

“Community” and “Collaboration” in Undergraduate Language Documentation Research: A Case Study from Nepal and a U.S. University

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A typical image of endangered language documentation is that of the lone-wolf scholar, devoting years to singlehandedly describing, analyzing, and preserving a vulnerable language and taking sole credit for these efforts. However, this “single-author” model is changing now, with the rise of team-structure documentation projects and with community-oriented materials designed by faculty, students, and community members. The Documenting the Languages of Manang, Nepal Project (<https://mananglanguages.isg.siue.edu>) is an example of a next step in the evolution of collaborative documentation and preservation. It demonstrates how faculty and undergraduate students in the Midwest’s Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) can gain greater awareness and appreciation of—as well as have a positive impact on—endangered and undervalued languages spoken in another part of the world: Nepal.

With more than 100 languages and a similarly high number of ethnic groupings, Nepal is a country of undisputed ethno-linguistic diversity. It also faces increasingly rapid cultural, political, and economic change with ensuing language displacement. The goals of this NSF-funded project (BCS-DEL 1149639) are to investigate the structure, social functions, and prospects of four languages spoken in the Manang District. Featuring a large-scale design, the methods involve multiple participants at all levels of design and implementation.

The approach embraced by the principal investigator, faculty collaborators, and student researchers is simultaneously “top-down” and “bottom-up,” in that research questions, methodologies, data collection, and outputs are co-constructed and evaluated across all levels. It also involves community-valued outputs. Discussed below are some of the most significant activities as conceived and orchestrated by the undergraduate students recruited through the SIUE program Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA).

First is the creation of an interactive, multimedia digital archive of narratives recorded from speakers of the languages, which is now housed for free public access at the University of Virginia (UVA). One example may be found at <https://audio-video.shanti.virginia.edu/collection/gyalsumdoproject>. URCA students edited narratives in ELAN, an audio-video annotation and translation program. They also uploaded videos and transcripts to the UVA archive and added meta-data about recording location/time/participants and subject keywords for searchability in the library’s database.

Second is the analysis of sociolinguistic interviews carried out in Nepal with the goal of a coauthored academic journal publication (see <http://nfdin.gov.np>). URCA students assisted with sorting open-ended interview responses into Likert-type categories for quantitative analysis, and they assisted with visualization of response types.

Third is the construction of a word corpus to study tone in these languages. URCA students and graduate research assistants worked together to organize sound files; perform acoustic analysis

with Praat software; and prepare data for statistical analysis in programs such as Excel, R, and Vassarstats. Their methods and results were presented at the fourth annual USA Science and Engineering Festival in Washington, DC, in April 2015.

Fourth is the construction of a community dictionary (*Gyalsumdo: A Community-Based Dictionary, with Nepali and English Indices*). Two SIUE URCA students and one graduate assistant assembled and edited the dictionary with Toolbox software. The final version was published by the Center for Nepal and Asian Study at Nepal's Tribhuvan University, with 500 copies issued to the Gyalsumdo community free of charge, and was distributed to local primary schools in March 2017.

These activities illustrate the local and international impact of student-generated research that is also truly community-based: it is conducted on, for, and *with* the community.

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