

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.0 Rationale

Language maintenance is by no means a new research topic. However, in the current political climate, it is being recognized as a valuable tool. Displaced people, migrants, and refugees are common features of the world's cities. These people must adapt quickly to their host nations, in order to make a better life for themselves. Adaptation, in many cases, leads to language loss. Although the Hualapai people of Arizona were not immigrants, they found themselves subordinate to a 'host' nation. That is, they were expected to adapt to the U.S. government's requirement for an English-medium education. The Hualapai children were required to attend schools where the language of instruction was English. "When they married, they spoke English to their children. 'Indians' no longer spoke their native languages as their primary means of communication" (Watahomigie and Yamamoto 1992: 10).

As linguists study language maintenance, they can observe factors which lead to language decline. Some factors include political, financial or social motivation to speak the dominant language, encroaching bilingualism, or a young generation that is increasingly adept in the new language (Crystal 2000: 78-79). However, some communities are preserving their languages despite incredible odds. One example is found with the Ugong of Thailand. This language has disappeared in some villages, but not in others. David Bradley (1989: 33-40) noted that the Ugong language has survived in isolated geographical locations, because those communities are financially self-sufficient and rarely have contact with outside groups. This Nepali study, though not as extensive as the research conducted by Bradley, attempts to increase sociolinguistic knowledge with regards to language maintenance in Thailand.

### 1.1 General background information

Because this is a study of displaced people, the researcher will introduce background information about the country of origin, followed by a brief history of Nepalis in Myanmar. Background information about Chiang Mai, Thailand, is also included, since it is the current place this Nepali speech community has come to live.



**Figure 1. Map of Nepal**

Nepal is an independent, democratic nation. It is bordered to the north by the Tibetan region of China and by India on the east, west, and south. (See Figure 1) According to informal conversations with employees at the Chiang Mai night bazaar, and personal observation, there are many Nepali-speaking people living in Chiang Mai, Thailand. However, there are no published population estimates for the Nepali community at this time.

Chiang Mai Province is the second largest province in Thailand, with a population of 1.6 million people. Located in northern Thailand, Chiang Mai province shares a border with Myanmar. (See Figure 2.) The province of Chiang Mai covers 20,107.1 square kilometers with many mountains (Population and housing census 2000). The capital of Chiang Mai (also called Chiang Mai) is the largest, most culturally important city in northern Thailand. (See Figure 3.) It is a fairly modern city, with thousands of tourists visiting each year. Although the city of Chiang Mai has a population of 160,000, the urban sprawl of the city stretches into several other districts (Cummings, et. all 2003). The metropolitan area around Chiang Mai city increases the population to nearly one million people.

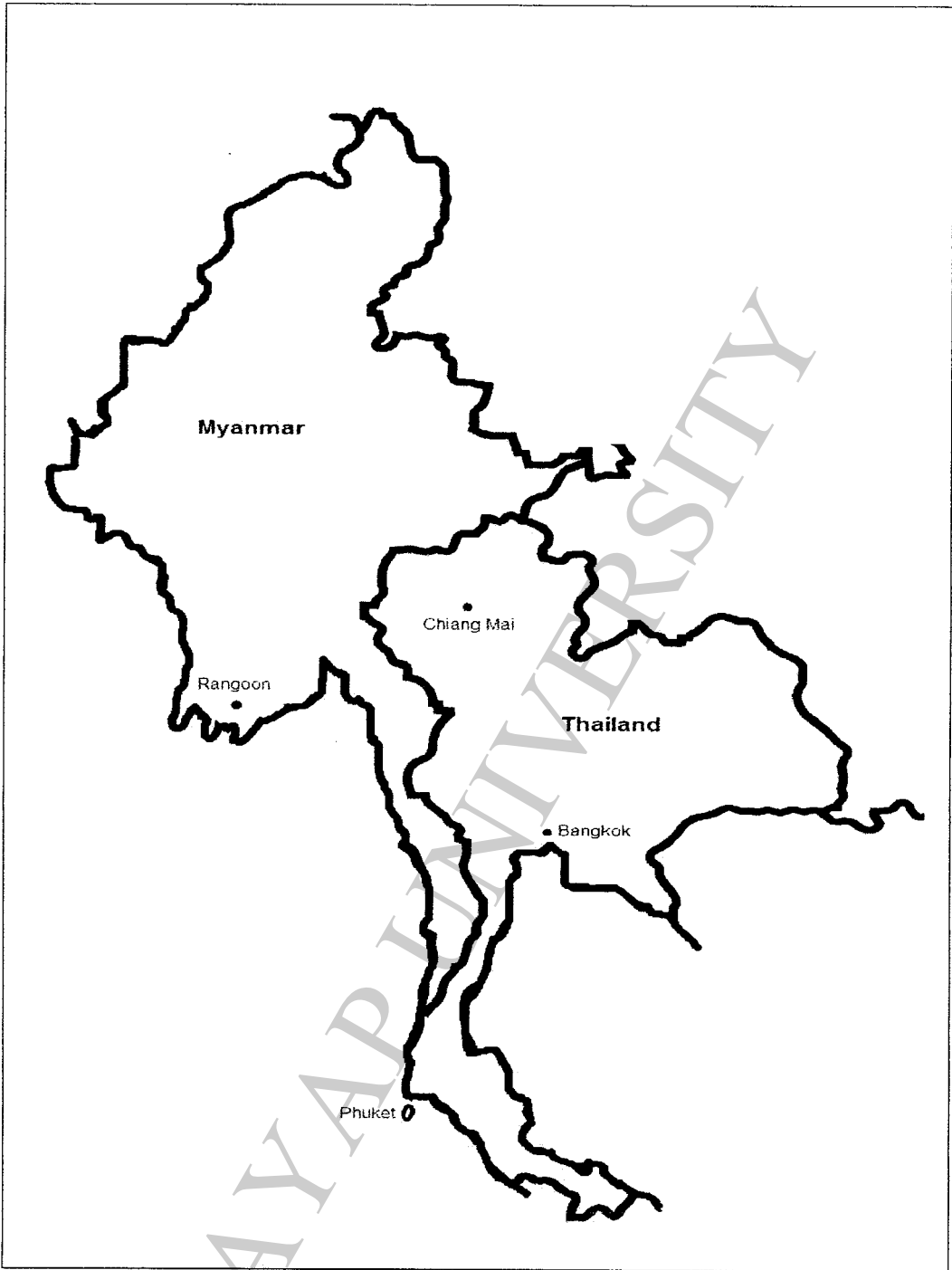


Figure 2. Map of Thailand and Myanmar



Figure 3. Map of the provinces of northern Thailand

## 1.2 Historical background

Why are Nepali people living in Myanmar? Nepalis have been familiar figures in the British Indian Army for 133 years. They were referred to as “Gurkha” soldiers, named for the Gorkha region of central Nepal (Bolt 1967:90).

In 1914 there were some 26,000 Gurkhas serving in the ten regular rifle regiments that formed the Gurkha Brigade of the Indian Army. More than twice that number again had been recruited from Nepal before the end of the war. Many more came down from their mountain homeland to join their compatriots in other units such as the Assam and Burma military police, and in non-combatant battalions like the Labour Corps and the Army Bearer Corps. In all, the total number of Gurkhas who left Nepal to serve the ‘foreign’ Emperor in one way or another between 1914 and 1918 exceeded 200,000. One in ten never returned (Bolt 1967:90).

Again, in 1940, three Gurkha battalions fought in Myanmar and Assam. During that time another 160,000 Nepali men joined the recruits. It is the descendents of these

Gurkha soldiers who formed the core of the Nepali populations of Myanmar. At this time, there is no language data regarding the Nepali community in Myanmar.

### **1.3 About the Nepali in Myanmar**

In recent years there has been wide-spread migration from Myanmar to Thailand. The economic situation in Myanmar is unstable, so many people are forced to seek jobs outside of their country. Nepalis from Myanmar are counted among the many that have crossed that border.

More than three decades of illegitimate and repressive military rule has greatly damaged the fabric and culture of politics in Myanmar. Political reality since 1962 has been characterized by the decay of government institutions and political infrastructures, the erosion of the norms of legality and rationality, and the habit of violence (Yawngwhe 1995:192).

Nepalis come from Myanmar by way of a chain-migration. That is, a member of a Nepali family will go to Thailand, and then encourage a few family members or friends to come and join him. He will then help them with housing or employment. They then ask their friends or family to join them, thus setting up a chain of migration (Khemlani-David, Naji, and Kaur 2003).

### **1.4 Nepali caste and culture**

Nepal has a wide range of people groups and languages. The Nepali caste system, introduced by the nation's Hindus, further complicates the ethnolinguistic picture.

The caste system, usually associated with Hinduism, is hierarchical, but different from a 'class' system. For example, "Open and closed stratification systems are sometimes described by the terms *class* and *caste*" (Chinoy 1967:178). Sociologist Anthony Giddens writes, "The caste system is based on the belief that individuals are born into a particular position in a social and ritual hierarchy, with a different set of duties and rituals for each caste" (Giddens 2006:535). The adherence to a caste system can influence language use as there are strict rules about which groups can intermarry, and with whom each caste can socialize, do business, and participate in religious rituals.

The caste system in Nepal is complicated by the fact that there are Nepali speaking Hindu groups, linguistically distinct Hindu groups, linguistically and ethnically distinct Hindu groups, Nepali speaking groups which follow a combination of

Hinduism and Buddhism, and linguistically and ethnically distinct Buddhist groups which are all hierarchically arranged in the caste taxonomy.

The 2001 census in Nepal identified 103 social groups based on caste, ethnicity, religion, and language. A large scale Gender and Social Exclusion Assessment (GSEA) was conducted by the Department for International Development (DFID), which is a British aid agency, and the World Bank, together with the National Planning Commission of Nepal. The GSEA listed 103 people groups and placed them in one of 10 categories.

Table 1 shows a general summary of the ethnic groups/castes listed by DFID (Department for International Development 2006:17).

**Table 1. Caste and ethnic groups in Nepal**

Share of population	Simplified group	2001 census group
Hindu caste groups (57.5%)	1. Brahmans and Chhetris (Hill)	Brahman, Chhetri, Thakuri, Sanyasi.
	2. Brahmans and Chhetris (Tarai)	Kayashta, Rajput, Baniya, Marwadi, Jaine, Nurang, Bengali.
	3. Tarai Middle Castes	Yadev, Teli, Kalwar, Sudi, Sonar, Lohar, Koiri, Kurmi, Kanu, Haluwai, Hajam/Thakur, Badhe, Rajbhar, Kewat Mallah, Numhar, Kahar, Lodha, Bing, Bhediyar, Mali, Kamar Dhunia.
	4. Dalits (Hill)	Kami, Damai, Sarki, Gaine, Badi.
	5. Dalits (Tarai)	Chamar, Musahar, Tatma, Bantar, Dhusadadh/Paswan, Khatway, Dom, Chidimar, Dhobi, Halkhor, Unidentified Dalit.
Janajatis (37.2%)	6. Newar	All Newari Castes.
	7. Janajatis (Hill)	Magar, Tamang, Rai, Gurung, Limbu, Sherpa, Bhote, Walung, Buansi, Hyolmo, Gharti/Bhujel, Kumal, Sunuwar, Baramu, Pahari, Adivasi, Yakkha, Shantal, Jirel, Darai, Dura, Majhi, Dunuwar, Thami, Lepcha, Chepeng, Raji, Hayu, Raute, Kasunda.
	8. Janajatis (Tarai)	Tharu, Dhanuk, Rajbanshi, Tajpuriya, Gangai, Dhimal, Meche, Kisan, Munda, Santhal/Satar/Dhangad/Jhangad, Koche, Pattarkatta/Kusbadiya.
Muslims(4.3%)	9. Muslims	Muslim, Churoute.
Others (1%)	10. Others	

In Nepal, it is difficult to determine if a people group is part of a caste group, or an ethnic group. The Nepali language has one word which means 'caste' but it also includes the term for a language group or ethnic group, even for non-Hindus. The word in Nepali is *jaat*. The following summary is adapted from Sigrun Eide Odegaard (1997:10):

### ***Jaat* - Caste or Ethnic Group**

According to Höfer (1979:45), the *Muluki Ain* (an administrative document, detailing the legal rights of each caste, from the 1800's) uses the term *jaat* with four different meanings:

1. It denotes taxonomically distinct groups with differing status positions within the hierarchy. It is only in this sense that *jaat* is rendered by caste (Höfer 1979:45).
2. *Jaat* can also mean a "caste-internal status group". Such a group does not necessarily correspond to a commensal or endogamous unit (*jaat* as defined in 1). The Tharus as a whole form one *jaat*, but the various endogamous Tharu groups (Rana, Dangora, Kathariya etc.) are also conceptualised as *jaat*.
3. In some cases *jaat* denotes an ethnically (culturally and linguistically) distinct group which can embrace several castes, such as the Newars. The *Muluki Ain* speaks of the Newar *jaat* in the sense of ethnic group, but describes their internal stratification (also *jaat*) in the meaning caste.
4. Finally, *jaat* is used in the sense of legal status in general. (The *Muluki Ain* functioned as a legal code which regulated punishments according to *jaat* status.) (Odegaard 1997:10)

During the course of this research, the castes/ethnic groups among Nepalis in Chiang Mai are recorded to determine if there is a pattern of migration to Myanmar and Thailand among specific castes, and if they still speak the language of their ethnic group, when that language is different from Nepali. Also, a study of marriage patterns among Nepalis can indicate whether or not the social stigmas associated with the caste system are weakened after migration.

### **1.5 The Nepali language**

The official language of Nepal, Nepali, is classified as an Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Northern Zone, Eastern Pahari language. Nepali is also spoken in Bhutan, India, and Myanmar. Approximately half the people of Nepal speak Nepali as their mother tongue, and many others speak it as their second language (Gordon 2005).

Although much research on the Nepali language is available, no information on the Nepali speech community in Chiang Mai has been published. It is assumed that Nepalis living in Chiang Mai will be using Central Thai as their language of wider communication (LWC). These two languages are from different language families.

The Nepali speech community's proficiency in Thai is unknown at this time, and not the focus of this research.

### **1.6 Objectives of the study**

There are four objectives for this study:

Objective 1: Investigate the language use patterns of Nepalis in Chiang Mai.

Objective 2: Determine the attitudes of Nepalis in Chiang Mai towards their language and towards the languages of wider communication.

Objective 3: Assess if Nepalis in Chiang Mai are maintaining their ability to speak Nepali.

Objective 4: Draw conclusions about the future of Nepali spoken in Chiang Mai.

### **1.7 Research questions**

Six research questions (RQ) direct this study. They are:

-RQ1: What languages are being used in key domains by Nepalis in Chiang Mai?

-RQ2: What is the dominant language used by each generation of Nepalis in Chiang Mai?

-RQ3: What are the attitudes of Nepalis towards the Nepali language?

-RQ4: What are the attitudes of Nepalis towards the languages of wider communication?

-RQ5: How do Nepalis in Chiang Mai perceive their language ability?

-RQ6: Do Nepali parents teach their children Nepali in Chiang Mai?

-RQ7: What are the differences in language use between first, second and third generation Nepalis in Chiang Mai?

### **1.8 Hypothesis**

The hypothesis leading to this research is that the first generation of Nepalis living in Chiang Mai are preserving their language, and they use it in all domains. The second generation of Nepalis living in Chiang Mai use their language in the family and home domains.

The crucial factors for language maintenance among Nepalis are whether or not they marry a non-Nepali speaker, and whether or not they follow Hinduism. It is



postulated that religion and intermarriage strongly affect whether the Nepali language is passed down from one generation to the next.

### **1.9 Benefits of the study**

The main benefit of this research is that the information it details can aid other researchers in their studies of language maintenance. Additionally, this study will help the Nepali community in their efforts at language preservation in Chiang Mai, by illustrating the domains where the language is weakest, and using social network analysis to promote it. Finally, this research can contribute another piece to the linguistic puzzle of the languages spoken in Thailand.

PAYAP UNIVERSITY