

Collaborations in Language

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

I have watched the infusion of funding from philanthropic sources overhaul historically extractive models of scholarship in linguistics and anthropology. Along the way, my own work has 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 raises complex practical and ethical issues about ownership, origin and access. Initiatives that set out to document, but along the way accidentally conserve and even end up revitalizing endangered languages are these days not only born digital, but increasingly born archival, with recordings of natural language uploaded directly from the field to an institutional repository on a university server.

Ensuring that these new partnerships continue to have both local relevance and academic integrity as they change requires careful attention, together with recognition of the varied investments that different stakeholders have in the outputs of research.

My presentation explores issues of orality, orthography, visibility and the enduringly problematic metaphor of “mother tongue”. I draw on long-term fieldwork in Nepal and India with speakers of Thangmi, a community whose Tibeto–Burman language has long been effaced from the national record in the states where it is spoken, and I reflect critically on the decade that I have spent directing two international, interdisciplinary collaborative research initiatives—the Digital Himalaya and World Oral Literature Projects. I conclude my presentation with a discussion of the work and vision of First Nations Languages Program at the University of British Columbia.