

## **Changing identity and linguistic practices in Nubri: Veiled language endangerment in the Nepalese Tibetosphere**

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### **Abstract**

This paper introduces the Nubri valley—the people, the place, the language—presenting results from a recent sociolinguistic survey that establishes internal variation as well as external pressures on the language. As a community of ethnic Tibetans in Nepal, crossing the border has slowly resulted in a shift of focus towards Kathmandu in many ways. Changing attitudes and evolving social practices are resulting in a marked shift in language use in the younger generations. Superficially, the Nubri language appears quite vital within the valley. However, I show how an examination of different borders in the sociolinguistic landscape helps us arrive at a much clearer understanding of the actual linguistic vitality, revealing a serious threat to its continued survival.

### **Keywords**

Nubri, sociolinguistics, language attitudes, linguistic practices, language vitality, language endangerment, Tibeto-Burman, Nepal

### **Bio**

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## Tibetic languages in Nepal

Nepal, situated between the Tibet Autonomous Region of China and India, is home to ~29 million people and more than 120 languages. Most of the original languages of Nepal belong to the Indo-Aryan group of Indo-European languages, including the national language, Nepali. The majority of people (>80%) are speakers of an Indo-Aryan language, but the greatest diversity is found in the Sino-Tibetan languages, spoken by ~17% of the population, though constituting over half the languages represented in the last census (and there are potentially more that are as yet undescribed). The remaining <1% population use Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, sign languages, or language isolates (or did not participate in the 2011 census) (Central Bureau of Statistics, Nepal, 2012; Grimes, 1992; Bradley, 1997; Genetti, 2004).

The >60 Tibeto-Burman languages found in Nepal are typically spoken outside of urban centers. Some major groups that are found in Nepal include Tibetic, Magaric, Tamangic, Newar, Kiranti as well as other smaller groups such as Raji-Raute, Chepangic, Baram-Thami, Kuke (e.g. Hale, 1982; DeLancey, 1987; Matisoff, 1991; van Driem, 2001). The Tibetic languages within Nepal are spoken by communities situated in the mountainous regions along the ~1400km northern border with Tibet that runs through the Himalayas (See Figure 7.1). This region is home to eight of the ten tallest peaks in the world, where the deep valley floors may be at altitudes >4000m, in a landscape scored by gorges and rivers, clearly delineating regions and hindering easy movement. The difficulty of the terrain and largely subsistence farming lifestyle have minimized movement from these valleys, possibly enabling a great degree of linguistic diversity to remain until the present time. Indeed, such diversity is refreshing, given that it is estimated that worldwide a language is lost every few months (e.g. Krauss, 1992; Campbell & Belew, 2018).

[INSERT FIGURE 7.1 HERE]

Figure 7.1. Location of Tibetic languages in Nepal, showing Nubri. Kathmandu marked with star.<sup>1</sup>

The Tibetic language communities are typically Buddhist, and identify strongly as ethnically Tibetan, resulting in a complex of interactions in their identity (for a more detailed study of related phenomena in Sikkim, see Lepcha, this volume). Tibetan remains the liturgical language and is featured in important festivals and rites. Like so many aspects of this complex cultural terrain, Tibetan ethnic identity creates a sense of shared heritage and community from within, but is also a source of discrimination from without, where they are labelled as *Bhotiya* (Tibetans), a term that has come to refer to

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<sup>1</sup> Figure adapted from the map by Noahhoward licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>)

a range of culturally diverse groups of Tibeto-Burman origin, many with very little connection to Tibet (Ramble, 1997; Roche, this volume). The term carries with it very negative connotations (e.g. Höfer, 1979; Samuels, 2018) and has resulted in many groups distancing themselves from Tibet to try to overcome this prejudice.

Another significant border found throughout these communities is a generational one, where expressions of culture such as wearing traditional clothing, listening to traditional music, following traditional subsistence farming practices, cooking, etc. define the older generation's lifestyle. The younger generation meanwhile is exposed to aspects of a modern Nepalese world through time spent in schools outside the valley, especially in Kathmandu, and through online access to contemporary culture from around the globe through increasingly available smartphones. For this generation, the overt expressions of culture are heart-warming, creating a sense of self-understanding and belonging, but at some level they also represent historical ties to a life of hardship and chance, of stagnation and lost opportunities, of forever remaining an outsider, a *Bhotiya*. As the interest in educating children beyond primary grows, many children must relocate to Nepali-speaking areas, resulting in a growing cultural and linguistic disconnect between generations as many of the youth of these small communities experience a rapid shift in language. Evolving identities necessarily result in evolving linguistic practices, rendering these local varieties 'definitely endangered'. This is a situation only too familiar in Nubri. With just ~2000 people (Simons & Fennig, 2018) the language is definitely endangered, its current usage perhaps the result of its relative isolation having delayed the process of language shift until more recently than in other, less remote areas. How can we identify and understand this language endangerment? We will see that by examining the complex sociolinguistic situation in terms of the language's many borders we can reach a much more enlightened understanding of the evolving linguistic landscape.

## Nubri Valley

Nubri Valley lies in the Manaslu Conservation Area in the upper Gorkha district, northern Central Nepal near the border with Tibet. The journey to the valley from Kathmandu is long and arduous, comprising a day of driving, after which the journey must continue on foot.<sup>2</sup> 3-4 days of walking and an elevation gain of ~2000 m will bring you to the lower Nubri valley, after which it is another 2-3 days walking, gaining another 2000 m to reach the end of the valley. To the West, the continuation of the journey towards the Annapurna Conservation Area means crossing the *Larke La*, a 25 km walk through permafrost starting at >4000 m and ending at >3500 m, reaching heights >5160m along the way. To the north lies the current border to Tibet through the similarly high *Lajyang Bhanjyang/Rui La* mountain pass, but this is only open for petty trade within 30km of the border on a barter system for two weeks every year.

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<sup>2</sup> It is now possible to fly by helicopter, but at ~USD 2000 one-way this is prohibitively expensive for most.

The Nubri people, or *Nubripa*, are said to have crossed over the border from Tibet about 400 years ago to settle this *beyul* or ‘hidden valley’ near the base of the protector deity, the world’s eighth tallest peak, Mt Manaslu, known as *Pungyen* (lit. ‘Ornamented Heap’, Childs 2004). The remote location of this community has meant that Nubri has remained relatively free of external influences, and perhaps explains how about a quarter of the population are still monolingual, and Nubri is still the primary means of communication in the valley. However, Nubri evolved significantly from the variety of Tibetan from which it descended, in large part due to the evolving geopolitical borders. Significant among these is the conquest of the Gorkha kingdom in the eighteenth century resulting in the inclusion of Nubri within Nepal. This resulted in the start of a reorientation away from Tibetan roots and towards Nepal as a key part of their national identity. A striking piece of evidence of this comes from the word *Nubri* itself. It is cognate with Tibetan, from ལུཔ *nup* + རི *ri* or ‘west’ + ‘hill’ as the valley’s location is to the far SW from Lhasa. However, as the Nubris align themselves more with the nation state of Nepal, *nup* has undergone a semantic shift to now mean ‘north’ reflecting that they are now redefining their identity and sense of place as belonging to Nepal.

A second key historical moment in defining new borders for Nubri Valley was the annexation of Tibet and the establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region in China. During this period (~1961) another group migrated to Samdo village from Kyirong in Tibet. While ethnically Tibetan, and contemporarily labelled as Nubris, this group is known to speak a variety that is much closer to Kyirong Tibetan, and which is quite different from Nubri as I discuss in the next section (see also Suzuki, this volume, for a discussion on the intricacies of ethnic and language labeling).

## Language within Nubri Valley

The languages spoken around Nubri Valley are shown in the maps given in Figure 7.2. Figure 7.2a illustrates how people from Nubri Valley consider themselves a single ethnic group, with the inclusion of Kuke speakers to the South and the Samdo villagers in the North. Linguistically, however, the languages bordering Tibet: Nubri, Samdo, and Tsum spoken in the neighboring Valley to the East are all related Tibetic languages, while Kuke is part of a different Tibeto-Burman group altogether (with Ghale, to the south).

[INSERT FIGURE 7.2 HERE]

Figure 7.2. Ethnic identity (left) and linguistic affiliation (right) in the Nubri region.

Given the isolation and the fact that they are unwritten, undescribed languages, the linguistic subgroupings are typically based on little data, relying heavily on short wordlists (e.g. Webster, 1992; Hildebrandt & Perry, 2011). For the most part, these subgroupings are not unjustified. Most of the Tibetic shibboleths are attested in Samdo-Nubri and not in Kuke-Ghale which belong to the Tamangic subgroup. Nubri attests linguistic features expected to be shared by members of the subgroup, such as a reflex

of Tibetan ཁྱེད *khyod* for ‘thou’ (Nubri: *khyo*) and ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་ *kho* for ‘he’ (Nubri: *kho*) in the modern language<sup>3</sup>. Further, the typical Tamangic case markers found in Ghale, Gurung, and Tamang are not found in Nubri whose morphological cases are clearly coming from Tibetan, with forms such as གིས་/ཡིས་ *-gis/-yis* to mark transitive subjects or possession, and ལ་ *-la* as a marker of location. As a relatively unknown linguistic area, there was much uncertainty about the linguistic composition in the valley until very recently. The linguistic situation in Nubri valley is described in the next section, in some sense showing even more, internal, borders within the valley further subdividing the Nubri identity.

A recent sociolinguistic survey of Nubri Valley shed light on the language situation and linguistic practices in the region (Donohue, 2019). The study was carried out in six villages throughout the valley and is based on participation in a survey that was conducted through a question/response as well as open-ended interview format in Nubri language. One of the main results from the study is that while Nubri Valley, the physical space, defined inclusion in the self-reference as a *Nubri* or ‘Nubri (person)’, this did not extend to the use of Nubri language. The region where Nubri is spoken extends from Samagaun in upper Nubri, down to Namrung and Prok in lower Nubri, as shown in Figure 7.3.

[INSERT FIGURE 7.3 HERE]

Figure 7.3. Areas of Nubri Valley where Nubri is spoken.

In Kutang at the southeastern edge of lower Nubri, which centers on Bi village, a different Tibeto-Burman language, Kuke, is spoken. In the far North in Samdo village, as noted, a variety much closer to Kyirong Tibetan is spoken. The study establishes that there are three main dialects of Nubri spoken in the valley, with the loci being Sama village in the North/West (Upper Nubri), Prok village in the South/East (Lower Nubri) and Lho village, the largest of the central villages, defining the locus of the third variety. This division is indicated on the map in Figure 7.4.

[INSERT FIGURE 7.4 HERE]

Figure 7.4. Languages spoken in Nubri: Samdo (Kyirong) is spoken in the north near the border to Tibet; Sama, Lho, and Prok varieties of Nubri are spoken within the valley, Kuke predominates in the Kutang area.

The Kuke speakers are relatively few, so many have a passing knowledge of Nubri for communicating with neighboring villages.

### **Bordering varieties: Negotiating linguistic interactions**

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<sup>3</sup> By ‘Tibetan’ I refer here to standard written Tibetan.

With just a couple of thousand speakers, it is perhaps surprising that there are three distinct varieties in a relatively small area (as the crow flies). But considering the difficulty of the terrain, the lack of transport, and the dependence on subsistence agriculture, it is less surprising that different norms have emerged, especially considering the unique contact situations at each point in the valley. Understanding how Nubris negotiate these ‘cross-border’ interactions is quite revealing of the current linguistic situation in the valley, highlighting the critical role of the speakers’ (relative) perceptions of prestige in learning and using different varieties and how this impacts language practices.

### *Prestige and intelligibility and linguistic accommodation*

Tibetan (or Chöke ཆོ་ཀེ, sometimes referred to as clerical Classical Tibetan) is the liturgical language, and thus retains a high prestige status throughout the Nubri speaking areas, while Nepali has a middling prestige. Perhaps due to its small number of speakers (and their relative poverty) Kuke is uniformly perceived as a language with low prestige, both from within as well as without. Within the Nubri varieties, Sama dialect speakers perceive their variety as having high prestige, though this is a view not shared by anyone else. The effect this has on negotiating linguistic interactions is discussed later. Conversely, no other villages perceive their own varieties as having particularly ‘high prestige’, but from outside villagers, Lho variety was perceived as the most prestigious in the valley. From within, both Prok and Lho villagers perceived their own varieties as having ‘middling prestige’, but from outside, Prok variety is viewed as low prestige. This sits with another asymmetry discussed later that while Prok identifies with the Lho variety, speakers from Lho claim that they do not speak exactly the same in Prok village. These results are summarized in Table 7.1 and represented graphically in Figure 7.5 (adapted from Donohue, 2019).

Language	Self-perception	Others’ perception
<b>Samdo/Kyirong</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>Sama/Nubri</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Middle</b>
Lho/Nubri	Middle	High
Prok/Nubri	Middle	Low
<b>Kuke</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Low</b>
Tibetan		High
Nepali		Middle

Table 7.1. *Perceived prestige of different varieties spoken in Nubri Valley.* (Note: Tibetan refers to Chöke as noted above).

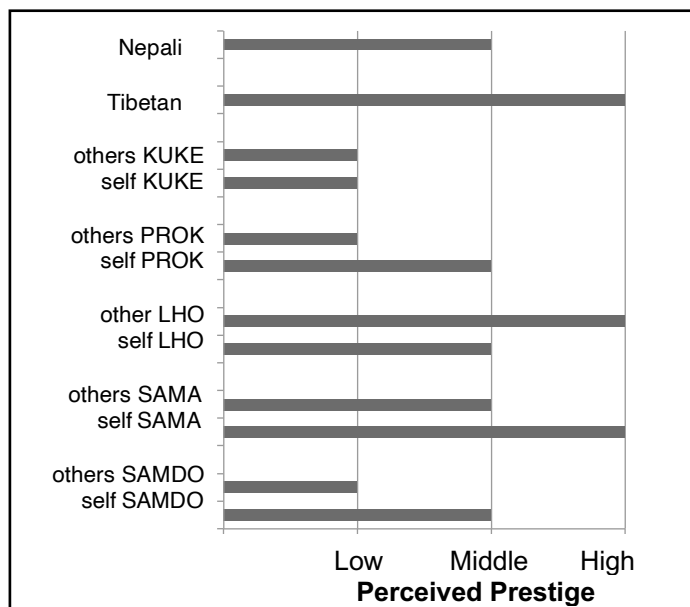


Figure 7.5. Bar chart of perceived prestige of different varieties spoken in Nubri Valley.

Given the differences in perception of prestige, there are obviously significant differences in the dialects and thus in how mutually intelligible the varieties are. As shown in Table 7.2 and Figure 7.6, Lho villagers basically understand Prok Nubri, but only about two-thirds of what Sama Nubri speakers are saying. While all Nubris understand the Lho variety well. This is perhaps due to its central location, increasing the chance of exposure to all varieties while moving through the valley, and its situation making it easier to travel to both ends of the valley. The Sama variety is only understood about two-thirds of the time by Lho villagers, but even less by those from Prok. Indeed, at only a reported 58% intelligibility rate for Prok villagers listening to Sama Nubri, it raises the question of whether they are indeed different dialects or different languages.

Listener	Speaker		
	Sama	Lho	Prok
Sama	100%	93%	89%
Lho	67%	100%	95%
Prok	58%	100%	100%

Table 7.2. *Reported intelligibility between Nubri varieties.*

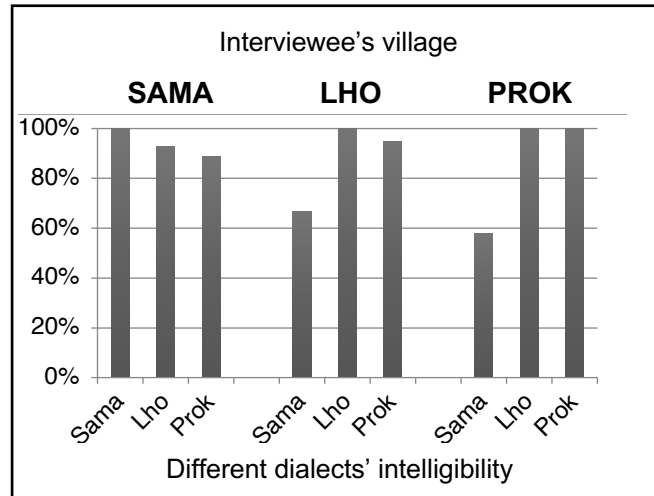


Figure 7.6. Bar chart of reported intelligibility (in %, y-axis) for each Nubri variety (as shown on the x-axis) by speakers from the different villages (indicated by the label of each cluster along the top).

The Sama people claim to understand Prok variety at a much higher rate. This is explained to some extent by the language choices made for communicating with different speakers (Table 7.3). Note the use of Tibetan here and below refers to spoken varieties derived from the written standard (such as Chöke) that people (mostly monks or those who attended monastic schools) have learned.

Speaker's village	Interlocutor's village:				
	Samdo	Sama	Lho	Prok	Kuke
Samdo	Samdo	Sama	Tibetan	Tibetan/ Nepali	Tibetan/ Nepali
Sama	Sama	Sama	Sama/ Tibetan	Sama	Sama/ Nepali
Lho	Tibetan/ Sama	Sama	Lho	Lho	Lho/ Nepali
Prok	Tibetan/ Sama	Sama	Lho	Prok	Prok/ Nepali
Kuke	Tibetan	Prok	Prok	Prok	Kuke

Table 7.3. *Preferred language of communication in Nubri.*



Table 7.3 shows that nearly everyone speaks Sama Nubri with people from Sama, and people from Sama speak their own variety with Nubris across the valley. This unwillingness to accommodate fits with the sense of high prestige the Sama villagers have of their variety, and the knowledge from the outside that the Sama people are (perhaps consequently) not very proficient in other varieties.

The villagers from Samdo, aside from accommodating to Sama Nubri with nearby Sama villagers, will speak Tibetan outside their home village (or Nepali, if proficient, further afield in lower Nubri/Kutang). Similarly, those from outside Samdo will use either Tibetan or Sama Nubri to talk to the Samdo villagers.

The Lho villagers use Tibetan or Sama Nubri to talk to the Samdo/Sama villagers North of them, but Lho variety throughout the rest of the valley. This language choice is reciprocated by others around the valley in interactions.

Prok villagers similarly speak Tibetan or Sama Nubri with Samdo/Sama villagers, and Prok variety with their own villagers and in Kutang. This is also true of how others perceive their interactions with the Prok villagers.

The Kuke villages in Kutang speak Tibetan with those from Samdo, Prok Nubri throughout the rest of the Nubri speaking part of the valley, and Kuke in the Kuke-speaking villages in Kutang. Other villagers from outside the Kuke speaking area will speak their own variety of Nubri or Nepali with Kuke speakers.

These data reflect the perceptions of prestige and explain the perceived degrees of intelligibility. Recall that the Sama villagers, believing themselves to speak the most prestigious variety, typically choose to interact with other Nubris from around the valley in Sama dialect, so it is perhaps not surprising that they have a greater sense of mutual intelligibility, or that the results appear one-sided, because the communicative situations *are* one-sided. Let us turn now to the question of how these sociolinguistic data bear on the issue of Nubri's ongoing linguistic vitality and the role of borders in reaching a clearer understanding of this.

### **Nubri's evolving identity**

Against this complex backdrop of linguistic distinctions within Nubri, there are also many external influences on the language. Nubri has faced many challenges, necessarily resulting in a changing state of affairs.

In large part, Nubri's remote location has meant it is relatively overlooked from the modern Nepalese Central Government, with little economic incentive due to the decreased opportunity to trade with China to the North and the limited access to the valley. Furthermore, Nubri has a small population and engages more with Buddhist institutions than with national ones. Economically, Nubri is largely limited to subsistence agriculture, with seasonal cordyceps or *yarsagumba* (Tibetan དབྱར་རྩ་དུལ་ན་འབྱ རྩ་དུལ་ན་འབྱ *yartsa gunbu*; Nepali यासर्गुम्बा *yarsha gumba*) collection in the upper valley (>3500 m) and seasonal tourism in the form of trekkers. Furthermore, Nubri was heavily affected by the 2015 earthquakes: trails were destroyed, nascent micro-hydro systems were lost,

trekking income disappeared. It is estimated that ~80% of housing and temples were destroyed (fortunately, with little loss of life).

In the absence of institutional attention from Kathmandu, the Nubris have continued development on their own. There is a large Nubri community in Western Kathmandu. Originally this was a landing site for children who left the valley for schooling, but many are now year-round residents. Economic activity in the valley is largely driven by the Nubris outside the valley, not by those resident in Nubri Valley.

### *Border creation: Evolving social practices, linguistic influences*

The strongest influences now come from Kathmandu and can be observed in many spheres. Linguistically, there is an increase in a shift to the casual use of Nepali by younger people, even between Nubris. As the Manaslu Circuit gains popularity as a trekking route, there is an increase in Nepali as the (mandatory) guides typically organized in Kathmandu or through a trekking agency are often from outside the area. Health workers and government primary school teachers stationed in Nubri are often from outside the valley and speakers of Nepali, forcing a growing accommodation in the community. Dietarily there is now a higher consumption of rice, though traditional staples (potatoes, and grain-based pasta such as *dhindo* or *sen* (Nepali *ढिँडो* *dhido*, Tibetan *ཟན་གང* *sengong*)) still dominate the local diet. Among the younger Nubris, there is an increased participation in popular culture (music, movies, television series, dress) through the smart phones and solar-powered cellular tower. These links to the ‘outside world’ with a focus shifting towards Kathmandu are likely responsible for the changes that we see: a greater uptake of Nepali (at least in some domains) even by those who do not spend much time outside the valley, and the decline in traditional dress and cultural practices among the younger Nubris. What is clear is that proficiency in Nepali increases with proximity to the South (easier access to Nepali speakers), as indicated in Figure 7.7.

[INSERT FIGURE 7.7 HERE]

Figure 7.7. Nepali exerting a greater influence in southern Nubri

Tibetan remains the second language for the older, non-monolingual Nubris. Its evolving sphere of influence remains strongest in the North where it is spoken by nearest neighbours, where trade across the border (or even across the *Larke La* pass into Manang, where varieties of Tibetan are spoken) are still a regular part of life. There are two prominent monasteries, which operate in Tibetan, and it is much harder to exit the valley from the north. The influence of Tibetan dwindles the further South in the valley (see Figure 7.8). This creates a situation where the second language for Nubris will vary: it is typically Tibetan in upper Nubri and Nepali in lower Nubri, a difference often reflected in the choice of medium of instruction of the chosen school for those sent outside the valley for post-primary education.

[INSERT FIGURE 7.8 HERE]

Figure 7.8. The influence of Tibetan is strongest in upper Nubri.

In sum, there are competing forces at play in the ongoing shaping of language choices in Nubri. Tibetan remains the language of Buddhism, of the education and training that the young monks receive and of formal rituals carried out in the valley. Nubri people are usually devoutly Buddhist and Tibetan is the liturgical language. However, closer to lower Nubri, there is a much greater pull towards Nepali. This is in part due to geography: it is simply a lot easier to exit the valley from the South, and there is much more contact with neighboring communities that speak Ghale/Gurung and/or Nepali.

However, this shift towards Nepali transcends geographic boundaries. The youth tendencies align with the South: their focus is much more on Nepal and Kathmandu. To the youth who have lived and attended school in Kathmandu, there is the lure of an easier, more prosperous life and Nepali represents the key to much greater socioeconomic opportunity. It is also symbolic of modernity and popular culture, of urbanity in contrast to the difficult, rural, subsistence farming life, largely devoid of the modern conveniences like running water and electricity found in the city. This shift is fueled by the speakers' evolving identities and serves to highlight the growing divide demarcating borders between young and old, near and far, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, modern and traditional, contemporary and historical, wealthy and poor.

## **Conclusion: Making and marking languages**

The strong ethnic identity coupled with the strong pressures to shift result in evolving language ecologies. There are many borders and juxtapositions relevant for a much clearer understanding of the contemporary linguistic situation in Nubri and which go a long way toward explaining the shifting language practices. There are obvious geopolitical borders between Nepal and China, but other geographical pulls such as being remote or more central, (in the eyes of Nepal, as it has impacted Nubri, or the eyes of the youth, and where they want to be), and the urban/rural, modern/traditional, and wealthy/poor oppositions that this brings with it.

The situation of the Nubri people is not so different from many other Tibetic people in Nepal (e.g. Syuba, see Gawne et al., 2020). However, one way in which it differs is that, unlike many other places, roads and other infrastructural developments have not yet been extended into Nubri valley, or even to the start of the valley. Once the near/far border has been softened through road access, language (and identity) shift follows quickly. For Nubri, the location and difficulty of the terrain, coupled with its low socioeconomic profile, has thus far prevented this from happening.

Among the ethnic Tibetans in China we see a very different story. With greater access to education and being a more literate population, standard Tibetan, that more closely approximates the writing system, is replacing the minority Tibetan varieties and even then is still competing with Mandarin (see chapters by Roche, and Ward, this volume). This different tale does however have a similar ending with the loss of language vitality through language shift.

Language is a vehicle for constructing one's social identity, so it is not surprising that the younger generations are shifting towards varieties that represent a much more alluring lifestyle than the traditional, rural (and difficult) lives of the older generations. In China, this typically results in a shift to Mandarin; for the Nubris this leads to a shift to Nepali.

Nubri is currently only a spoken language, so there is no competition with a written standard, but the lack of a writing system also comes with a greater risk of imminent loss. Perhaps this highlights some of the final borders shaping this complex linguistic ecology: that of the written/spoken divide, a border recognized in largely literate communities (e.g. Schmidt, this volume), but relevant now as the educated/uneducated divide deepens. Many borders have conspired to create this veiled language endangerment. Indeed, identifying and understanding different borders, and their dynamics and interactions, go a long way towards recognizing the key linguistic ecology of Nubri: how the language still exists, how there are monolingual speakers, how it is used as a result of its internal politics in the backdrop of broader cultural and social attitudes, where the key pressure points are on the relatively recent language shift. The complex social, cultural and linguistic factors are best understood as the unique result of border interactions. This is a critical moment in Nubri's linguistic history, as we now see that the outwardly vital language is actually on the brink of disappearing, with the future lying in the hands of the youngest generations.

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