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Review: Aspects of Nepali Grammar

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Again, this does not mean that morphological generation in natural languages really is that hard. In all likelihood, natural languages avoid the complexity either by hitherto unrecognized constraints, or by historical changes (i.e. lexicalization) that result in simplifications.

The papers were printed directly from copy provided by the authors, which results in a variety of typefaces. Given the quality of typesetting now available, this is less of a problem than it was several years ago. (A few authors do succumb to the mathematician's temptation of using unusual symbols where more pedestrian ones would suffice.) Typographic errors appear to be few; three references to example (12) on page 104 should refer to example (14). Occasional non-native English creeps in but not objectionably so.

REFERENCES


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This book has nearly all the characteristics of good research: a good overview of the work, minimal use of elicited data for illustrative examples (and a recognition of the problems inherent in elicited material), reliance on natural data, and a perspective that is relatively theory neutral. It is a good introduction to some current issues in the study and interpretation of the grammatical facts of the major Indo-Aryan language of Nepal. It is noteworthy because of its data-driven and data-oriented discussion.

One feature that I particularly like is that the nine interlinearized texts in the final 81 pages are available on cassette tape (for $3.00), so the interested researcher may peruse the material to confirm conclusions reached by the article writers, as well as proceed in other directions of research. If the texts are truly oral (not read from a written text) and well recorded, they will be a valuable resource for Indo-Aryan and Nepali scholars.

The book begins with a good introduction by the editor (Genetti) and an easy-to-follow grammar sketch. In the introduction, 24 of 58 illustrative examples are from conversations or stories, and the transcriptions are easy to understand. Genetti explains that the book is composed of four papers and a collection of narratives written by graduate students during the Field Methods course at UCSB in the 1992-1993 academic year. Data is mostly from one native speaker.

Genetti ends her introduction with Nepali’s typological characteristics and an appendix of references for Nepali linguistics. The theoretical orientation of the editor and graduate students is functional/typological because ‘... the ultimate goal of linguistics is to understand the relationship between linguistic constructions and their communicative functions in natural language’ (p. 2). Consequently the writers depend, for the most part, upon ‘natural’ data from conversation and stories. As Genetti says, such an approach lends itself to more exact insight into language universals.

The first article concerns the Dative Subject Construction (DSC), and tries to clarify its function relative to previous research. Out of 82 examples, 22 are from unelicited material—the author mentions how word order changes
according to whether or not the sentences are elicited. The study is an interesting investigation of subjecthood and topic as they relate to DSCs.

The second article is a study of passive formation which the author considers to have been misconstrued by earlier researchers. The author shows that the construction is really a marker for Agent, and aptly points out and illustrates that there is a difference between Subject and Agent in Nepali. Although the importance of ‘natural’ data is mentioned, the author does not say whether her 33 examples are elicited or not.

The third article pertains to a controversial compound word that has been interpreted as a verb derived from a noun (i.e., N + garu-nu ‘to do/make’). The author explains and illustrates well that the construction is not an example of noun plus verb compounding but is syntactic where the noun shows characteristics of objecthood. There are 38 examples—all of which are not specified according to their ‘naturalness’.

The fourth article shows that verbal suffixes daa and day are not free variants of a participial morpheme as some researchers have claimed, but each exhibit characteristics different from the other, as well as some that overlap. The author discusses, as do others, the consequences of relying on elicited data to the exclusion of data from conversation and texts, which can lead to skewed conclusions. Of the 40 examples, 25 are elicited.

In the last section of the book, one of the stories (p. 208) is divided into intonation units (IU) following DuBois (in ‘Discourse Transcription’ in vol. 4 of the Santa Barbara Papers in Linguistics 1992), thereby better representing the natural sectioning of the text.

In my opinion, this book illustrates what field linguists ought to be about: sticking to data that is as naturally occurring as possible, thereby laying a basis for more realistic theory building and faithful translation that reflects actual language facts. Such works as these promote a deeper understanding of the world’s languages and cannot but help us be better linguists if by nothing else than just following their example.

It is a good introduction to Nepali and provides an avenue for verification of results presented and for further research. I’ve not often seen such scholarly vulnerability. Its awareness of the dangers of elicited material is one that all field linguists should possess. This, I believe, is its chief contribution.

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