

SOUTH ASIA

FELIX OTTER:

A Course in Reading Classical Newari: Selections from the Vetālapañcaviṃśati.

xiii, 162 pp. Heidelberg and Berlin: CrossAsia-eBooks, 2021. ISBN 978 3 946742 94 4 (pdf). ISBN 978 3 946742 93 7 (paperback).

doi:10.1017/S0041977X21000665

Students of the vast literature of Classical Newar (or Newari) have hitherto had to rely upon Hans Jørgensen's *Grammar of the Classical Newari* (Copenhagen, 1941) and his *Dictionary of the Classical Newari* (Copenhagen, 1936) in conjunction with the more recent and thorough Nepal Bhasa Dictionary Committee's *Dictionary of Classical Newari* (Kathmandu, 2000) to begin to come to terms with the language. As the learning curve of becoming acquainted with Classical Newar will be well known to those who have endured or attempted it, Felix Otter's recent publication of the first textbook of Classical Newar is likely to be warmly welcomed and is certainly a valuable addition to the still nascent field of Newar studies.

This textbook consists of 15 short lessons on sets of grammatical or lexical points, each with a short series of exercises, and concludes with a selection of extended reading passages. With a few exceptions, the examples, exercises, and readings are taken from manuscripts of the Newar translation of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati*, the earliest of which date to the seventeenth century. This has the advantage of providing a representation of Classical Newar largely untinged by archaic or modern forms. This makes the textbook much easier to use than diving straight into typical manuscripts, but also potentially prescriptive and certainly tidier than what is usually encountered in practice. Nonetheless, the heavy emphasis on reading primary source material is one of the great strengths of this textbook.

The textbook is attractively formatted, with examples primarily presented in bold romanized font. Devanagari transliteration is provided for longer examples, exercises, and the reading passages. Examples of the Prachalit script are given only in the first lesson, when the Newar syllabary is provided, and in lesson nine, when the numerals are presented. Orthographically, Otter's transcriptions largely conform to those used by Jørgensen, reflecting a reconstructed phonology, rather than strict transliteration.

The main advantage of the textbook is its focus, both in terms of being thematically and temporally limited to a particular text from a particular stage in the development of Newar, but also in terms of its economizing of grammatical and theoretical explanations. This is likely to keep confusion in students to a minimum and significantly reduce the time demanded of them; however, it may prove confusing for those outside of the target audience – those with prior knowledge of linguistics or South Asian and Himalayan languages (p. vii). The reasoning given for this terseness is the author's expected publication of a reference grammar of Classical Newar (p. viii). While this textbook primarily gives one the impression of progressively less elemental parts of Classical Newar grammar as one would expect from a textbook rather than a grammar, but some forward referencing is necessary to understand all explanations (e.g. on p. 74). In terms of the author's approach to grammar, one improvement on Jørgensen's grammar is the use of the more recently developed model of ergativity (p. 11), rather than an attempt to

explain things in terms of nominative syntax. Another area of greater clarity is in Otter's explanation of the Classical Newar verb morphology, which is significantly more developed than in Jørgensen's pioneering time.

The main way in which this textbook can shine in a pedagogical environment, even if explanations are not fully grasped by students, however, is its extensive use of examples, exercises with clear solutions provided, and most of all in the extensive reading selections. The readings, which span eighteen pages (pp. 99–117), taken from the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati*, provide students with ample opportunity to apply and see almost all the grammatical points indicated in the textbook. Surely, this is the best way to get students up to speed with reading Classical Newar. This approach is a feature that other language textbooks, which tend to prioritize translating single example sentences out of context, all too often lack.

In the way of critique, I would first note the author's unremarked upon usage of the term Newari, rather than Newar. While presumably this is done in consistency with the usage of Jørgensen and the Nepal Bhasa Dictionary Committee's dictionary, this requires some discussion for those new to the language, as the former term is considered disrespectful by many contemporary Newar intellectuals, as pointed out in Carol Genetti's *A Grammar of Dolakha Newar* (Berlin, 2007). The continued use of the term "Classical Newari", rather than a more value neutral historical-linguistic term, such as "Middle Newar", is also worth reflecting upon. With regards to the use of romanization and Devanagari, this does allow one to see the phonetic relationship to Newar Devanagari spelling conventions – in practice however, relatively few Classical Newar texts are encountered in Devanagari or are romanized, so a more extensive use of Prachalit is something which might be contemplated. Extensive usage of abbreviations, without corresponding definitions in the dedicated "Symbols and abbreviations" section (p. xiii) makes apparent the intended audience as one familiar with linguistic terminology (as expressed on p. vii). Some formatting issues, such as the confusing misalignment of a chart illustrating the gradation of verb stems (p. 22), as well as several spelling and grammatical errors, make me suspect that the textbook had limited proof-reading. Moreover, several words presented in exercises have no corresponding definition in the provided glossary, "caurawo" and "sudina" in "Exercise 4" (p. 26) for example. The occasional missing definition does not matter so much, however, when such clear translations as those provided by the author are given in the solutions section.

This textbook is ideal for those with prior linguistic training or familiarity with contemporary Newar, Sanskrit, and other South Asian or Himalayan languages, though those outside of this target audience may also find it of benefit. Moreover, this will likely be of most interest to those already involved in Newar studies and serves as a very exciting prelude to the eventual publication of Otter's grammar of Classical Newar and his critical edition of the Newar *Vetālapañcaviṃśati*.

Alexander James O'Neill
University of Toronto, Canada