

Regional

Some languages in Nepal in danger of disappearing

Nepal is a small country located between China and India. And while it is about the size of Arkansas, Nepal is rich in history and culture, and is home to a variety of languages.

Despite its remoteness, Nepal's richness of languages provided the perfect research environment for a trio of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville faculty. Kristine Hildebrandt, associate professor in the department of English language and literature, Shunfu Hu, professor in the department of geography and Jessica Krim, assistant professor in the department of curriculum and instruction, traveled to Nepal to study its indigenous languages.

For Hildebrandt, her initial interest in language came out of the program she was studying in for her Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of California Santa Barbara, which had a strong emphasis in cross-cultural fieldwork.

"There are over 100 languages spoken in Nepal," she said. "These are distinct languages, plus countless dialects and varieties of those languages. It is a great place to do fieldwork because people are wonderful to work with. They are very accommodating. And I was lucky enough in my graduate program to become involved in a research project that was just beginning there at the time that would bring us to Nepal for that kind of work."

Although a geographer, Hu, who is of Chinese origin, thought he could also make important contributions to this research on linguistics.

"When Dr. Hildebrandt talked to me about studying the languages, especially endangered languages in Nepal, I was interested in linking the speaking of the languages to the geographic context," he said. "My interest is to see how those languages are geographically distributed and also use my research expertise in online mapping to demonstrate these languages to the public."

Hu found that there were many similarities in terms of language and culture between Nepal and China. "The way that people interact with each other, the food they eat, some of the cultures, religions they practice, are all very similar to Southwestern China," he said.

Krim found a strong application between this project and what she does as an educational researcher. "In Nepal, schools are basi-



Photo courtesy of Dr. Kristine Hildebrandt

Dr. Shunfu Hu, Dr. Kristine Hildebrandt, and Dr. Jessica Krim during their recent trip to Nepal.

cally community centers," she explained. "They are the roots of where the language centers are. There is just a large group of people in those areas. So I looked at it from my point of view in order to study the educational system."

In many ways Nepal, despite its size, is a linguistic puzzle. Although Nepali is the official language, almost half of the country does not speak it.

"It is true Nepali is the official language, and it is the language of banking and official business, and to the extent that you see

active schooling going on it is the language of education. However, English is starting to have more a presence in schools as well. Despite that, when you leave the urban centers of Nepal you lose Nepali as a commonly spoken language," explained Hildebrandt.

This diversity of language is in big contrast with countries like the United States, where despite its size, most people speak the same language, and where original languages like those spoken by Native Americans or other colonial languages, including Spanish, are not as dominant.

"That is not the case in most other parts of the world," added Hildebrandt. "In fact, many people in different parts of the world are not just bilingual, but trilingual or they are polyglots. And it's not that big of a deal. It is true even for people who have had no formal education in their lives."

It does help that the languages spoken in Nepal are closely related to each other. So while they are different, the differences are not that dramatic. We find a similar situation in China. Although Mandarin is the most widely spoken Chinese language, it

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

is not the only one by any means. You have Cantonese, but you also have many regional languages. So how does commerce and everyday life get done in such places?

"There are 52 minorities in China itself," said Hu. "The main language everyone uses is Mandarin, but in practice everyone uses their own languages at home. Parents will speak their own languages with their kids. But when the kids go to school they speak Mandarin."

One of the languages of Nepal is Manange, currently spoken by no more than a couple hundred people. How do such languages survive?

"For students to actually learn it they need to be taught in their home language, but in order to survive in the world outside of their home language they need to know Nepali and even English," said Krim. "As an educator I think it is important to learn all of them so that you can function in different societies."

Hildebrandt said that countries like Nepal, with their many languages, pose many interesting questions. Should Nepali replace other languages, or should there be an additive approach, in which Nepali is added to the repertoire of local languages? To what extent can these languages be taught in school if they don't have writing systems? It depends, according to Hildebrandt, on how well prepared schools are.

"How well are the local schools equipped in terms of where the teachers get their training, and how they interact in a local school system to handle a task of bringing in local languages? Is the local school system a functioning system to begin with? We found some issues and gaps in how the school systems function on a day to day level," she said. "And that's even before you try to introduce a new level of pedagogy and curriculum in language teaching."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.