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 didî, bahîntî, dâî or bhâi.

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 buvâ and the pronoun tapâì. On the other hand, in a conversation with one’s younger sister, one would use the term bahîntî and most likely the personal pronoun timî. The table below is a provisional attempt at categorising these relationships.
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 didî, bahiî, dâi, bâhî, nânî and bâbu to fellow passengers they have never met before. A boy selling boiled eggs is trying to persuade an older woman, whom he addresses as didî, that his eggs are indeed fresh. An older man, using the term nânî, 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: an%kal-lâî namaskâr gara! ‘Say hello to uncle!’.

So while other people are using sibling terms, or parent-child terms with a stranger’s children (nânî, bâbu), I am an%kal ‘uncle’. It took me some time to appreciate that calling me an%kal 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 an%kal 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: tâ, timî and tapâ. What I call the ‘half-register’ is

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<th>kinship term:</th>
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<td>buvâ, âmâ</td>
<td>tapâ, hajur</td>
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<td>tâ</td>
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represented by the form *hajur*, which functions as an honorific pronoun meaning ‘Sir’ or ‘Madam’, but takes the same verbal ending as the *tapāṭi* pronominal form.

Generally speaking, an older man would use the term *bahinī* or *nānī* to address an unrelated young girl and most likely use the pronominal form *timī*, or perhaps even the more intimate *tā*. Likewise, a young man would address an older woman with the kinship term *āmā* or *didī* and use the *tapāṭi*, 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.

Bideši Aṅkal

I am often called *bhāi* or *bābu* by older men and women, especially in villages, yet they resolutely stick to the *tapāṭi*, 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 *timī*, and *dāi* with *tapāṭi*’. Yet within minutes someone will use the term *bābu* to attract my attention, and then use the pronoun *tapāṭi* 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 *tapāṭi*, 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 nānī, 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 an%kal 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 an%kal and an%tī 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 maiju ‘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
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 *ân†î*, however, is flexible and not yet occupied by one’s own kin. No wonder then that the kinship terms *ânkal* and *ân†î* 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 *ânkal* to *kâkâ* or from *ân†î* to *sânî-mâ* 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 *mâk sar*, but on occasion would precede it, thus *sar mâk*. 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 *mis†ar* (<Mr), resulting in *mis†ar mâk* (<Mr Mark) or *mâk mis†ar* (<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 *mis†ar*, leading to such unwieldy concatenations as *mis†ar mâk sar* (<Mr Mark Sir), and even on one occasion the highly-inflated *sar mâk mis†ar* (<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 *mâk sar* in school and simply as *mâk* 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: Thâmî) 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 mâmâ and phupu, both derived from Nepali, in which they mean ‘mother’s brother’ and ‘father’s sister’ respectively. However, as in the case of an%kal and ânjî above, the loan words mâmâ 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 *ân†î* 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**