 1st International Conference on Geolinguistics in Nepal, which was held at the Center for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, on March 15 and 16, 2019. Dr Lav Deo

Awasthi, the chairperson of the Language Commission, Nepal, was the chief guest, and the distinguished guest was Dr Jai Raj Awasthi, who is the former Vice-Chancellor of the Far Western University in Nepal. Dr Hikaru Kitabayashi delivered the presidential address whereas Dr Wayne Finke from Baruch College, City University of New York, presented the keynote speech entitled “East meets West: communality in linguistic pursuits”. About 35 research papers from America, Britain, Russia, Japan, India, Nepal and Nigeria were presented. A panel discussion was also conducted. The theme of the conference was *Multilingual Perspectives in Geolinguistics, II*¹, and it was a grand success as a rigorous discussion on language issues in the Himalayan range that involved researchers, linguists and educators both from home and abroad, including young scholars from Tribhuvan University.

In 2020, the Geolinguistics Society of Nepal organized the 1st International Webinar on Geolinguistics. The topic was *Theory, Research, and Practice in Geolinguistics*, and it was organized in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic on December 18 and 19, 2020. Once again, Dr Lav Deo Awasthi was the chief guest and Dr Jai Raj Awasthi was the distinguished guest. Dr Hikaru Kitabayashi welcomed the webinar and Dr Wayne Finke presented the keynote speech entitled “El español al día: Castilian in the twenty-first century Iberian Peninsula”. Some 21 papers from America, Britain, Japan, Russia, Australia, Nepal, India and Nigeria were presented, including that of Dr Kathleen Heugh from University of South Australia. The virtual webinar spread enthusiasm for research and cooperation among geolinguistics practitioners around the globe despite the pandemic crisis.

The Geolinguistics Society of Nepal was officially registered as an NGO in the local government of Nepal in 2021. The organization conducted the 2nd International Virtual Conference on Geolinguistics on December 17 and 18, 2021. The theme was *Research Practices in Geolinguistics: Diverse Languages and Multiple Approaches*. The chief guest was Dr Lav Deo Awasthi and the keynote speech was presented by Dr Hikaru Kitabayashi. About 23 research papers were presented. The speakers were from America, Mexico, Britain, Russia, Japan, India, Nepal, Australia and Nigeria, including distinguished professors of linguistics at Tribhuvan University. Geolinguistics has thus been established as an academic discipline in Nepal. The virtual conference sent vibrant waves in the research practices in geolinguistics around the globe.

These conferences and the webinar were organized in collaboration with the American Society of Geolinguistics in Tokyo, the American Society of Geolinguistics in New York, and Amici Linguarum in Moscow. These events open up a new avenue in the study of languages in the multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual country of Nepal, and, together with multilingual studies and polyglottery studies, foster geolinguistics as an academic discipline in the Himalayas.

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¹ The first conference under this title was held on April 11, 2015, at Daito Bunka University in Tokyo (*editor's note*).