

‘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 a Midwestern U.S. university (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville) can gain greater awareness and appreciation of, and can have a positive impact on, endangered and undervalued languages spoken in another part of the world: Nepal.

With over one hundred 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 (BCS-DEL 1149639) project are to investigate the structure and also the social functions and prospects of four languages spoken in the Manang District. Charged with 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. This paper surveys some of the most significant and meaningful activities as conceived of and orchestrated by the undergraduate students recruited through SIUE’s Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program.

First is the creation of an interactive, multi-media 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 is: <https://audio-video.shanti.virginia.edu/collection/gyalsumdo-project>. 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 towards a co-authored academic journal publication: <http://nfdin.gov.np>. URCA students assisted with converting 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 like Excel, R and

Vassarstats. Their methods and results were presented at the 4th annual USA Science and Engineering Festival in Washington D.C., 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, and the final version was published, with 500 copies released back to the Gyalsumdo community for free, to be distributed to local primary schools.

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.