

RESEARCH NOTE

CALL ME UNCLE: AN OUTSIDER'S EXPERIENCE OF NEPALI KINSHIP

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Introduction

The kinship terminology of any language is a natural meeting point for the disciplines of anthropology and linguistics. The manner in which people construct and understand their relationships with others has a direct impact on the words they use to describe these relationships. In this short article, I will focus on the kinship system of Nepali and demonstrate its subtleties, especially in its application to non-Nepalis.

Nepali Kinship Terminology

A socio-linguistic characteristic of Nepali which greatly appeals to Western sensibilities is the widespread use of sibling kinship terms in interactions with people whom one has never met before. Many Nepali phrasebooks suggest addressing total strangers as *didī*, *bahinī*, *dāi* or *bhāi*.

Nepali kinship terms are usually closely linked to specific pronouns which in turn require specific verbal endings. In other words, when addressing one's own father or someone of that age, one should use the kinship term *buvā* and the pronoun *tapāī*. On the other hand, in a conversation with one's younger sister, one would use the term *bahinī* and most likely the personal pronoun *timī*. The table below is a provisional attempt at categorising these relationships.

kinship term:	pronoun:	verbal ending:
<i>buvā, āmā</i> <i>dāi, didī</i>	<i>tapāī, hajur</i>	- <i>nuhuncha</i> (indicative present) - <i>nuhos</i> (imperative)
<i>bhāi, bahinī</i>	<i>timī</i>	- <i>chau</i> (indicative present) - <i>au ~ -a</i> (imperative)
<i>bābu, nānī</i>	<i>timī</i>	- <i>chau</i> (indicative present) - <i>au ~ -a</i> (imperative)
	<i>tā</i>	- <i>chas</i> (indicative present) - \emptyset (imperative)

To elaborate on the deployment of these kinship terms in everyday interactions with people, I will invoke two classic social scenarios. First, a conversation in a bus, and second, my own experience of being a volunteer teacher in a government school.

The Bus

Around me I can hear people calling out *didī*, *bahinī*, *dāi*, *bhāi*, *nānī* and *bābu* to fellow passengers they have never met before. A boy selling boiled eggs is trying to persuade an older woman, whom he addresses as *didī*, that his eggs are indeed fresh. An older man, using the term *nānī*, tells a little girl to move over so that he can sit down. When someone finally addresses me, it is with the term *sar* ‘Sir’. Then I demonstrate that I speak some Nepali and strike up a conversation with the family to my left, who happen to have a small child. Within a few minutes the father says to the child: *añkal-lāi namaskār gara!* ‘Say hello to uncle!’.

So while other people are using sibling terms, or parent-child terms with a stranger’s children (*nānī*, *bābu*), I am *añkal* ‘uncle’. It took me some time to appreciate that calling me *añkal* is as much about respect as it is about creating social distance. In an environment where everyone invokes notional-sibling kinship with strangers, to be *añkal* rather than ‘older brother’ is as much a prestige position as it is a step removed.

There are three registers of standard (non-royal) speech in Nepali, each with an associated verbal ending and specific pronoun, in addition to one register with a pronoun but with no separate verbal ending. The three ‘full’ registers are: *tā*, *timī* and *tapāī*. What I call the ‘half-register’ is

represented by the form *hajur*, which functions as an honorific pronoun meaning ‘Sir’ or ‘Madam’, but takes the same verbal ending as the *tapāĩ* pronominal form.

Generally speaking, an older man would use the term *bahinĩ* or *nānĩ* to address an unrelated young girl and most likely use the pronominal form *timĩ*, or perhaps even the more intimate *tā*. Likewise, a young man would address an older woman with the kinship term *āmā* or *didĩ* and use the *tapāĩ*, and perhaps even the *hajur*, form of pronominal address. This is fairly self-explanatory for any native Nepali-speaker and for non-Nepalis comfortable with the language. The point I want to emphasise is that, generally speaking, on account of their inherent respect and age-relatedness, kinship terms are consistently associated with specific second person pronouns and their associated verbal endings. Yet foreigners who speak Nepali and have in some form entered the sphere of notional Nepali kinship test these rules in interesting ways.

Bideśĩ Añkal

I am often called *bhāi* or *bābu* by older men and women, especially in villages, yet they resolutely stick to the *tapāĩ*, or even the *hajur*, form of pronominal address. If I ever try to do the same with younger male Nepali friends, I am immediately corrected: ‘*bhāi* is to be used with *timĩ*, and *dāi* with *tapāĩ*. Yet within minutes someone will use the term *bābu* to attract my attention, and then use the pronoun *tapāĩ* when addressing me. How can this seeming inconsistency be explained?

In part at least, the answer is a tribute to the inherent flexibility of the apparently rigid Nepali kinship system. Calling a younger foreign man *dāi* to convey respect is more awkward from a Nepali language-internal point of view than it is to use an honorific, such as *tapāĩ*, or its associated verbal endings. An example will serve to illustrate the point. A grandfather calls out to me: *bābu, basnuhos hajur, ciyā khānuhos*, ‘little boy, please sit down (respectful) and drink some tea (respectful)’. The above sentence is entirely plausible. Respect is conveyed through the verbal ending *-nuhos* as well as through the choice of *hajur* as an honorific pronoun, and the use of the kinship term *bābu* conveys affection rather than disrespect. An inverted version of the above sentence, however, would be less common: *dāi, basa, ciyā khāu*, ‘elder brother, sit down (informal) and drink some tea (informal)’, since the kinship term *dāi* carries with it a certain degree of respect which one would expect to find mirrored by an appropriate verbal ending. I should point out that register switching, as in the examples above,

is a common feature of Nepali. Kinship terms of endearment, such as *bābu* with *nāntī*, can be compatible with honorific second person pronouns and their associated verbal endings.

Let us now turn to the kinship terminology of English for a comparative perspective. While *uncle* signifies ‘mother’s brother’, ‘father’s brother’, ‘mother’s sister’s husband’ and ‘father’s sister’s husband’ in modern English, the kinship term also has a broader and more metaphorical meaning when applied to non-kin. To this day, young people in Britain may have ‘uncles’ and ‘aunties’ who are neither blood relations nor family by marriage. To the contrary, they are usually close friends of the child’s parents who have thus assumed a notional kinship position as mother’s or father’s sibling. In Nepali, the loan-word *aīkal* is also used to mean close friends of one’s parents, and (more commonly than in contemporary British English) strangers of a similar age to one’s parents.

What remains to be explained for Nepali, however, is why the kinship terms used to refer to strangers are mostly loan words. The practice of having ‘uncles’ and ‘aunts’ was a noted feature of Anglo-Indian society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it is likely that Nepali took its lead from Indian English. That borrowed words should come from English is no great surprise, but why was there a need for borrowing in the first place?

My theory concerning the widespread use of borrowed kinship terminology in modern Nepali is that loaned kinship terms provide a context-free and socially-neutral way of addressing outsiders, thus filling a niche which is largely absent in Nepali. In conversations with strangers then, the English kinship terms *aīkal* and *āntī* are the only terms which may logically be used. The explanation is as follows.

In the Nepali-language kinship sphere, there are many different classes of ‘uncles’ and ‘aunts’: those younger than the parent versus those older; those from the mother’s side as opposed to those from the father’s side; and those who are blood relations versus those who have married in. Unsurprisingly, there are also specific kinship terms for many of these different uncles and aunts. For the most part then, a *kākā* ‘father’s younger brother’ is as far removed from a *māmā* ‘mother’s brother’ as a *phupu* ‘father’s sister’ is from a *maijyu* ‘mother’s brother’s wife’. All of the Nepali kinship terms, translated by ‘uncle’ and ‘aunt’ in English, have more specific meanings than just ‘uncle’ or ‘aunt’, and each term encodes a range of social and cultural obligations. Consequently, it would make little sense to address an unknown foreign woman of about the age of one’s father as

phupu when there is no reason to trace her descent from one's father's family any more than there is to suggest that she is kin of one's mother. The term *phupu*, as we have noted, has a specific meaning, and this kinship role is most likely already occupied by a 'real' *phupu*. The role of *ānī*, however, is flexible and not yet occupied by one's own kin. No wonder then that the kinship terms *aṅkal* and *ānī* are used with such frequency to apply to foreigners in Nepal: the terms are respectful but neutral, affectionate but empty of real kinship meaning and the responsibility that such a role entails. As a logical extension of this explanation, being 'promoted' from *aṅkal* to *kākā* or from *ānī* to *sānī-mā* implies that as a non-Nepali, one has been incorporated into a family's kin network. From then on, kinship will be specifically reckoned through one of the parents over and above the other.

The School

Ten years ago, when I volunteered as an assistant English teacher in a government school, neither the students nor the teachers could decide how best to address me. The word *sar* (< Sir) always seemed to be used in some form, and usually it followed my name, resulting in *māk sar*, but on occasion would precede it, thus *sar māk*. For reasons that remained unexplained, some teachers had decided that while Nepali staff should be called *sar* and *mis*, as a foreign teacher, I should be addressed as *mīstar* (< Mr), resulting in *mīstar māk* (< Mr Mark) or *māk mīstar* (< Mark Mr). The latter form replaced *sar* with a different title of address, but at least retained Nepali word order. Other teachers found the lack of *sar* unacceptable, but agreed that non-Nepali men should be addressed as *mīstar*, leading to such unwieldy concatenations as *mīstar māk sar* (< Mr Mark Sir), and even on one occasion the highly-inflated *sar māk mīstar* (< Sir Mark Mr). The pros and cons of the various possible forms of address generated quite some discussion in the village, and I was confused by the whole process and eager to find a solution acceptable to all. My status was rendered even more unclear by the conflicting facts of being younger than some of my students yet living in the house of an important family. Eventually, to my satisfaction and to the palpable relief of many of the villagers, I came to be addressed as *māk sar* in school and simply as *māk* outside.

The above example demonstrates the unclear role of non-Nepalis in the realm of Nepali forms of address. The 'not-quite-inside' but also 'not-quite-outside' status of the school example, and the social angst and

terminological confusion that ensued, underscore the importance of choosing the right form of address.

Borrowed Nepali kinship terms in other Himalayan languages

A further point should be made regarding the use of borrowed kinship terms: not all ethnic groups in Nepal use English loan words to address strangers. Many of the ethnic languages have retained their native lexical items for kinship relationships, some in full, others in part. When indigenous terms for social relationships are lacking or have been lost, then speakers of these minority languages may resort to using Nepali words to fill the same lexical and semantic vacuum as fluent Nepali speakers use English words to do. A case in point are the Thangmi-speaking populations of Dolakhā and Sindhupālcok. Thangmi (Nepali: *Thāmī*) is a Tibeto-Burman language which retains an almost complete set of indigenous lexical items to encode culturally-salient kinship relationships. On the rare occasion that loaned kinship terms are used, they are invariably taken from Nepali. The most common borrowings are *māmā* and *phupu*, both derived from Nepali, in which they mean ‘mother’s brother’ and ‘father’s sister’ respectively. However, as in the case of *aīkal* and *āñī* above, the loan words *māmā* and *phupu* have been divorced from their original Nepali meanings and have a more general sense of ‘trusted non-Thangmi man’ and ‘trusted non-Thangmi woman’. The status language is clearly not the same for every ethnolinguistic grouping, even within the nation state of Nepal. While urban Nepali-speakers borrow kinship terms from English, Thangmi-speaking villagers borrow similar words from Nepali, both groups of speakers adapt and reinterpret these loans to fit their own sociolinguistic context.

Conclusion

Professor Braj B. Kachru, the author of *The Indianization of English: The English Language in India*, suggests that “items operating in British English kinship terms may be used with extended meaning in IE [Indian English]; for instance, *mother* as a term of respect, *sister* of regard;...*bhai* (brother) is used for any male of equal age” (1983: 117). His statement may be broadened to encompass Nepali as well.

I would go further, however, to posit that borrowed English kinship terms are not so much used ‘with extended meaning’ in Nepali, but

are rather reworked and reinterpreted. While British English *auntie* and Nepali *āñī* may on the surface appear to have the same meaning, the motivations for their use are quite distinct. Traditional understanding of language encounters suggests that one language will borrow lexical or grammatical items from another for reasons of status. While there is no doubt that for many urban and educated Nepali-speakers, English is the dominant status language, I suggest that prestige alone is not enough to explain borrowings of kinship terminology from English. Rather, faced with a precise and elaborate system of native Nepali kinship terminology, Nepali-speakers conscript English terms to convey the very imprecision and vagueness which is so difficult to achieve in Nepali.

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References

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