

Linguistic Topography

Loss of terrain as a matter of domain

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The Himalayan region as a whole, and the Eastern Himalaya in particular, represents one of the world's hot spots in terms both of linguistic diversity and of language endangerment. Yet the linguistic topography of the Himalayas is as varied as the physical topography of the region. Linguistic topography is the term which I have coined for the sociolinguistic situation of endangered languages in terms of the diverse factors which determine a language's prospects for extinction or survival. A theoretical distinction obtains between the Schleicher-Mufwene approach to individual languages as species in competition as against the Müller-van Driem model of linguistic signs and semiotic systems respectively constituting the units of selection and the arena in which natural selection operates. Linguistic topography unifies the two Darwinian approaches by the combined application of the analytical frameworks of both models. Factors affecting the domains of use represent one of several types of determinant for the viability of an endangered language and its potential for survival. The national languages of Bhutan and Nepal provide somewhat contrasting examples of linguistic topography. Other instructive examples are adduced from within and beyond the Himalayas. Linguistic topography yields recommendations for policy makers, educators and members of language communities based on the sociolinguistic dimensions of individual language endangerment situations at different levels of analysis.