



**Title of Project:**

The Commodification and Representation of  
Nepal in International Tourism

**Researcher:**

Bal Krishna Sharma  
University of Hawai‘i at Manoa  
[bal.kri.sarma@gmail.com](mailto:bal.kri.sarma@gmail.com)

**Research Supervisor:**

Christina Higgins  
University of Hawai‘i at Manoa  
[cmhiggin@hawaii.edu](mailto:cmhiggin@hawaii.edu)



Bal Krishna Sharma

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**Project Summary**

This dissertation investigates communicative practices in the context of tourism, which serve to portray the linguistically and culturally diverse cultures of Nepal as desirable commodities for linguistic and cultural outsiders. I examine the production and circulation of these discursive practices, largely from the perspective of Nepali workers in the tourism industry, by researching how they create and (re)produce these discourses. Tourists are also a central consideration, as they are the *raison d'être* for these discourses. The dissertation examines how tourists are represented to Nepalese tourism workers and how tourists co-construct their understandings of Nepal in actual tours and treks. I consider tourism primarily as a discourse-driven and discourse-producing economic industry that markets and commodifies cultural representations by using a range of communicative resources. I chose to study representational discourses and communicative practices in tourism because many of the activities that characterize, and also create tourism as a sellable commodity, are discursive in nature. Such discursive practices are mostly driven by the capitalist market ideologies that commodify language and communication skills. Cultural representations in tourism are influenced by socio-political ideologies and economic and cultural changes at destinations where tourism takes place, and my dissertation aims to shed light on this recursive process.

By critically analyzing ideologies about communication and discourses that yield representations of Nepal in tour guides' commentaries, training discourses in a tourism literacy program, and in interviews with multilingual tourism workers, I was able to ask what linguistic, cultural and ethnic resources are valued in Nepali tourism. I explored how multilingual communication skills and resources were used in representations of Nepal and as part of the economic market of the tourism industry. I paid attention to the ideologies and roles of multilingual and intercultural communication skills in maintaining social relationships and in commodifying tourism destinations. Examining tourism workers' motivations and experiences of learning and using the dominant tourism lingua franca, English, allowed me to analyze



ideologies of English in a society where tourism continues to be considered as a key economic resource that will strengthen both individuals and the nation. Hence, new forms of multilingualism (such as the increased use of English and the commodification of local languages) were part of the new economic order where individual subjects develop their dispositions and skills to meet the market demands of the tourism industry.

Another major concern of this dissertation was to investigate what exactly happens *in situ* in tourist-guide encounters. Here, I paid attention to what identities were created in interactions and how these discourses constructed and (re)produced authenticity as an object of experience for cultural outsiders. In doing so, I addressed the sociolinguistic question of to what extent tourism invoked linguistic, ethnic, and cultural essentialism in an era when there is ever more awareness of cultural differences and sameness. Due to the global mobility of people, media, technology and cultural practices, societies in the world's "periphery" have experienced the effects of globalization such that their life experiences are no longer starkly different from those at the "center" (Appadurai, 1996; Urry & Larsen, 2011).

Language and literacy training discourses for many service industries often emphasize a more homogenous way of communicating with their clients (e.g., Cameron, 2000; Hall, 1995). However, touristic encounters in Nepal showed that tourist-guide interactions seemed to defy such established notions of language and culture while nevertheless perpetuating relatively essentialized representations of Nepali cultures. Encounters with tourists in Nepal seemed to be characterized by fluid and complex language repertoires, accents, and communication strategies. Overall, then, my research has added to a growing body of work on the representation, commodification and encounters of cultures, identities, and peoples in the context of tourism (Coupland, 2012; Heller, 2003; Pietikäinen & Kelly Holmes, 2011; Shuang, 2012). More broadly, however, it has contributed to research on the sociolinguistics of globalization (Blommaert, 2010) and to scholarship on understanding the nature of "intercultural" understanding in the new millennium (Holliday, 2013; Zhu Hua, 2014).

This study also makes major contributions to the two key theoretical strands that inform the study: discursive representation, and commodification of language and culture in the global economy. Most studies on touristic representations and stereotypes have focused on how powerful tourists represents the "cosmopolitan" Self and constructs the "native" Other (e.g., Dann, 2004). However, little is done to investigate the reverse gaze: how those who remain as the Other construct and represent tourists (exceptions include Evans-Pritchard, 1989 and Maoz, 2005). Analysis of the current data suggests that Nepali tour guides who present themselves as the Other for international tourists are continually learning ways to understand and represent tourists as part of their professional discourse and learn skills and tactics for managing relationships with tourists. As I showed in Chapter 4, their professional competence comprises rapport management strategies that they learn through their perception and categorization of international tourists.

Another issue that was evident in the analysis was the category of "tourists." Although the training does teach tour guides to learn about the cultural stereotypes of their prospective clients from many parts of the world, English speaking Western clients, particularly Americans, are constructed as *the* tourists in Nepal. Indians and Chinese, who comprise the largest number of international tourists, do not serve as "typical" examples of international tourists in the training classes. Also, although tourists come from diverse linguistic backgrounds and there is



availability of workers serving this diversity, training discourses valorize English as the language of the West, which serves as a default tourist lingua franca in Nepal's tourism industry.

Representational discourses of the Other, whether they are represented by the Self or by the Other themselves, exist because they have a commodity value in the global tourism market. They may feed into the discourses of essentialism, perpetuate racial and ethnic hierarchies and reproduce economic and other inequalities for economic gains. They are geared toward constructing the "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1991) that are less likely to match with the realities on the ground—the realities of the changing nature of the way people live their lives in the transcultural, globalizing world. These representations are, thus, problematic. However, they are problematic in different ways. Studies show that tourists' representation of the Other are largely static and essentialist, and these representations are the major schemas through which tourists are likely to see and understand the destination cultures before, during and after their trips (Bruner, 1996). In my research, I showed that tour guides' and local's representations of themselves are mostly tactical, theatrical, and seductive and motivated mainly by economic and even political reasons.

I also point out that for Nepali tourism workers, English continues to serve as the major link language in the global economy of tourism, and it is used as a tool to commodity local cultural and religious identities and practices. Trekking guides who are mostly from indigenous ethnic groups learn and re-learn their own cultural practices, along with appropriate communication skills in English, in order to be able to neatly weave them into compelling narratives for tourists. These representations demand certain kinds of intercultural knowledge and English ability to effectively convey these narratives. Their practices are similar to what Heller (2003) found in Canada, where French developed a commodity value in the tourism industry in recent decades. Due to heritage tourism and a growing number of call centers built on a neoliberal economy, native French-speaking bilinguals now value their bilingual skills both as tools of identity as well as of communication. In the present context also, ethnic identities are recognized as commodities in the tourism market. However, all identities are not equally valued. Based on the results of this study, I argue that tourism can create a new hierarchy of ethnicities, which puts some identities at the center in terms of their commodity value in the market.



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