

Collaborations in Language

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This talk focuses on several key partnerships in which I have been engaged over the last two decades, with members of historically marginalized, Indigenous speech communities in the Himalayan region, and increasingly with a global community in print, on air and online.

I have watched as a recent infusion of funding from philanthropic sources and research councils has overhauled historically extractive models of scholarship in linguistics and anthropology. My own work has also transformed as I grapple with the collaborative potential of newer digital tools that permit more transparent research partnerships with Indigenous communities.

While these innovations are celebrated by many, the growth in access to digital recording technology is uneven, and technologies raise complex practical and ethical issues about ownership, origin and access. Initiatives that set out to document, but along the way accidentally conserve may even end up revitalizing endangered languages. Programs and projects are increasingly ‘born digital’ and ‘born archival’, with recordings of natural language uploaded directly from the field to an institutional repository on a university server. But who owns such recordings: the speaker, the researcher or the university into whose archive the sounds and scripts have been saved?

Ensuring that new digitally-mediated partnerships continue to have local relevance and academic integrity as they change requires careful attention and a heightened appreciation of the varied investments that different stakeholders have in the outputs of research.

My presentation explores issues of orality, orthography and representation through the frame of long-term fieldwork in Nepal and India with speakers of Thangmi, a community whose Tibeto–Burman language was effaced from the national record in the states in which it is still spoken. During Nepal’s prolonged political and social transition, the Thangmi language is experiencing a renaissance of visibility and purchase that inspires hope for the coming generation.