

Authority, Status, and Caste Markers in Everyday Village Conversations: the Example of Eastern Nepal

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This study sets out to detect the various markers that express forms of caste and community belonging, and, more generally, hierarchies in the language used in ordinary social interactions in villages in the hills of eastern Nepal, and how the somewhat rigid codes of civility that govern village society and language have recently evolved. The study is carried out from a socio-anthropological perspective rather than a linguistic or a literary one.¹

Before discussing the topic in detail, I characterize the site of my research, which is the Khotang District. Firstly, it is a mixed society: the autochthonous Chamling Rai represent 39 percent of the population, Chetris 22 percent, Brahmans 9 percent, Newars, Magars, and other Himalayan communities about 5 percent each, and Dalits also 5 percent. The identity of the Chamling Rai has been preserved by their specific religious rituals and an exclusive relationship with their ancestral land. Other indigenous “Himalayan” communities (Magars, Tamangs, Gurungs, and Newars) have their own identity and rituals but they are not regarded (and they do not consider themselves) as autochthonous in Khotang.² Like caste people (Brahmins, Chetri, and the craftsmen caste), they are “guests” in a land that is not “theirs.” Brahmin-Chetris, who are numerically equal to Chamling Rais in a large number of Village Development Committees (VDCs), draw strength from their comfortable economic position and centuries-old cultural and religious affinities with the elite who wield power in Kathmandu. This local diversity is reflected in their language: caste people speak only Nepali while indigenous communities, who use their

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²According to the official terminology, a distinction is made between Adivasi Janajati, or “indigenous” ethnic groups, and the Brahmans-Chetri and Dalits, who are not regarded as “indigenous.” Although commonly used, this wording is rather unsatisfactory in the local context: in VDCs in the Sapsu Khola valley where fieldwork was conducted, it appears—if one is to believe the genealogical data kept by priests on the lineage cult and marriages is correct—that Chetri from neighboring localities, followed by their Brahmin priests and craftsmen, settled there twelve or thirteen generations ago, in the seventeenth century; the Magars arrived at the end of the eighteenth century, and the Newars in the late nineteenth century. Only the Rai are “autochthonous”; the other groups whether they be “indigenous” (the Adivasi Janajati) or “Indo-Nepalese” are regarded locally as “latecomers.” While I prefer the term “Himalayan communities” to characterize the Adivasi Janajati, I will respect common usage, despite its ambiguity.

mother tongue to talk among themselves and Nepali with other groups as the vernacular language, are usually bilingual.

Secondly, this society is somewhat homogeneous in terms of its standard of education and daily lifestyle. Local community leaders are merely farmers who are slightly richer than their neighbors. Before high schools were created in the 1970s and school textbooks became commonplace, ordinary people had an oral village culture and there was virtually no room for a written culture, books, or newspapers; indeed, reading was associated with Brahmin *purohits*, headmen with administrative responsibilities, and later on with teachers. Nevertheless, due to increased access to education and emigration, this society, which for centuries was purely agricultural, has become more diversified: land ownership is no longer their exclusive source of wealth. Farmers now compete with civil servants (predominantly teachers), enriched migrants, Gurkhas who retired decades ago, and construction workers now in the Middle East, who engage in local trade when they return home. The increasing diversification of local society has induced changes that, as we will see, are discernible in the language.

Thirdly, the structure of this society is basically non-egalitarian. The family is patriarchal and authoritarian to varying degrees: elders have precedence over young people, and men over women. Caste people are stratified into internal categories: in most VDCs, although there are few Brahmins, they carry more weight than their number would suggest since they have capitalized on education and they claim to be superior in local hierarchies; most Chetris are well-off farmers; “craftsmen” castes of cobblers, tailors, and blacksmiths occupy a middle position as far as their wealth is concerned, but do not benefit from any social esteem. Chamling Rai, who make up the relative majority in most villages, have often held the local power; they have never forgotten that the country is theirs nor what the “latecomers” owe them. Communities and castes compete with each other to maintain or to gain the local supremacy, and each head of the family strives to be treated by others with the respect he deserves. In this society where community, caste, age, sex, notability, wealth, and education combine to assign everyone their rank, language works as an expression of implicit hierarchies that shape the legitimacy of speaking out and the choice of words.

Fourthly, albeit plagued by frustrations and biases, the village regards itself as a big family, which makes for a harmonious environment and precludes any physical or verbal abuse. Language is, to a certain extent, codified to maintain courteous relationships between individuals. In the case of Khotang, it is a “restricted code” as defined by Bernstein (1964:63), where what is transmitted verbally makes reference to the other person in terms of their status or local group membership. What is said reflects the form of the social relationship and the basis on which it is shared. For villagers, as within a family, conflicts can be avoided as long as everyone respects their given place. In this respect, language reflects first and foremost the assigned position: to express in an expected manner means accepting a person’s rank in a big family; to speak out can be a challenge that can upset the others, as it suggests that the “transgressor” misunderstands his position, or feels dissatisfied with it.

When society is based on the acute awareness that individuals can only express themselves in the framework of traditional codes that are assigned to his age, sex, caste, or community, and their social position, there is little room for an “art of speaking well,” a notion that perhaps makes more sense in a diversified urban society shaped by legal affairs or the

intellectual prestige of an elite. It does not mean that the concept does not exist in the minds of people, but at the village level, nobody has yet attempted to define it. There is, however, unquestionably a wrong and bad way of speaking, and more generally, a manner of behaving inappropriately that is reflected in the language. People regard this as incompatible with the exercise of any kind of authority, as we will see in the last part of the article that addresses the authoritative speech of notables. But authority, whether official or moral, hardly derives from a person's way of speaking, and the mastery of language is not a source of power. It is an additional (and minor) requirement demanded of those who are vested with authority, along with the probity, the generosity, and the dignity also expected of them.

This is perhaps less true for the language of religious officiants (not the subject of this study), which answers its own logic, though its specificity should not be overestimated. Of course the Brahmin pundit draws his authority from his memorization of the Sanskrit holy texts and his capacity to repeat them, but he can lose everything if his purity is impugned or the reputation of his family tarnished. For the shaman, the knowledge of the sacred formulae of *muddhum*, the Great Tradition of Kiranti worship, is of course a prerequisite, and he cultivates this art to impress the audience in delivering his words even though he will ultimately be judged by his results in exorcizing evil spirits and curing the ill, not by his eloquence or the dramatization of his magic tricks. Women possessed by Goddess Bhagavati, the number of whom has multiplied in recent years, hold their own impressive prophetic discourse that is perhaps close to the “performative speech” studied by J. L. Austin (1962). However, their authority is ultimately based on their belief—which is shared by their followers—that they have actually been “chosen” by the Great Goddess who speaks through their words. And they can only maintain this conviction by locking themselves away in an ascetic lifestyle involving weird spiritual exercises (Ghimire 2016). As for the Maoists, who do not simply form a political movement but also a cult that developed a quasi-religious discourse, their abstruse rhetoric and repetitive slogans hypnotized their captive audience for seven years. Their success, however, owes little to the power of words: as Chairman Mao wisely noted: “political power grows out the barrel of a gun.” In these last cases, as Bourdieu noted (1991:107): “The power of words is nothing other than the *delegated power* of the spokesperson, and his speech—that is, the substance of his discourse and, inseparably, his way of speaking—is no more than a testimony, and one among others, of the *guarantee of delegation* which is vested in him.”

While, as I argue, the language of villagers is essentially a mirror reflection of identities and hierarchies, except in times of (individual or political) crisis when transgressive attitudes emerge, the impact of the dramatic changes of the last decades should not be underestimated. In a more diverse and fluid society, when the democratic procedures to select local officials upset the traditional authority-obedience relationship, the accepted rules are reconsidered. In a context where people have lost their points of reference, language gains a certain degree of autonomy and, through its uncertainties, becomes a valuable marker of the changes taking place.

I first discuss the specificities of multilingualism in the region where Chamling, a language spoken by the autochthonous Rai, and the Nepali language coexist. We will see that, though the Chamling language is closely linked to the oral religious tradition of the *muddhum*, this group's daily language is surprisingly mutable and flexible. The growing awareness of the importance of this language among its speakers parallels the decline in its use. As for the national

language, Nepali, its various dialectal variants tend to combine to form a “Creolized Nepali” that is spoken by villagers from various groups.

Second, I review the complex use of terms of address and honorific pronouns in the common Nepali language. In a society where the use of personal names is limited to administrative contexts, terms of kinship are widely used to mark the positions of interlocutors: there is some interplay between seniority, affection, and social status in this code. Pronouns also mark a wide range of nuances in relationships, which allow a wide range of combinations. Recent changes challenging the validity of the caste system will be examined in this context later in this study.

Third, I demonstrate how the standard of authority has evolved, and how within several generations it has shifted from virile authority to a more formal one based on moderation and restraint. Among the other effects it has had, this shift tends to banish vulgarity from public interactions; it was formerly inherent in the popular culture of the various ethnic groups.

Rise and Decline of Bilingualism

In eastern Nepal, several local languages are spoken. Autochthonous idioms are of Kiranti origin but the use of Magar, Gurung, Tamang, and Newar languages, spoken by groups that apparently settled later, should not be minimized. All are spoken concurrently with Nepali. This bilingualism, however, is limited to indigenous groups, since Brahmins-Chetri castes only speak the Nepali language. Sometimes, Brahmins-Chetri may at least acquire a passive knowledge of the language spoken by their neighbors in a few VDCs where there are not enough caste people to make a compact settlement (village or hamlet) or when a family, as a result of a quarrel with members of its clan, decides to settle in a village inhabited by an indigenous community. The history of bilingualism in indigenous communities, which is still only based on hypotheses, remains to be written.

Two points, however, should be underlined. Firstly, though evidence is rare, it can be inferred from witnesses of the nineteenth century that the Nepali language became the vernacular language at an early period.³ In Khotang, it seems likely that Nepali was spoken by all Rai men and a majority of women as early as the nineteenth century. In the first half of the twentieth century the Nepali language extended to Magars, which are locally a marginal community.⁴ Several factors have contributed to making Nepali a *lingua franca*.

Autochthonous Rai (also called Khambu) populations scattered between Everest and the eastern Terai are made up of more than fifteen groups, basically clans with a common ancestor, that reside in a given area with their own religious rituals, each of them speaking their own language that others cannot understand. None of these Rai linguistic groups, which have never

³This impression is confirmed by Hodgson (1874:1-2): “the only language of southern origin spoken in these Hills is the Khas or Parbatia, brought into them by colonies from below (twelfth to fifteenth century CE), now so generally diffused.” This remark appears in an essay published for the first time in 1828.

⁴In the VDCs this study focuses on, the last person to speak only the Chamling language (one of the many Rai idioms used in the region) was an old woman who was born around 1900 and died in the 1980s. The last of the Magars who could not speak Nepali at all died in the 1990s.

formed political entities, have taken precedence over the others or imposed their language on other communities, whether Indo-Nepalese or indigenous.⁵ Associated with farming and technical innovations that were supposedly introduced by Indo-Nepali settlers long before the conquest (Sagant 1976:39-41; Regmi 1965:548-49; Dollfus et al. 2003:303), the Nepali language was no doubt used for trade and spoken by indigenous males who, as early as the nineteenth century, descended to the Terai plain or to India to work on plantations or in mines during seasonal migrations. It was also the language of administration and of the elites at the small Rajput courts in the Terai, such as Makwanpur, Chaudandi, and Vijayapur, where, by this time, Kiranti headmen had made their place in the entourage of the Sen Dynasts (Hamilton 1971 [1819]:128ff). When the country was unified in 1774, the Gorkhali rulers, like their Sen predecessors, entrusted these Limbu and Rai local rulers with administrative, judiciary, and fiscal duties. As their officers needed both to have a good command of the Nepali language and to mediate between the many different communities they were in charge of, headmen helped to spread the Nepali language among their dependents. Hence Nepali is practiced just as much in very remote mountain communities, in homogeneous Rai settlements, as it is in the mixed villages in the lower valleys. Though Nepali, however, was the administrative language used for official correspondence at the time, it had not become the dominant idiom among the common people through any direct action by the Nepali government, and even less so through coercion. When schools opened in every village of the Sapsu Khola valley in the 1970s, almost everybody could already speak Nepali.

The second point worth noting is, although the Rais were able to maintain their local dominance in many localities where they held a majority, even where their local position remained unchallenged, the Rais did not try to impose their language on the other communities who had, at best, a passive understanding of the autochthonous language. This question deserves an explanation.

Every Rai language is primarily the language of *muddhum*, the language of domestic worship, the vector of an exclusive dialogue between the Rais and their ancestors and spirits.⁶ Members of other communities, who are not supposed to communicate with deceased Kirantis, have no reason to understand it and much less reason to speak it.⁷ When a Brahmin-Chetri or a Magar is affected by a malevolent Rai spirit, he is advised to call a Rai shaman. If he implores the spirit directly in the language of *muddhum*, people say that this will cause disasters. Thus, the ancestral language of the Rais is essentially a component of their ritual identity. It explains both its resilience and, ultimately, its marginalization. It was not until the 1980s that Kiranti intellectual and nationalist circles realized that a language is not only the vector of dialogue between ancestors and their progeny, but also an instrument of cultural and political influence.

⁵About the fragmentation of the Rais, see Schlemmer (2004:41-44); Gaenszle (2000:2-12, 38-41).

⁶This point is highlighted by all the studies devoted to the Rai (Allen 1978:237-56; Gaenszle 2000:112-57, 223-312; Nicoletti 2006:37-38).

⁷The remark applies to all the components of the "Rais' mosaic." These concepts have hindered attempts at linguistic unification that nationalist Kirantis were calling for.

Besides, each Rai language has a dual character. *Muddhum* is a “relic language,” preserved for ritual dialogue with ancestors who impose on the living a scrupulous respect of the words of *muddhum* that are comparable to ritual Sanskrit holy texts. The Kiranti oral texts compiled by Karen H. Ebert and Martin Gaenszle reveal striking similarities that suggest that the recognized special value of the wording matters just as much as the substance of the myth (Ebert and Gaenszle 2008).⁸ It is worth noting that should the go-betweens (“*kopi*” in Chamling language) who are asked to arrange a marriage become tongue-tied and mispronounce the sacred words of *muddhum*, the bride’s parents’ blood would boil. Kicked out by the outraged family, they would sheepishly explain to their instigators that their mission failed because they mixed up the sacred formulae.

However, when the Rais chat on their veranda, in the fields, or at the fountain, their colloquial language, which has little to do with the words of *muddhum*, is surprisingly informal. The ethnologists, who have tried to find the place where the “purest” Rai language is spoken, have admitted that this concept does not make sense. All these idioms, each exclusively oral, are conspicuous for their flexibility and mutability (Gaenszle 2000:48). Syntactic structures are indeed important but an additional factor may play a role here: the vocabulary of Chamling-Nepali-English dictionaries attests to the lexical wealth of this original Kiranti language in the fields of nature, kinship, family, and feelings. However, when Rais want to express general ideas, they routinely add words borrowed from the Nepali language, and even from English, which combine with the Kiranti syntax. If necessary, they switch from Chamling to Nepali.⁹ When I collected the sacred words of *muddhum* from the oldest Chamling men, the record was punctuated with explanations, glosses, and digressions in pidgin Nepali-Kiranti. These explanations in this mixed language were necessary to clarify the meaning of *muddhum*, not only for me but for my informant too!

If, at the present time, all Rai and Magar adults can speak their mother tongue, young people neglect it. The knowledge of *muddhum* may confer a certain prestige, but it is limited to a few erudite tradition-lovers, to a handful of fierce nationalists, and to the shamans. The decline of *muddhum* among young people as a language of knowledge and authority is inseparable from a broader disregard for the traditional forms of ancestral worship. Since shamanism is affected by a “crisis of vocations” (Ghimire 2010:213-44), the rituals and dialogue with the ancestors have become a special mission assigned to a senior member of the clan who has not emigrated. Despite the lack of shamanic skills, his knowledge of the *muddhum* makes him not so much a “village priest,” as he is sometimes misrepresented, but a reliable neighbor whose knowledge of the words and the rites are required by the related families for life-cycle events.

⁸Schlemmer (2004:174-77) calls “le parler ancien,” this ritual language, “archaïque, pur, à l’usage strict et formalisé” that differs from the everyday language.

⁹The same situation obtained in the year 1980 with the Mewahang Rai (Gaenszle 2000:36-41).

The persistence of the Magar language has different reasons. Its linguistic conservatism was both a cause and a consequence of their long-lasting economic and social marginalization.¹⁰ Yet, the recent opening up of the community, the late schooling, and the mass expatriation have precipitated its decline.

In the last decades, the Kiranti and Magar nationalist leaders have realized that their languages were doomed to marginalization if they remained confined to ritual dialogue and family conversations. To deliver a clear, well-constructed, elaborate political speech in a Rai language, however, is a real challenge. Three years ago I attended a meeting in Diktel of the *Kirat Rai Yayokkha* devoted to the linguistic question. I could understand everything since the debate was in Nepali. During election time, Rai and Magar leaders like to harangue their brothers in their mother tongue, but after the slogans calling for communal solidarity, they switch quickly to Nepali. When a Chamling litigant submits a dispute to a Chamling umpire, he often begins presenting its petition in his mother tongue. As these preliminaries, however, make the part of the public that cannot understand uncomfortable, the litigants go into Nepali. In any event, it is not uncommon for a group, whether Rai, Magar, or Newar to suddenly start to converse in their communal language to make an individual from another community understand that he is not welcome. Reasoning, however, is rarely extended to its conclusion when a conversation is conducted in Chamling or Magar language, since as soon as one of the speakers switches to Nepali, the others follow.

The Rais are used to hearing and speaking an unwritten mother tongue, which has several local variants and is sometimes spoken in relatively close localities; these differences are simply regarded as local markers.¹¹ They attach no importance to any correction to their colloquial language, whether it be their native tongue or Nepali, as an element of refinement and distinction. This is not the case with English, which is now required for jobs abroad. In the lower part of Temma VDC, villagers clubbed together to bring back a Darjeeling-born Rai who supposedly teaches the purest English and who gives private tuition. Those who do not use her services (the vast majority) have to buy grammar books and a dictionary and to work hard at their English at home.

Vernacular Nepali: The Gradual Standardization of Local Variants

Nepali is the language of inter-community relations and, more generally of social relations, which contrast with family relations. But what is really meant by Nepali? Except for caste people whose mother tongue is Nepali, the *lingua franca* of the Hills was learned in early childhood by listening to others, at least until schools opened in the 1970s, to meet the basic needs of communication of a mixed society or to comply with administrative formalities. For this

¹⁰ The Magars' migration to Khotang seems to have occurred in two stages. They came from western Nepal centuries ago and settled in the foothills around Udayapur, where they provided soldiers to the Rajput princes of the Makwanpur State. In the eighteenth century, a part of this Magar community migrated, perhaps for economic reasons, in some upper valleys of Khotang (Ghimire 2010:451-54).

¹¹ For the Mewahang, see Gaenszle (2000:37-38).

reason, it has long been a kind of pidgin or Creole Nepali that bears the marks of its speakers' mother tongue.

In villages, accent and syntax are not significant elements of identification since everybody knows everybody else. When a villager meets a stranger, physical features (Mongoloid for Himalayan groups, Indian for caste people) matter more than language. Furthermore, when a villager begins to speak to a stranger, he asks him straightaway to introduce himself, in order to situate himself geographically and socially. The usual set phrase is: "My dear, don't I know you? (*Maile nānī tapāī lāi ciṅna sakina?*) Which village do you come from? (*Tapāīko gāun kun ho?*) Whose son are you? (*Tapāī kaśko chorā?*).” When I answer, I introduce myself as P. Ghimire, the son of H. P. Ghimire, who used to live in J., a locality of my Village Development Committee, and the brother of H., the headmaster of the senior high school. The language, the accent, and the syntax merely combine to confirm my statements. A suspected imposture will provoke a feeling of uneasiness but not a quick reaction.

Each group has its unique accent. Because the Magars of Khotang swallow vowels and nasalize consonants, their Nepali sounds guttural and nasal. The Chamling Rais of Khotang make an intrusive use of the vowel U instead of A: when others say *U bhanna khojcha* ("he tries to say"), or *U garna khojcha* ("he tries to do"), the Chamling pronounce this *U bhunnu khojcha* and *U garnu khojcha*. Similarly, the Magars of eastern Nepal, but also the Bantawa Rais, the Puma Rais, and some Chamling Rais from the north and south-west of Khotang have their own way of placing tonic accents and they tend to harden consonants: their accentuated Ḍ and Ṭ are characteristic.¹²

There are more significant syntactic variations and turns of phrases. When the Chamling Rais and Magars speak Nepali, they have little concern for conjugating verbs whether in the past, present, or future, and, above all, they are indifferent to the use of singular and plural forms.¹³ Where a Brahmin-Chetri says "the goats have come" (*bākhārāhu āe*), a Magar or a Chamling says "the goats has come" (*bākhārā āyo*), combining a plural subject with a singular verb. Of course, everyone understands the Chamlings and Magars when they speak Nepali, but if the sometimes patronizing Brahmins-Chetri are to be believed, the former's language is not the most correct.

Craftsmen castes have their own way of pronouncing words. For the verb *lyāunu*, which means "to bring," they say *līunu*. They are fond of making noises with their mouth as well as speech sounds and expressions of their own, such as "*muī muī muī*," the equivalent of the French "*eh bé!*" or the English "Uh oh!," which conveys surprise, doubt, and discontent. Due to the negative image of Dalits, the other communities are displeased with these intonations.

High-caste people tend to consider that the way they speak Nepali is the correct one. This irks the Rais and Magars, who are quickly vexed by their pretentious neighbors. When they want to parody a Brahmin, they add strange plural forms, complicated turns of phrase, and obsolete

¹² Though every Rai language varies from village to village, the differences are not such that they can be regarded as different dialects. On this instability, see Gaenszle (2000:16-17) and Hardman (2000:30-31).

¹³ In the case of Kiranti languages, this may reflect the difficulty of switching from one language whose morphology is based on a complex combination of affixes and suffixes to the specific way of conjugating Indo-European languages.

words to their sentences to produce a comic effect. The Rais, Magars, and even the Chetri make fun of the linguistic archaisms the Brahmins are fond of, such as the word “*rān*,” when “*rahechan*” is perfectly correct in modern Nepali. To caricature one of their tendencies, the Brahmin would say “*uśkā baccā dherai rān*” meaning “He had many children,” whereas Chetri would say “*uśkā baccā dherai rāchan*,” while the correct form in Nepali is “*uśkā baccāharu dherai rahechan*.” Each community preserves linguistic specificities that are ultimately a string of inaccuracies.¹⁴ These differences are minor and permanently maintained because most daily conversations take place in the same neighborhood, and because no individual would try to emulate the particular way another community talks.

This situation confirms an observation made by Bourdieu, who noted that “in the absence of objectification in writing and especially of the quasi-legal codification, which is inseparable from the constitution of an official language, ‘languages’ exist only in the practical state, that is, in the form of so many linguistic habitus, which are at least partially orchestrated, and of the oral productions of these habitus” (Bourdieu 1991:46). Does all this in fact really matter?

On the one hand, a Nepali taught and spoken in schools (but not at home) by teachers and students exists today but is a fairly recent phenomenon. This Nepali taught at school is ultimately the language spoken by the Brahmins-Chetri living in the Kathmandu Valley, and the language you hear on the radio, which is now heard by almost every household. As this specific language tends to undergo grammatical standardization, accents become less perceptible. On the other hand, in Khotang there are many ways of speaking Nepali, each one specific to a given community, but these variations do not constitute dialects. They are merely local variants of a creolized Nepali language. Nobody lends any importance to these peculiarities. Each community stands out due to its specificities regarding rituals, food and drink, gestures, manifestations of courtesy, jokes, and so on. The singularities of the language are not the most significant. Priority is given to passing on a message, which is understood by everybody, in a respectful way as is expected in village society, where each member has to stay in the place assigned to him.

A Complex and Unstable Protocol Reflecting the Crisis of Hierarchies

In Nepal, hierarchies are associated with a complex caste protocol. This protocol is embodied in forms of greeting and the differential use of *tapāī*, *timī*, and *tā* to express the “you” form, among other things. Forms of greeting are borrowed from kinship vocabulary regardless of any community or caste status, and of any social position. The village world is like a large family where everyone finds his assigned place. People hate to be called by their personal given name, a situation that may happen when two individuals have an argument:¹⁵ “Who are you to call me by

¹⁴ For example, to say “we haven’t done anything,” the Rai says “*hāmīle kehī garīngnā*,” the Magar says “*hyāmle kyāhī gryāna*,” and the Brahmin-Chetri says “*hamerle Kehī garīuna*,” while the correct form is “*hāmīle kehī garenaū*.”

¹⁵ Nobody likes to be called by his or her name. The only exceptions are among students of the same age. An older person can call a younger one by his name, preceded by *bhanja/bhatij* (“nephew”) for a boy or *bhanji/chori* (“niece”) for a girl, but the younger person will never say the name of the older one. Exceptions may, however, occur.

my name?" (*mero nām kāḍhera bolāune timī ko hau*) is the usual (angry) reaction. The given name has administrative value that has no place in a village social context.

The form of greeting is dictated by the respective ages of the people concerned but also by the relationship that my own parents had with the person I am talking to. Normally, if my parents say uncle or aunt to Brahmins and Chetri, but also to Rais and Magars, I say "grandfather" or "grandmother." I will say "ritual-father" (*mitbāu*) or "ritual-mother" (*mitāmā*) if my parents have made a pact of friendship (*mit*). "Elder brother" (*dāju*) or "Sister-in-law" (*bhāujū*) of *mit* is expressed by the same words. If my parents say "elder brother" (*dāju*) or "sister-in-law" (*bhāujū*), in such a case, I am obliged to greet them as "elder uncle" (*baḍābāu/ṭhulobuvā*) or "elder aunt" (*baḍāmā/ṭhulāmā*). If they are younger than my parents, I call them "younger uncle" (*kākā*) and "younger aunt" (*kākī*). It is the reason why I address as "paternal uncle" (*kākā*) a Magar who was formerly a mayor of my VDC, since my father called him "younger brother." At the same time, I address as "maternal uncle" (*māmā*) another former mayor, a Chamling Rai, since my mother called him "elder brother" and my father "brother-in-law." In return, both of them call me "nephew" (*bhatij* and *bhānij*). This familiarity has nothing to do with personal feelings since none of us can choose the form of greeting. When I forget the special ties my parents have with my interlocutor, I am scolded good-naturedly by the offended person ("Have you forgotten how your mother greeted me?"). When I talk with people of my own generation, if I do not know their exact age, I take heed and call them "elder brother" or "elder sister." To children, I say "little brother" (*sāno bhāi*) or "little sister" (*sānī bahinī*).

Outside their own caste, however, no one greets a Dalit as "father," "mother," "uncle," or "aunt," since it sounds deferential or familiar. To an old and respectable Dalit man, my parents would say "eldest" (*jethā*) or "youngest" (*kānchā*). My generation would greet him as "elder brother" (*dāju*) and his wife as "sister-in-law" (*bhāujū*) or "elder sister" (*didī*). This in itself is not a mark of contempt since this greeting is rather impersonal. Associated with the use of the informal "you" (*timī* or *tā*), however, this greeting attributes to the Dalit a permanent position of junior member of the village family. This position is made more evident by the demonstrations of respect that are required of lower castes. When they address a married Brahmin-Chetri, Rai, or Magar, they have to call them "master" or "mistress" (*mukhya* or *mukhini*), a greeting that today has fallen out of use in other communities: it reminds the Dalits that they remain, at least formally, dependents and clients vis-à-vis Brahmin-Chetri, Rai, and Magar. If the person they talk to is not yet married, the Dalit says "elder" (*jethā jethī*), "younger" (*māilā māilī*), or "youngest" (*kānchā kānchī*).

There are two exceptions to these standard rules, which make everybody, whether a Brahmin-Chetri, a Rai, a Newar, or a Magar, a member of the village's big family.

Teachers are called "Masters," "Master," or "Sir" in English-Nepali by their students, and that sticks for life.¹⁶ A female teacher will be called "*gurū āmā*," which sounds archaic; "Miss" in the English way is now considered appropriate. When I recently returned to my village, some young adults used the respectful "Sir" to address me because I had briefly been their teacher in the early 1990s. The same rule applies among teachers, whether a friendly or hostile relationship

¹⁶ "Teacher" is gaining the ground instead of "master" because since the mid-1990s, this greeting is also used to address "tailor-masters" who are often from the craftsmen caste of Damai. However, teachers, the progressive wing of village society, are somewhat embarrassed by the confusion.

prevails: I call “H. Sir” the former headmaster of the high school and in return he calls me “Sir,” since I was one of his assistants. These customary courtesies express the spirit of the corps of teachers.

The other exception is the mark of respect due to a Brahmin *purohit*, who is always called “*guru*” by his Brahmin-Chetri clients. Meanwhile, the Magars call their priest “*puret*,” a corrupted form of *Purohit*. They also call him “*bāhun bāje*” (“old Brahmin”), which sounds familiar and has ceased to be a gratifying term of address. However, the context itself counts: when a Magar mayor or deputy mayor welcomes his *purohit* into his house or when he visits the priest, he bows and touches his feet and sometimes prostrates himself, calling him “*guru*.” But when the priest and the elected official meet in a social and civic context, the relationship becomes secularized and is soon reversed: the priest will be the first to greet the mayor, and, according to their age, they will call themselves “elder” or “younger brother” as equals should do.¹⁷

Since administrative forms of greeting, like “Mister Mayor,” are not commonly used, the chairman of the Panchayat, now the Village Development Committee, is necessarily the grandfather, father, the uncle, or elder brother of his constituents, regardless of their caste or community, just as he is the *mukhya* of Dalits. The implicit assimilation of village communities to an extended family gives the relationship between the official and his constituents a paternalistic flavor.

While it is easy to identify the spirit that governs forms of greeting, the customary courtesies that govern the use of “you” (in French *vouvoiement* and *tutoiement*) can be a headache just as is the case in French: there are no set rules, and practice changes from one community to another.

In Nepali the most polite way of saying “you” is *tapāĩ* or *hajur*. Similarly to the French *vous*, it implies distance and respect. While *tapāĩ* is always formal, there are two informal “you” forms, similar to the French *tu*. The “major” one, *timĩ*, is fairly egalitarian and friendly. The “minor” one, *tā*, is clearly non-egalitarian, but it is also used to express affection. These three forms of “you,” *tapāĩ*, *timĩ*, and *tā*, coexist.

The Brahmin makes a point of using the most polite form of “you,” *tapāĩ*, with almost everyone. First, he uses *tapāĩ* with anyone who is older than him: father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt, older brother, and older sister. This applies to members of all the other communities, with the significant exception of the Dalits. The Brahmin also uses *tapāĩ* when he speaks with boys and girls of the same age, including his high school classmates from the age of 14 or 15 years. In return for this extensive use of *tapāĩ*, the Brahmin-Chetri expects to be addressed with the most polite form of “you” by everyone. But a Brahmin husband uses the “minor” informal “you” (*tā*) when he speaks to his wife, to his younger sisters, and to his own children: indeed, *tā* is the emotional vector of family privacy but it is a permanent reminder of the age and gender hierarchies that are the backbone of the Hindu family. The use of the more egalitarian *timĩ* is residual: an older brother uses it when he speaks to his younger brothers, a

¹⁷ Louis Dumont (1966:320) explains this inversion of hierarchical status: the priest ranks himself lower in the hierarchy of state power because the warrior-king is both the Head of State and elected by God. However, in some royal rituals the king bows down before his priest; here the two authorities and the two different sources of hierarchy coexist and, therefore, one would be incomplete without the other.

teacher uses it throughout his life with his former students, and the Brahmin-Chetri also uses *timī* when he speaks to a child no matter what community he is from.

For many years, this pervasive use of *tapāī* was an element that caricatured the Brahmins: it seemed just as strange and outdated to other communities as the very formal use of *vous* between parents and children can be among the French aristocracy and “grande bourgeoisie” families. If criticism directed at Brahmins-Chetris is to be believed, this immoderate preference for *tapāī* would reveal their inability to enter into an equal and relaxed relationship, both inside and outside their caste. If the Brahmin-Chetri cherishes *tapāī*, other communities find it difficult to follow rules, whatever they may be. Perhaps because their respective mother tongue is not governed by any restrictive rules, the Rais and Magars tend to hesitate between *tapāī*, *timī*, and *tā* when they speak Nepali.

Among Rais, a husband and wife who converse on equal footing generally use the egalitarian informal “you,” *timī*, but when they argue, they switch to *tā*, which is rather insulting in this context. When parents use *tā* with their children, the children use *timī* with their parents. Both are loving and respectful, and the distance between parents and children that exists in Rai families is less pronounced and formal than in caste families. Outside the family, uncertainty prevails: though a Rai uses *timī* with his equals, older people, especially notables, appreciate it when young people use the more formal *tapāī* with them.

Among Magars, the rules are slightly different: in general, they approve of familiarity and more so than Rais; consequently, they have a preference for *tā*, the most informal “you,” and they seemingly ignore the formal “you,” *tapāī*. As with high castes, however, the relationship between husband and wife is clearly an unequal one: the husband uses the “minor” informal “you,” *tā*, to talk to his wife, who, in return, uses *timī*, which is more respectful.

Though the Himalayan communities of Rai and Magar have a less stilted way than Brahmins-Chetri of approaching other communities, the practices have evolved over the years. Chamling Rais, who in the past married within the neighborhood, now go very far away to find a partner. I recently attended a Chamling wedding where the affined families did not know each other. They began to talk as usual, mixing up the Chamling and the Nepali languages and using, in the latter, the informal egalitarian “you,” *timī*. But no matter how hard the guests tried, they did not get on very well. They gradually came to prefer Nepali to the Chamling language, as it provides the ability to switch more elegantly to a more formal code, *tapāī* setting a distance between them that corresponds to cool relations. Conversely, in conversations that include different communities, pidgins of Chamling and Magar that are riddled with Nepali words, the creolized Nepali, and the Nepali taught in school, tend to become intermingled. If caste people can easily stick to the formal *tapāī*, since the use of *timī* and *tā* would embarrass them, Rais and Magars rapidly lose their bearings: when their confidence is boosted by alcohol, a sporadic *timī* or *tā* mixed with in the more formal *tapāī* surreptitiously emerges.

Finally, Dalits ignore the formal *tapāī* when talking to each other. Adults use the informal egalitarian *timī*, regardless of sub-caste or sex. Parents use *tā* to speak to their children and young people use *timī* to address older people. In the past, whatever their age and local position, Dalits were forced to use the formal and respectful *tapāī* whenever they talked to members of other communities (Ghimire 2011:336-38). In return, caste people, Rais, Newars, and Magars called them by the informal “you,” *tā*, which is in this case less affectionate than disdainful. Since the

1980s, however, the egalitarian “you,” *timī*, which is more gracious, has gained ground at the expense of *tā*.

The Maoists, who controlled Khotang between 2002 and 2006, began to alter the use of these terms of address. Determined to root out all traces of inequality, they fought the combined use of the formal “you,” *tapāī*, and of the informal “you,” *tā* (Ghimire 2013:131-34), since the first is contemptuous when a superior speaks to an inferior.¹⁸ They tried to replace this vestige of the past by the reciprocal use of *tapāī* or *timī*, both being egalitarian forms that they cherished. This attempt, which affected both gender and caste relations, provoked great exasperation: an elderly Chetri who used *tan* to talk to his wife was horribly humiliated in front of his family by a band of young Maoists who had settled in his house; refusing to repent, the old man replied to the young masters, as I was told, “they had no lessons to give him on how to behave with his wife, nor did he need to be told how to make love with her. And if they wanted to impose on him formal respect, which had nothing to do with true love, he would henceforth use *tapāī* with his wife on a basis of reciprocity.” At the same time, the Dalits, encouraged by the *māobādīs*, had abandoned the formal *tapāī* and had begun to call the Brahmin-Chetri, Magar, and the Chamling Rai by the informal *timī*. These transgressions occurred in a climate of widespread suspicion: many Maoist fighters of Dalit stock, who tried to impersonate Brahmin-Chetris when they occupied the houses where they could hide from the army, revealed their identity by their preference for the informal you, *timī*, in a context where it sounded inappropriately familiar (Ghimire 2011:337). Experienced as a verbal aggression, the reciprocal use of *timī* is now associated with caste fraud by Dalits and with the intrusions of the revolutionaries in family privacy.

Today, the use of the formal you, *tapāī*, is gradually becoming standard, as is the case in cities, since it no longer upsets anybody. It is the rule outside the village of origin, where it has spread at the same pace as the most neutral greetings like *dāju* (“elder brother”) or *didī* (“elder sister”). In the village, the reciprocal form of respect, *tapāī*, which tended to be the normal form in inter-caste conversations, now prevails, even with the Dalits: equality is respected, courtesy is impeccable, and distance is maximal (Ghimire 2011:338).¹⁹ Derided in the past as a sign of arrogance, the frosty courtesy of the Brahmin-Chetri is now part of good manners that relieve and inspire the Kirantis and Magars: not a model in itself, but a neutral form that nobody could find offensive in times where old practices are challenged.

Authoritative Speech Reflects the Changing Values of the Notable

Until now, I have attended to the form rather than to the substance of the language. I now review the discourse of political authorities. The authoritative speech of Kiranti headmen was originally characterized by two conflicting aspects: gentleness and brutality. The leader can not only “purr like a cat” (*birāloko bolī*) but also “roar like a tiger” (*bāghko garjan*). This reflects the

¹⁸ Was this ambition reminiscent of the French Jacobins’ motto at the height of the Revolution: “*Citoyen, ici on se tutoie!*”?

¹⁹ In my last fieldwork in 2010, only very old and stubborn people still used *tā* when addressing a Dalit.

double, ambivalent nature of his role. The headman is first and foremost the eldest of a clan (*pāchā*). As the head of an extended family, he wields a multifaceted authority over the members of his clan (*dāju bhāi*), which extends to his dependants in other communities, who have an obligation of gratitude when they are granted the right to cultivate a portion of the ancestral land. His duties as administrator and judge, which are conferred by the Crown, confirm his authority as custodian of customary family law. The headman's attitude is sometimes motivated by generosity, sometimes by self-interest, and often by ongoing competition with other headmen. This relationship is complex because clan solidarity, personal interests, and affective exchanges may contradict each other.²⁰ He is at the same time a big brother who protects his community, who establishes his authority first through his self-confidence and by the services he provides for his constituents. However, he can also be a crabbed and vindictive bogeyman who bullies them, even if he keeps up appearances.²¹ In this respect, the local ruler hardly differs from the shaman who successively cajoles and defies the spirits, coaxes, and overcomes them in order to impose his will.

As the first duty of the ruler is “to say who is right and who is wrong” (*ko sāco ko jhuṭo*), he should be self-confident and his words should be “courageous and assertive” (*shāhasi ra hakki*). His language is that of a levelheaded judge, distinguished by the clarity of his thought (*śpaśtatā*) and impartiality (*niśpakshyatā*).²² His forcefully spoken words (*khara sabda*) must not show any sign of hesitation. However, if his arbitration is challenged, the ruler of today, unlike chieftains of the past, will not immediately show his wrath. On the contrary, he will simulate fatigue, he will remember that his authority ultimately rests on the consent of the people, and will threaten to drop them, since he knows the litigants cannot cope without him: “If you refuse to listen to me or you do not follow me, sort it out among yourselves, and do not disturb my peace and quiet. I am sick and tired of hearing your recriminations. I know who is right and who is wrong.” (*Maile bhaneko suṇdainau ra māṇdainau bhane timī harū āfu-āfumai mila, malāi bheṭna naāo, timīharūko jhagaḍā pherī suṇnu naparoś. Ko sahī ra ko jhuṭo cha bhaṇne malāi panī thāhā cha.*) This oscillation between authority and consensus reflects the leaders' often complex position inside their community, and the sometimes unstable position of their community in the village hierarchy.

Conversely, as a rule in all communities, poor families must exercise a high level of discretion, retreating into the background when notables speak and, unfailingly resigned,

²⁰ See Sagant (1978:75-78).

²¹ See Sagant (1980:246-47, 258-61).

²² The two adjectives *śpaśtatā* and *niśpakshyatā* express the requirements for becoming a judge in a village. No one would go and ask a person to play the role of judge if he or she has a reputation of being unclear (*aśpaśta*) and biased (*pakshyatāti*). In villages, most cases (except murder) are handled by an informal system of justice: mediation and reconciliation in the presence of at least five people (*panca bhalādmī*) who (are supposed to be *śpaśta* and *niśpakshya*) act as mediator between the victim and aggressor so that the litigants agree to reach a compromise, to find a middle-path solution, and to accept an informal verdict that is pronounced by the *panca bhalādmī*. In the past, leaders were indeed subjected to contradictory expectations. The Kiranti desired arbitration in their favor at the expense of other communities. All their clients, including natives and Indo-Nepalese, expected headmen to protect them from rival headmen. At the same time, all valued “the impartiality,” which is the cardinal virtue of a good leader. Held by a binding code of values, most leaders forced themselves to preserve their image. Others, who gave it up, had the reputation of temperamental judges (Ghimire 2010:521-42).

respecting the latter's words. To explain this "natural" restraint, the internalized shame of the poor matters more than their acceptance of the balance of power. In villages, poverty goes hand in hand with extremely low self-esteem and an acute sense of powerlessness. Of course, no villager has ever denied that a poor man can be wise. Privately, he will be greeted for his "common sense" and "sincerity" while, officiously, the leader will be stigmatized for his "arrogance" or his brutality. Whether he is right or not, a poor man, however, does not have the personal authority required to be heard, at least in public conversations. If he stands and talks, his opinion cannot prevail over those more powerful and wealthier than him because his voice is swallowed in the hubbub, in total indifference. By contrast, even the "one whose family has grown too fast" (*tuppābāṭa palāeko parivār*: literally pushed from the top without background, with no manner) can contradict prideful or haughty hereditary notables: upward mobility that provokes deference (and envy) ensures a person to be heard by others. A retired British Gurkha, made wealthy by his comfortable military pension, speaks louder than a less well-paid Indian Gurkha. Although both succeeded at university, the words of a permanent teacher are like Gospel truth, while the opinion of a jobless graduate, regarded as a "failure," is of no value. This remark applies to all communities and circumstances, except the Dalits: whether rich or poor (most of them belong to the village middle-class), and often appreciated as individuals, members of lower castes have no standing to contradict the views of others; they may be heard, but rarely listened to, and when they are listened to, hardly credited for the proposals they make. In a word, they are not so much silent as inaudible.

In the specific context of Khotang, where they represent a minority in many villages, the language of the Brahmins-Chetris is as ambiguous as their local position: although fairly educated, *purohits* epitomize a fossilized and declining knowledge; while firmly grounded in the village's middle class, not all upper-caste people are rich; moreover, Brahmins-Chetris people are the losers of the mass expatriation process, their land base has declined over the last thirty years, and they usually do not count for much in many municipalities. Torn between their excessive self-esteem and the historic antipathy of the other groups, Brahmins-Chetris prefer avoidance to social affirmation: they have often endured the brutal joviality (which hardly conceals threats and resentment) of their indigenous neighbors with cold detachment, bland courtesy, and complicated sentences filled with unfamiliar words. This thoughtful gentility hardly inspires confidence. The Rais and Magars are people whom they consider "as slippery as an eel" (*māchā jasto ciplo*), who suspected of being "two-faced" (*bhanāi ra garāi pharak bhaekā*), and who speak an "elusive language" (*leghro pasārne bolī*). They interpret rambling civility and convoluted speeches as a congenital duplicity when Brahmins-Chetris adjust their language to the local balance of power (Ghimire 2010:497-507).

A local leader, the Rai headman in the past, the former Gurkha who had later become the informal "justice of peace" in the village, and most recently a member of the municipality, must refrain from any subtlety when addressing the public at large. When somebody says that "you speak in a literary style!" (*tapāi sāhityik tarikāle bolnuhuncha!*), don't take it as a compliment. You will be rebuffed: "All right, do not indulge in literature!" (*bhayo bhayo dherai sāhitya nachāṭa!*). Higher studies are intended to prepare for expatriation, not to speak well. Local politicians, even Kiranti leaders, inspire the same mistrust as the crafty Brahmin-Chetri: they are suspected of seducing folk with their clever rhetoric simply to gain influence. Only teachers can

speak a more sophisticated language without sounding pedantic. “Our teachers speak the language of philosophers” (*hāmṛā shiksyakharu dārsanīkko bhāṣā boḷchan*), villagers proudly say. This solicitude persists despite the harassment and humiliations inflicted on some of them by the Maoist during the years they controlled the countryside around Khotang. The truth is that most teachers are boys and girls from the area who studied at university and they are the first in the family to be educated to such a degree, a source of joy and pride for their families. Nobody in the village can forget the elation felt among the whole Magar community in Temma VDC when the first Magar graduate from the village was appointed as a high-school English teacher. A teacher is first and foremost a child from the country who returns there triumphantly. For his family and neighbors, he necessarily speaks with words of wisdom. Conversely, nobody pays any attention to what a teacher coming from a remote district and reluctantly appointed for two or three years in the village, might think and say. Outsiders count for little.

Since the politicization of local public life is quite a new phenomenon, it may not be surprising that the political language now borrows heavily from religious attitudes that still impregnate village society. Like the religious discourse, whether *muddhum* or brahminic mantras and prayers, the political speech likes formulas of unknown origin, the obscurity of which is an essential feature of effectiveness. Reinforced by quotations from *Das Kapital* and the *Communist Manifesto*, Maoist political speech turned out to be aggressive because some people genuinely thought that the complexity of their world could be explained by indigestible but irrefutable arguments that sounded “new.” The respect due to all sacred formulae of the *muddhum* and the Vedas prepared the ground for a resigned and casual acceptance of abstract reasoning and unintelligible wordings, at least when the Maobadis wielded local power.

Nobody can win hearts with abstruse language and therefore it is a requirement for a leader to get the laugh out of the public. Villagers appreciate a good sense of humor, but jokes must always conform to the rules: they must not shock women, nor give young people bad ideas, nor must they disrespect the elderly. Only Kiranti chieftains in the past, the Maoists, and the politicians today indulge in highly controversial transgressions: to laugh and to provoke hilarity at the expense of the weak is the ultimate goal of the powerful, a mark of their omnipotence; humiliated, the victim, who can no longer hold his head high, opts for public submission, then a shameful withdrawal into isolation, and sometimes flight from the village. Because humor can be a cruel weapon in a society where appearances and reputation matter more than anything else, the use of jokes is defined and confined. When a local party leader holds a political meeting, his speech abounds in proverbs, quotations, anecdotes, and stories drawn from village folklore, most of them fairly innocent. Village culture is imbued with references to the Indian epics, most of all to the *Mahabharata*. Electoral competition transposes the struggle between the Pandavas, courageous and caring, and the Kauravas, selfish and destructive: is it not a battle between the members of a family, some good, others misled? In addition to this Manichean dimension, the *Mahabharata* provides a full range of colorful characters like Sakuni, the uncle of the Kauravas, laughable, opportunist, and evil, the natural incarnation of the political opponent. On the other hand, the corpus of Kiranti myths does not lend itself to humor. Neither the sacred languages of *muddhum*, nor the myths of the ancestral worship filled with characters situated in an indistinct past, provide easy matter for jokes. And nobody will laugh at the malevolent spirits hidden everywhere, waiting to bring disease and death. While, thanks to Maoist insurgents, Marx

entered the local repertoire, it is still easier to make the audience smile with Indian stories. Thus the language of politics remains impregnated with the Hindu culture, maybe more so than the general language itself.

If common people like a good folksy and non-controversial sense of humor, anger, and vulgarity are badly looked upon. Nowadays, a ruler must meet growing expectations regarding good behavior and good manners. Like the Brahmin *purohit*, a politician now impresses his constituents by his aloofness, uses his words thoughtfully, and shows compunction in a meditative atmosphere. This claim for dignity arose in the 1960s when a new generation of retired British Gurkhas took over from the heavy-handed headmen and *mukhiyas*. Though not all were exemplary, most Gurkhas were taken to discipline under the Union Jack. As their rise to notability went hand in hand with a general demand for self-control, their more polished manners slowly prevailed over a rougher lifestyle. Unlike the puritan Brahmins-Chetris whose words are highly controlled, Rais, Magars, and Dalits talk passionately, knowledgeably, and eloquently about sex. Their curses and swearing, colorful and florid, return obsessively to the female sexual organs (called the “sunflower” in the village) and the tireless virility of the male. But nowadays, exaggerated machismo and locker-room jokes may be embarrassing: at school, teachers try to purge the language of children of their early acquired coarseness; women have undertaken to discipline their father, brothers, and husband. In this context, bad manners and dirty words can become a social handicap. A former mayor at the time of the Panchayat, the most frank and honest man, plagued by a crude language he could not be cured of, was consistently blackballed: still appreciated for his rightness (villagers call on him to give private arbitrations), he does not fit the demanding image of a local official of today.

To become and remain a ruler, the local notable, now a politician, should be a slick and smart seducer, sometimes a deceiver. Though he is supposed to speak on everyone’s behalf, the local leader of the 2010s targets specific publics and specific communities. No occasion is lost to show that he commands all the local languages and their variants: Rai leaders will speak Chamling with their clan brothers, but they will surprisingly master the most complicated and archaic forms of the Nepali language when they speak with a Brahmin pundit, simply to imply they are in no way inferior. Today, the best candidate for an election should permanently adjust his language. He knows that, like the *purohit* or the shaman with their clientele, he is trapped in client relationships that work both ways: dependents who humbly beg the ruler can dismiss him when he no longer satisfies their needs, as they do with the “religious specialists” they consult. When retaining public favor in an increasingly competitive society is the ultimate goal, there is no single elitist way of speaking, but definitively an opportunistic way (if not a populist one) to switch from one language to another in order to stay on the right side of the listener. Henceforth in highly politicized village society, the leaders of today suit their language to their audiences, their clients, and their voters.

Conclusion

Can speech be regarded as a major instrument of political power? Bourdieu noted (1991:72): “The linguistic relation of power is never defined solely by the linguistic competences

present. And the relation between the weight of the different agents depends on their symbolic capital, that is, on the recognition, institutionalized or not, that they receive from a group.” In a rather unsophisticated village society where civility matters more than urbanity, the quality of speech matters less than the position of the speaker, hence the extreme attention paid to a protocol that governs both formulae of address and the gestures of respect. Thus, language tends to reflect rather passively the balance of power between communities, between castes, between age groups, men and women, between rich and poor farmers, between “big men” and dependents. However, the nature of the authority exercised by local rulers has dramatically changed since the Democratic Revolution of 1990: they are now engaged in a permanent competition arbitrated by the voters who, at least in Khotang, are not likely to elect the same team that disappointed them twice. Moreover, the Maobadis terrorized and ridiculed the notables who did not seek safety in the cities of the plain. Since the language of authority is now the language of an increasingly weak local leadership, it adapts to the changing circumstances and to the various circles. It expresses less than before the position of strength of a traditional leader but instead the necessity for the speaker to seduce and to convince the listener.

While authoritative speech is adjusting to the gradual changes affecting hierarchies in the village, the language spoken by ordinary villagers is also changing. Since education among the masses has spread everywhere, the standard Nepali spoken by the Brahmins-Chetris of Kathmandu now competes with the many variants of the creolized Nepali specific to each village. This process cannot be dissociated from the rise of the teaching profession. Since the 1990s, the language of power has gradually shifted from traditional notables and retired Gurkhas to teachers who strive to impose the language they master. This language, school-level Nepali, cannot be dissociated with the ideals they carry: belief in the progress of the human mind, modernism, and now republicanism. The standardization of Nepali, associated with a demand for grammatical, social, and moral correctness and the dissemination of the new values go hand in hand. However, the prestige recently gained by the teaching profession is already being challenged by expatriates. These *nouveaux riches* pride themselves on having neglected higher studies. For parents who decide to send their sons abroad from the age of sixteen, the command of school-level Nepali has definitely little value, at least less than a good practice of English. That puts in perspective, at least for the future, the success of standard Nepali, which should not be overemphasized. Furthermore, it should be underlined that since 2000, following rural electrification, eastern Nepal has moved on from the pre-Gutenberg era to the computer age: the oral language of young people is now fashioned by radio, and the written language by the Internet, more than by teachers.

While the school-level Nepali language is gradually becoming the natural vector of political speech, it coexists with “new sectarian languages.” As I underlined in previous studies, religious sects, heterodox Hindu cults, and even Christian converts are now gaining ground in the mountain villages in eastern Nepal. They share with the Maoists a propensity to forge a common language that is incantatory, repetitive, and obscure. At the margins of the village life, these sectarian authoritative speeches provide an outlet for villagers whose self-expression is still held in check: they allow Dalits, women, the jobless, and all kinds of dropouts or people of lower status, to speak authoritatively, at least in their inner circle. These marginal languages for

marginalized groups bloom and decline. Their vitality, which should not be underestimated, reflects the complexity of a very unstable society.

When I started this study, I underlined the basic conformism of village society which imposes on everyone its codes of linguistic civility, while remaining indifferent to correction, and more generally to the “art of speaking well” which has developed in urban areas. I now emphasize a new phenomenon that gradually appeared with the democratization in the 1990s and accelerated with the Maoist regime of the last decade. Today three registers coexist: village Nepali with its idiomatic expressions spoken in familial and local circles; mainstream Nepali, reserved for inter-caste conversation; and finally, chosen languages, each corresponding to specific identities, some religious and traditional such as the the Rais’ *muddhum* and the Brahmins’ Sanskrit, others, particularly in political and social fields, ephemeral and transitory. Codes of civility are in greater flux now more than before. These linguistic uncertainties go hand in hand with the need to find a new balance between castes, genders, social groups, and the slow and painful emergence of individualism in a still rigid communitarian society.

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