

# Nepali Royal Register

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# Honorifics in Nepali

- In Nepali there are multiple levels of honorificity (3-7, cf. Hutt 1988, Acharya 1991, Regmi 2006)
- This is encoded in the usage of specific pronominal forms, verb conjugations, constructions, and honorific vocabulary
- Honorificity is encoded for both 2nd and 3rd person forms, for imperative and assertive statements

# Honorifics in Nepali

- 'you do' for each level (following Acharya's terms):
- **Low** *tã gar-chas*
- **Equal** *timī gar-chau*
- **High** *tapãĩ gar-nu hun-cha*
- **Honorific** *hajūr gar-nu hun-cha*
- **Royal Honorific** *sarkār gar-i-baksan-cha*

- Historically, the correct pronoun depended upon the relative status of speaker and addressee in terms of age and caste, as well as other social considerations (Acharya 1991 Fig. 9.4)

# Honorifics in Nepali

Speaker's Caste	Addressee's Caste	Addressee's Age	Pronoun
Brahman	Brahman	Peer Senior Junior	<i>tapāĩ</i> <i>yahāĩ</i> <i>timĩ</i>
Brahman	Kṣatriyas	Same as Brahman	
Brahman	Vaiśyas	Peer Senior Junior	<i>timĩ</i> <i>tapāĩ</i> <i>timĩ</i>
Brahman	Śūdras	Peer Senior Junior	<i>timĩ</i> <i>timĩ</i> <i>tā</i>
Brahman	Royal family	All ages	<i>sarkār</i>
Vaiśyas	Brahman	All ages	<i>hajūr</i>
Śūdras	Brahman	All ages	<i>hajūr</i>

Figure: 9.4 Second person pronoun by caste and age

# The Royal Language

- The royal register (*darbāri bhashikā*) was traditionally reserved for addressing the royal family and Rana ministers
- It consists of an honorific construction and a specialized vocabulary
- The honorific construction uses the *baksanu* or *baksinu* 'to bestow', which derives from the Persian *bakhshīdan*.

(1) hajur-le            chiyā jyunār gar-i-baksan-cha?  
PRO.HON-ERG tea    imbibe do-PRT-bestow-3.SG  
'Will you have tea, Your Majesty?' (Matthews 1984: 238)

# The Royal Language: Vocabulary

Non-honorific	Royal Honorific	Gloss
<i>khānu</i>	<i>jyunār garibaksanu</i>	'to eat'
<i>jānu</i>	<i>sawāri hoibaksanu</i>	'to go'
<i>basnu</i>	<i>rāj hunu</i>	'to sit/stay'

Figure: Examples of royal register verbs

# The Royal Language: Influences

- According to Grierson, honorific constructions are due to influence from Tibeto-Burman languages
- Royal language influence from the Indian Mughal administration (Matthews 2013, Hutt 1988)
- Persian loans in many terms for law and governance, e.g. *Muluki Ain*



# Other Royal Registers: Thai, Japanese, Newari

- Thai has a specific register for addressing the royal family that is heavily influenced by the Khmer language
- The Japanese courtly language was based on Classical Japanese and has a separate system of honorifics
- Tibetan and other TB languages have honorific forms of lexical items
- For example, in Newari (the indigenous language of Kathmandu Valley): 'to eat' *nayegu* (non-honorific), *bhapiyegu* (honorific)

- During the Panchayat era, political power was hierarchically arranged with the monarchy at the top
- Usage of the royal register facilitated patronage with the royal family

# Patterns of Use

- Was the royal register required for making requests to the government?
- *“It was not mandatory but government officers were normally addressed in this form by his/her juniors and general public in Kathmandu Valley but outside it was not often heard.”*  
(Tikaram Poudel, p.c.)
- *“Yes, but only to the king, queen, their family members and relatives not to the prime minister and ministers... However, there used to be many layers of the language depending on who is the addresser and who is the addressee and we can say it used to be used to prime ministers too in spoken form but not in written form.”* (Bhim Regmi, p.c.)

*“Yet another distortion to the Nepali language is seen in the significant trend, especially among the Kathmanduites, towards the sycophantic version of the language. During earlier periods, **many residents of Kathmandu had adopted the royal version of the Nepali language because they had to deal with the royal family.** Priests, palace officials and other associates in the royal court were required to use the royal language in the palace and to address the royal family and the Ranas. They gradually adopted this as a family language in order to have their children access to the royal palace. **This practice in language has become so much pervasive in Kathmandu these days that every one is using the royal version of Nepali language, even if they have nothing to do with the royal family and the palace.** This trend has so much invaded Nepali language that many people have taken it as a normal thing and they don't even notice it.” (Acharya 2002: 189-90)*

# Patterns of Use

- Acharya decries “copying the royal accent” as an offshoot of *chakari* bureaucratic culture that “has spoiled [Nepali’s] originality and eloquence and has developed as a corrupt version.”
- People began using it more widely to facilitate access for themselves and their children.
- It has spread and “normalized,” with people mixing forms

- *“I have come across people who still use the shortened version of the high-level language; for example, rather than saying ‘garibaksyos,’ they would say ‘garisyos.”*” (Yamal Rajbhandary, p.c.)
- *“[I]t is my sense that ‘elite’ Nepali has been spreading in the past decade or so. In my experience, however, **aristocratic language in everyday households never includes the full grammatical forms and vocabularies that one would use with the royals.** Its more like little fanciful flourishes on otherwise relatively normal speech, which don't require that much special attention... So where you would say to the actual king, ‘jyunaar garibaksanu holaa,’ you might say to your dad, ‘khaaisyus’ (= khaaibaksanus’). ”* (Anne Mocko, p.c.)

# Patterns of Use

- Is usage of the royal register associated with a particular class?
- “[I]t is widely used by particularly elite class of Kathmandu in social gatherings as use of this form of language is **restricted to higher class**. (Tikaram Poudel, p.c.)
- “[T]he folks I was staying with (in Jhapa) would make fun of Kathmandu people putting on airs by using the royal endings.” (Miranda Weinberg. p.c.)
- “I do think this language is part of aspirational middle-class living in the Valley and that **it has spread along with middle-class aspirational lifestyles** but I dont know whether it seems like ‘putting on airs.’ ” (Anne Mocko, p.c.)

# Patterns of Use

- Is it still used to refer to the royal family?
- *“Yes there are few people who are loyal to the former royal family use it while addressing to the members of former royal family. (Tikaram Poudel, p.c.)*
- *“Mainstream and leftist politicians seemed to pretty uniformly use ‘u’ [Equal] form; older government folks who had worked a long time under the king often used “wahaa” [Honorific]. People actually connected to the palace would often waffle, and sometimes stumble over two or three verb conjugations. One or two royalists still used the actual royal form but that seemed to be a very deliberate political statement.” (Anne Mocko, p.c.)*



- Some form of the royal honorific register is continuing to spread, even beyond Kathmandu
- It has widened in usage to a more general honorific
- With regards to the former monarchy, the choice of honorific can make a political statement



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