

Ouch! Don't print that!

Political correctness in Gurung lexicography

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*A paper presented at The Asia Lexicography Conference,
Chiangmai, Thailand
24th – 26th May, 2004*

Controversy over certain words included in a recent (May 2003) dictionary of the Gurung language of Nepal, leading to a court case against the editors and all the advisory committee, alerts one to some hazards facing the compiler of dictionaries. This article traces the development of Gurung lexicography and decisions regarding dialect and orthography. It shows that the controversy and litigation arises from a combination of language and culture change over a few decades, together with competition and rivalry within the community.

The publication of a dictionary for a language community is an important recognition of the value of the language – to its own speakers, to the academic community, and to the nation where it is spoken. Different audiences seek different kinds of information in a dictionary and it is difficult for a publisher to meet all expectations. The two major reader expectations of a bilingual (or trilingual) dictionary are the ability to understand and learn words in Gurung, and the desire to preserve Gurung words as spoken in different areas. As part of the language development of Gurung, the dictionary also seeks to represent the current practice and decision of community members on how to write their language.

However the compilation of a dictionary is inevitably a long process, usually taking decades, and neither languages nor community values are static. Words collected at one stage can become 'politically incorrect' and be rejected by the community as impolite or pejorative. Publishers need to be sensitive to community attitudes.

1. SOME GURUNG DICTIONARIES

In 1918, GWP Money, a British Gurkha officer, published a language manual with introduction to Nepali (called Gurkhali), Gurung, and Magar languages. He noted that there was considerable dialect variation in Gurung, with speakers from different areas using quite different words. I suspect he may even have included some Ghale words in his collection of 'Gurung', which would certainly have increased the apparent diversity since Ghale has only about 44% lexical similarity with Gurung (based on the Swadesh 100 word list)!

In the course of my doctoral research, I prepared a mimeographed vocabulary of the Gurung language of Ghachok village in Kaski district (Glover 1972). With collection of further Gurung

lexical data, I worked with my wife and with Deu Bahadur Gurung to prepare a Gurung-Nepali-English dictionary with Nepali-Gurung index. In this Kathmandu publication (Gurung, Glover, & Glover 1976) the Gurung and Nepali words were in Devanagari script and the English glosses in both Devanagari and roman scripts, with the purpose of serving Gurung readers both as a lexical resource and as a pronunciation guide to English – of an Australian variety!

The following year in Canberra, we published a fuller edition of the dictionary, all in roman script except for a reprinting of the Nepali-Gurung index in Devanagari script (Glover, Glover, & Gurung, 1977). This work aimed more at an academic audience and the introductory sections and appendices are all written in English. Both editions of the dictionary still represented the speech of Ghachok village in the western dialect of Gurung.

A prolific author in Gurung lexicography and culture has been Shri Dillijung Tamu (Gurung), from Dharapani VDC in Manang district, the northernmost Gurung-speaking area. His publications include a trilingual dictionary (DJ Gurung 2052 [AD 1995]), in which Gurung words are presented in both Devanagari and roman script. The foreword and preface are both in the Nepali language. Dillijung notes the difficulty of representing ध्वनि (tone, tune) in Devanagari script: तमु भाषामा एउटै शब्दले दशौं अर्थ लाग्न सक्छन्। ('In the Gurung language, one word can carry tens of meanings.') He discusses dialect variation in the Gurung language (citing the well-known examples of 'cap' and 'tomorrow' having variant forms: कुले, मल्कु, मुलु and नागा, पना respectively), but claims that one Gurung person can understand another's speech well. He gives no indication in this work of which area particular words come from, but in the manuscript Dillijung submitted in 2000 to a Gurung cultural society in Kathmandu, Shri Tamu Bauddha Sewa Samiti (TBSS), for publication, he identified the location of some local variants.

Dr Rem Bahadur Gurung has compiled and edited a dictionary (RB Gurung 1998), working with a team of compilers (including Dillijung Tamu) and advisors. The introduction is written both in Nepali and in Gurung, the latter in upper case roman script. The dictionary lists Gurung words in an upper case roman script, using various diacritical marks to distinguish contrasts such as nasalization, stress, aspiration, and length in vowels and retroflexion in consonants. (The qualities of stress and aspiration have been described by others as accent, or high tone, and breathiness, respectively.) In the dictionary listing, the roman Gurung word is followed in parentheses by a Devanagari spelling. The dictionary marks many words with the district of usage (Manang, Kaski, Lamjung, etc).

In 2000, Dillijung Tamu (a native speaker of the northern dialect) and Mrs Deu Maya Tamu (who grew up in the western dialect, and married into the eastern dialect) each submitted dictionary manuscripts to TBSS, requesting publication. TBSS approached me to work with them in producing a dictionary combining the two manuscripts. I agreed, and was able to add also the data from our 1976 dictionary of Ghachok Gurung, and data collected in 1993 in the easternmost Gurung district of Gorkha. My co-editor in the project was Ratna Bahadur Gurung, from Syangja – the southern dialect. The resulting Gurung-Nepali-English dictionary (RB Gurung & Glover 2003) has the preface in Gurung, Nepali, and English, and grammatical introduction in both Nepali and English.

2. DIALECT CONSIDERATIONS

The most detailed study of Gurung dialects is Glover & Landon (1980) based on extensive field work in 1975. The major dialects identified in that work were Eastern (the districts of Lamjung, Gorkha, and Tanahun), Western (Kaski and Parbat), and a less clearly distinguished Southern (Syangja district). To these must be added a Northern dialect spoken in Manang district, north of the main Annapurna range.

Whether or not to include and identify dialectal forms in the dictionary proved somewhat controversial. The leadership of TBSS, some of whom do not speak the Gurung language, argued for one standardized form for each word! But those with a better knowledge of the situation recognise the rich variation in the Gurung language across central Nepal, and some authorities see documentation of this variation as a major purpose of the dictionary (Dr Harka Gurung, personal communication). It must be recognised, though, that detailed and accurate identification of word geography is a mammoth task and certainly is not complete in this publication.

3. CHOICE OF SCRIPT

There is considerable on-going discussion within the Gurung community on how to write their language, and two orthography conferences were sponsored by TBSS in January and March 2002. A major issue discussed there was "What script should be used for writing the Gurung language?" I will list a few options.

3.1 खेमाँ लिपि (khemaa lipi) – a unique Gurung script?

Iman Singh Chemjong (1967) reported the Gurung legend that at the time of creation of the different ethnic groups each group was given a script to use for their language – but the Gurung representative was careless, and lost the script entrusted to him! So, Gurung writers have had to make do with somebody else's script. Thus, the religious texts of the indigenous Gurung officiants (pucu and klebbri) are in an old form of the Gurung language but are written in Devanagari.

In recent times, Bal Narisingh Gurung and Prahlad Gurung (1997) have advocated using खेमाँ लिपि. This 'Khemaa script' is similar to Devanagari, but distinct from it – presumably constructed in an effort to create a uniquely Gurung script for the Gurung language, and rectify the carelessness of the Gurung ancestor. However, inventing and propagating a new script is a major economic undertaking, involving as it does not only the production of literature but the training of teachers for hundreds of thousands of Gurung people. Possessing a script of their own may fulfill a felt need of some Gurung people, but others argue pragmatically for either Devanagari or roman at the present time (see 3.1.3 and 3.1.4 below). They point out that if Khemaa lipi becomes well-developed and established it will be possible to transfer materials to that script at a later date.

3.2 Tibetan script?

Because Gurung is linguistically close to Tibetan, and because of the cultural and religious links with Tibet, there have been suggestions of adapting the Tibetan script for Gurung. The

Tibetan script is seen as most appropriate for Gurung by some who have studied in monasteries in Tibet.

Certainly the use of Tibetan script is the preference of many language groups in the northern border regions in Nepal, but the question then arises of whether to use simply Tibetan letters to represent vernacular sounds, or to use the very complicated Tibetan spelling conventions for writing vernacular words that are recognised as cognate with Tibetan.

In addition to this controversy on how to write other languages in Tibetan script, there is the problem that only a very small percentage of Gurung people are literate in Tibetan. So the educational and economic challenge of introducing Tibetan script for Gurung would be almost as great as for a new unique Gurung script.

3.3 Devanagari script?

In discussion at an orthography workshop held 19-21 November 2001 at the National Resource Centre for Non-Formal Education in Kathmandu, the Gurung participants noted that the use of Devanagari script for Gurung has the following clear advantages:

1. Transfer to reading Gurung will be easy for the many Gurung people already literate in Nepali.
2. It will be compatible and cohesive with Nepal's national education system. The curriculum development authority of His Majesty's Government is reported to approve textbook development for minority languages of Nepal only in either their own unique script (e.g. Limbu), or else in the national script of Nepal, Devanagari (DJ Gurung, personal communication). Thus, there has been a delay in the publication of textbooks prepared in roman script by the Gurung committee.
3. If Gurung is written in Devanagari script, Gurung literature is more easily accessible to any educated person in Nepal.

The group noted also a disadvantage of Devanagari script, in that it is not really acceptable to add new diacritics or additional symbols. Hence Devanagari is inadequate for marking tone distinctions. (For the same reason it is also inadequate for representing additional vowels or consonants in some other languages of Nepal, but that is not a problem for writing Gurung.)

3.4 Roman script?

Rem Bahadur Gurung lists five reasons for preferring roman script (1998:iii, xiii), with some comments from TBSS leaders in support added here in brackets:

1. Gurkhas, (that is, men who have served with the British and Indian military forces) return to Nepal knowing roman script well, [and they are very influential members in Gurung society].
2. Nowadays, children in Nepal learn to read and write English in school and so wherever in the world they live they can easily read and write their own language in roman script [convenient for using the Internet and email for Gurung].
3. Since nowadays throughout the world all news, trade, and technology matters use roman script, it will be convenient to use roman script in Gurung trade and education [the use of roman script for Indonesian and Malay is cited in support].
4. In all languages of the world, using roman script is convenient for marking phonetic contrasts in words – some of which are difficult to mark in Devanagari, as noted above.

5. Writing Gurung in roman script can be an example for national development.

To these reasons, leaders in TBSS have added another:

6. If Gurung is written in roman script, Gurung literature is more easily accessible not just to people in Nepal but to international scholars.

3.5 TBSS solution

The TBSS dictionary (2003) uses **both Devanagari and roman script** for Gurung, offering readers the choice of script. It lists the entries in Devanagari with a roman spelling (automatically transliterated) following in parentheses. The entries are arranged strictly by Devanagari alphabetical order. The vast majority of literate Gurung people can read the Devanagari script and either already know how to read roman or desire to learn it. To use any other script, such as Tibetan or Khemaa, would impose a great learning challenge for all except a very few.

4. TROUBLE LOOMING!

Nearly seven months after the publication of the TBSS dictionary on 3 May 2003 I received in India some urgent emails from the very gracious retired British Gurkha officer who, as President of TBSS, had coordinated the dictionary project. Major Bhupal Gurung informed me that certain words in our published dictionary were unacceptable, and that TBSS was planning a recall of the print run and to amend the relevant pages to remove the offending items! When would I be in Kathmandu to advise on the means of doing this? Happily, I was scheduling a visit to Nepal very shortly, but I wondered how this development would affect our Christmas vacation plans!

When I met him in Kathmandu, Major Gurung explained further. A group in Pokhara, a major town 200 Km west of Kathmandu which is the centre of the Gurung area, had stirred up students to protest against the dictionary. There had been articles in the Nepali papers published in Pokhara reporting the disturbances, and the groups had filed a case in the district court against all those 17 people listed in the dictionary as editors or advisers, including of course himself, and Ratna Bahadur and myself as the editors. He advised against our plans to make a visit to some of our Gurung friends in Pokhara! (But when Jessie and I assured him we would keep a low profile and not make a scene in the streets, he relented.)

4.1 The 'caste' problem

Two offending entries were identified, पैमैँ [paeñmaeñ] 'Gurung lower castes' and लेम्मैँ [lemmaeñ] 'clan of Gurungs (of the upper four)'. The protesters asserted that caste differences were not a feature of Gurung society, and that by including these words in our dictionary TBSS was imposing onto a democratic and egalitarian community the offensive, hierarchical caste system of the elite Brahmin society that has always dominated Nepal.

The offence was only in the English glosses, with the words 'upper' and 'lower', and Ratna Bahadur washed his hands of the affair as his responsibility had been for the Nepali glosses (which I have omitted in citing the examples here). I acknowledged that I had taken responsibility for the English glosses.

4.2 Historical change

Everybody familiar with Gurung society knows that there are two endogamous divisions, called ‘four clans’ and ‘sixteen clans’, and that normally marriage between the two divisions is not permitted, but only between clans within one division. Historically, in Gurung villages the ‘four clans’ are regarded as socially superior – hence the designation ‘upper’ – and the two offending entries in the dictionary came from my data collection for the 1976 dictionary of Ghachok Gurung, nearly 30 years ago.

But Major Bhupal Gurung explained to me that the social distinction between the two divisions was economic in origin. Though it still exists in village society, it is nowadays breaking down, as people from the ‘sixteen clans’ find opportunities for economic, educational, and social advancement. He said that ‘four clans’ families are willing to marry their daughters to wealthy men of the ‘sixteen clans’, particularly if they are British Gurkhas – that is, soldiers who serve with the British Army and come back to Nepal with good salary and pension! He told me that he himself is of the ‘sixteen clans’, and cited a number of other Gurung leading figures likewise. I greatly respect his openness and humility in acknowledging this fact.

As well-to-do Gurungs have moved, just in the last generation, from the hardships of village life to settle in towns like Pokhara – or the city of Kathmandu – they do not want to be reminded of the social barriers of village life. Consequently, the objection was raised to the ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ implications in the two offending entries.

Incidentally, both Bhupal and Ratna Bahadur denied knowledge of the word पैमै [paeŋmaeŋ] ‘Gurung lower castes’, but speakers from Ghachok affirm that it is part of their vocabulary. This could be a dialect problem, but I suspect that the word has acquired such negative, pejorative overtones that it is effectively a swear word and these gentlemen living in Kathmandu did not want to acknowledge it, or have erased it from their vocabulary!

4.3 The resolution

TBSS had immediately published an apology in the Pokhara papers in November, but this in fact seemed to stir up the opposition who clearly felt they had TBSS in a weak position. Bhupal explained that the group that was protesting was a rival ethnic society that was always opposing or criticising work that TBSS does, and so the TBSS apology would clearly not be the end of the matter.

The dispute was referred to the Gurung National Council, an umbrella organisation for the various Gurung societies across Nepal. Bhupal asked me and Ratna Bahadur to write personal letters of apology for any offence caused, and we submitted those to the committee of inquiry that the Gurung National Council established into the matter. Happily, we have heard nothing since.

In the letter I wrote I outlined the steps we would take to edit out the offending entries and the offer to reprint the edited pages (four leaves in all) and insert them in the dictionary copies in stock and those that might be returned in a recall.

It was also agreed that a thorough-going revision of the dictionary should be done and a second revised edition produced.

5. LESSONS TO LEARN

Language changes, and language attitudes change! It behoves us in compiling dictionaries of the current speech to be aware of and to respect current attitudes and meanings.

Rather cheekily, I might add that controversy might not be a bad thing, commercially. Only 400 copies of the first edition print run of 2000 had been sold by early December, but Major Gurung was expecting significant sales during the celebrations of the Gurung New Year festival (30 December) – sales perhaps promoted by the controversy!

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