

## Introduction

Newari (or Newar; indigenous name: **nepāl bhāṣā**, modern **nevāḥ bhāy**) is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Indosphere; its precise position within the Tibeto-Burman branch is contested. Its lexicon, especially that of the “Classical” variety introduced here, is replete with Indic loans (mostly from Sanskrit, but also from Maithili and, to a lesser extent, Nepali). Three stages of its development can be distinguished, although the timeline for the transition from one stage to the other is at present far from clear:

(1) Early Classical or Old Newari, the earliest surviving document of which is dated to NS 235/1112 CE. There are a number of important texts written in this variety, including the bilingual *Gopālarāja-vaṃśāvalī* (NS 500/1380 CE, Sanskrit/ Newari), a version of the *Nāradaśmṛti*, and a commentary on the *Amarakośa* (the latter two as yet unedited). There is to date no comprehensive grammatical study of Old Newari, although some groundwork has been done, and its vocabulary is covered by the *DCN*.

(2) Late Classical Newari or Classical Newari *proprement dit* – the language of literary texts and inscriptions of the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, but used in MSS until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE. This is the variety described in Hans JØRGENSEN’s *A Grammar of the Classical Newari* (1941), the only grammar of Classical Newari available so far. A small number of Classical Newari texts have been edited, mostly translations and/or adaptations of Sanskrit texts, but also original compositions, including a wealth of historiographical material; the vast majority of Classical Newari texts still awaits edition and publication. Modern Newari forms begin to surface in manuscripts from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE onward, suggesting a diglossic situation where the spoken everyday language differed increasingly from the formal literary language. The 18<sup>th</sup> century also sees a rupture in the scribal tradition after the Gorkha conquest, which resulted in a more or less complete cessation of royal patronage, although manuscripts continued to be produced and copied well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is this variety of Newari that is the object of this course.

(3) Probably in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the spoken language begins the transition from Classical to Modern Newari, which is today spoken by

about 850,000 individuals in the Kathmandu Valley and beyond. Used as literary language since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the language was the object of political persecution under the Rāṇā regime. Although Modern Newari is relatively well documented, the language is somewhat endangered, with more and more speakers shifting to Nepali – a trend that started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and appears to continue largely unbroken. More recently, however, there have been some encouraging developments, and there is today a vibrant scene of language activists both in Nepal and in the global diaspora.

The text by means of which the grammar of Classical Newari will be introduced in the following pages is the Newari version of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* – one of the most popular texts of the South Asian narrative tradition, which exists in a considerable number of different versions. The Newari text, which must have been composed before 1675 CE, is relatively close to Jambhaladatta's Sanskrit version. Nevertheless, Students familiar with any of the many tellings of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* in any South Asian language will be at an advantage when tackling the reading passages contained in this book. The basic plot is as follows: King Vikramakeśarin (or Vikramāditya) is called upon by a quite sinister yogi to help with a secret ritual: on the night of the new moon, the king has to fetch a corpse inhabited by a *vetāla*, a corpse-demon, that is hanging from a tree and that the yogi requires for his ritual. While carrying the corpse, the king must not speak, otherwise the corpse will return to the tree. The *vetāla* now tricks the king into breaking his silence by telling him stories that involve a riddle: if the king knows the answer but does not speak, he will have committed a grave sin (in some versions of the story, his head would explode). Twenty-four times the king knows the answer, and twenty-four times the corpse returns to the tree. Finally, the *vetāla* tells the king a riddle he cannot solve, and his task is about to be fulfilled – when it turns out that the yogi requires not one corpse, but two ...