

Refusing to Gloss: Metalinguistic Practices and the Collaborative Construction of Meaning in Nepal

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A word in the first place is a noise.

—Ursula K. Leguin

Introduction

Transcribing, the act of representing on paper the words of others, forms some part of most anthropological undertakings, from digested summaries of what informants have said to precisely detailed transcriptions of recorded linguistic material. Translation between different languages may or may not be involved in this process, but there is usually, at the very least, an “intersemiotic translation” (Fine 1994) or process of entextualization, as words are extracted from the context of their production and made into texts or objects with the capacity to circulate (cf. Bauman and Briggs 1990; Urban 1996a). The finished, fixed texts that researchers present obscure the ambiguities, inconsistencies, perplexities, and uncertainties that affect every level of the entextualizing process, from hearing to transcribing to translating.¹ But there is much that can be learned from these very elements of uncertainty; a neglected area in this respect is the way that such processes can illuminate the importance of cultural differences in metadiscourse and interpretive style. Because local metadiscursive and interpretive practices implicate the ways that cultural and discursive meanings are produced in the experience of our informants, they should be of concern to any of us who attempt to represent the words and worlds of others.

I entered the field with a research agenda that focused on expressive cultural forms as social practice; I approached my work from a disciplinary perspective at the intersections of cultural and linguistic anthropology, examining the relationships that discourse, poetics, and expressive culture have to sociality, work, and the constitution of identity. I was somewhat less prepared, however, to consider the significance of cultural differences in what language is understood to *be* and what it is understood to *do*. Based in part on the kinds of interactions described below, I began to consider the importance of thinking about how people understand language to work, what they say talk of various sorts does, and how they presume meaning and communication to be produced through discourse.

In this article, I analyze a conversation that occurred between myself and a villager, Dil Bahadur Tamang, about the taped solo performance of a song sung by

another villager, Mingma Sherpa. Both of these individuals are residents of Charigaon, a village in the high middle hills of Nepal, where I did field research in 1984, 1988-90, 1991, and 1994-95. The apparently straightforward purpose of my conversations with Dil Bahadur was for me to confirm my transcriptions of Mingma's song and to ask about a few points where I had trouble hearing or understanding what she had sung. As it turns out, these transcribing sessions did not always contribute very much to my understanding of the semantic meanings of the words or phrases in question or to my ability to transcribe, gloss, or translate them. They did prove, however, fruitful in other respects, as they illuminated local models of language, meaning, and interpretation.²

Despite my theoretical focus on analyzing the rich ways that referential and non-referential aspects of language work together in social processes of meaning-making, my practices in the field revealed the degree to which I unconsciously retained a notion of the entextualizability of discourse through the processes of transcription and translation, and the extent to which this notion rested squarely on the presumed "glossability" of the lexicon. Western traditions of lexicography suggest that "if the word is an identifiable unit of a language, then it must be possible to isolate a core, stable meaning that enables its consistent use by a vast number of users in many contexts over long periods of time" (McCarthy 1991:298). This proposition is, however, less self-evident than it appears at first, particularly in societies without traditions of lexicography (see, for example, Urban 1996b). When we think about meaning as social process, rather than as lexical gloss (or as constituted in a coherent system of Saussurian difference), it opens up the possibilities of cultural difference in what constitutes meaning-making itself.

This article explores the misunderstandings and frustrations that occurred as I enlisted villagers in my project of entextualization. Specifically, I look at my own insistence on the primacy of the gloss and my interest, as an ethnographer and translator, in writing down words and their semantic equivalents—thereby fixing them and their meanings. These preoccupations of mine came head to head with villagers' own linguistic practices and metalinguistic categories, practices and categories that privilege indeterminacies of meaning by (1) assigning importance to word sounds; (2) resisting fixity or finalization of word forms and meanings; (3) presuming linguistic meaning to be contextual; and (4) emphasizing the co-production of discourse meanings between speakers and listeners. In Charigaon, villagers value textual ambiguity and indeterminacy for their pleasurable and poetic potential in everyday conversation, narrative, and—especially—lyric song. But there is a further, social, level at which such ambiguity is valued. Charigaonle (villagers of Charigaon) social practice is built around ideas of egalitarianism and reciprocity. One result of this is a strong prohibition against telling other people what to do, a prohibition that is echoed in a striking reluctance to tell others what things *mean*. It is, further, socially inappropriate either to assert oneself authoritatively through language or to assert oneself by claiming authority over discourse or discourse meanings.³ This poses an

ethnographic challenge to concepts of meaning that presume a listener's recognition of a speaker's intention.⁴ In Charigaon, listeners are expected to be active participants in the creation of meaning and, simultaneously, in the creation of a participatory, reciprocal sociality (see Jacobson 1999). But these social norms were not clear to me at first; it was in part through misunderstanding in the field, through frustrating myself and others with my expectations about the unproblematic entextualizability of discourse, that I came to understand them.

Sherpa and Tamang are ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities within a constitutionally Hindu, Nepali-speaking nation. Both our conversations about Mingma's song and the song itself were in the Nepali language, a second language for me and a third for both of them. In Charigaon, almost everyone speaks at least three languages on a near-daily basis (Sherpa, Tamang, and Nepali). Conversational genres such as personal narrative, flirtation, gossip, and joking provide daily pleasures to villagers; song is also among their most pleasurable undertakings. Most of the singing in the village is done in the Nepali language, in the form of local adaptations of professionally-produced *lok git* (folksongs) that villagers hear over national radio or on purchased cassette tapes. *Lok git* represent idealized and highly conventionalized versions of village musical traditions. Although the history of *lok git* as a genre is ostensibly one of "preserving," "collecting" or "adapting" the many song traditions of Nepal's villages, in actuality it molded a variety of diverse local musics into a distinctive popular mediated genre. This national genre is characterized by a focus on romantic love in its *lyrics*, by remarkable stylistic consistency in its *music*, and by the use of Nepali in its *language*. Charigaonle sing these *lok git* in collaborative group song and dance performances in conjunction with a variety of ritual and sociable occasions, including Sherpa Buddhist temple rituals, Tamang shamanic ceremonies, and national Hindu festival celebrations—all of which are celebrated locally. For the purposes of my argument here, it is important to know that *lok git* represents a national tradition, in the national language, but that it has become an important part of local values and practices in Charigaon; villagers claim the songs as "our own" (see Jacobson 1998, 1999).⁵

Talking about Meaning

At the tail end of the monsoon season in 1995, which corresponded with the final weeks of my fieldwork, I sat with Dil Bahadur in a rented room in Kathmandu. As the rain fell intermittently outside, we listened to taped songs and narratives that I had recorded in preceding months in Charigaon. The process of listening together, and my attempts to use that listening to create texts, was by turns frustrating, funny, fruitful, tedious and revealing. Then, as now, I took great pleasure in listening to field recordings I had made of Charigaon songs and narratives. Dil Bahadur, as most Charigaonle, similarly enjoyed listening to these materials, though we approached the task of listening in very different ways. Later, back in Colorado and Texas, when I

began to think closely about what was going on in this and other transcribing sessions (working with Dil Bahadur and with other villagers, both Sherpa and Tamang), I was somewhat surprised—and not a little embarrassed—to find how persistently I tended to be concerned with *glossing* words or phrases. As an anthropologist, after all, my professional task involved recasting discourse materials as texts. I wanted to be able to write something down; I did not wish to be left with ambiguities, inconsistencies, and blanks in my text. The recorded sessions reveal that I continually returned to questions about semantic meaning. My informants, on the other hand, tended to respond to such queries in a variety of ways, and without privileging either referential content or textual fixity. Although I focus here on one particular conversation, the responses I detail are characteristic of those I heard over many years, in context of a variety of conversational and narrative genres, and with numerous individuals of this village. I rely heavily on examples from interactions with Dil Bahadur not because his responses were unusual, but because it was not until late in my fieldwork that I began making regular recordings of transcribing sessions, and his voice predominates in these.

The responses that I heard tended to fall into the following six categories. The first category of response that I heard is simple repetition: the word or phrase is repeated back to me with minimal embellishment or alteration as if I will grow to understand it through the sonic repetition and density of hearing it spoken over and over, as in the following: “You know, *ke bhaeko nārana* means, well what it actually means is, well, ‘*Ke bhaeko nārana, ke bhaeko, brother, ke bhaeko nārana, ke bhaeko?*’ maybe, you know? Well, saying to this brother, ‘*Ke bhaeko nārana, ke bhaeko nārana?*’ ” This was not an infrequent kind of response but rarely occurred in isolation; it was ordinarily conjoined with one or more of the categories given below.

In the second category, a sound-iconic exchange is made: a word or phrase that sounds similar to a phrase about which I am asking, but that has a different meaning—or even no meaning at all—is substituted. This happens particularly, though not exclusively, with words that are not in common use locally—that is, whose meanings may not be clearly known—or when working between languages. In a sense, then, this category works like the category of the gloss, “translating,” but doing so by making sound-alike instead of meaning-alike substitutions. Sound-iconicity is extremely salient in Charigaon discourses. For example, those who work on the trekking circuit and know a few English phrases often incorporate these phrases into their conversation by adding rhyming Nepali-language words or phrases: “Suhāri, bhāi buhāri!” [Sorry, younger brother’s wife!], they will say, or “Gud āidiya, musāle khāidiya!” [Good idea, (a) rat ate (it)!]. In these cases, the English phrase is nonsensically paired with a rhyming Nepali-language phrase; it is there because it provides a link between the two languages at the level of sound. When using English-language words or phrases such as these, I, on the other hand, initially tended to pair them with a word or phrase which had a similar *meaning* in Nepali, opting for

redundancy of meaning across languages rather than of sound: “Suhāri, māph garnus!” [Sorry, forgive me!]. People use phrases like these in situations where the English meaning is appropriate and the Nepali meaning nonsensical, but they also just shout them out for fun, enjoying their *sound* and the fact that something in English sounds like something in Nepali. Sound iconicity occurred frequently, both in spontaneous interactions and as a response to my inquiries.

The third and fourth categories relate specifically to talk about song. The third category characterizes phrases used in songs as *gitko sabdā* (song words). The term *song words* refers to evocative but propositionally irrelevant or near-nonsensical words or phrases. These are often appealing or evocative images such as *kalpanā* (imagination), *pāni tālaimā* (water in the lake), *chha māchchi jālaimā* (there are fish in the net), and *sarara minibasaimā* (*sarara*⁶ on the minibus). Such words or phrases exist in songs for the sake of form, poetic structure, rhyme, and meter and not (or at most secondarily) for the sake of their content. As an explanation, “*gitko sabdā*” has to be understood as a metalinguistic comment, instructing me to understand these words not by reference to their content but to the generic, specifically poetic, expectations that surround them (cf. Briggs and Bauman 1992; Hanks 1987).

The fourth category of response explains lyrics as being *gitko jawāph* (the song’s answer), contextualizing lyric meanings in terms of the back-and-forth of the verses of a song. In this case, a dialogue is presumed, based on the alternation of conventionally gendered “voices” within a song; meanings coalesce out of the song’s internal context. “She/he is giving the song’s answer” in itself was often considered sufficient explanation, although sometimes such a response was elaborated with specific reference to a previous couplet as part of a dialogue. When Charigaonle talk about “the song’s answer,” they are implicitly referring to the practice of *juwāri khelnu* (song dueling) or, as it is often billed on cassette covers, *dohori git* (reciprocal song). In these, male and female singers exchange verses until one side “wins.”⁷

In the fifth category a word or phrase is addressed by a brief narrative that leaps away from the text altogether. Charigaonle often understand song lyrics to speak to very specific kinds of personal situations—sometimes actual but often hypothetical—and villagers frequently answer questions about textual meanings (of songs, stories, or simple lexical items) with a story about an actual or imagined situation. In this kind of response, the original phrase may be abandoned entirely, the ensuing narrative neither explaining nor illustrating it in a straightforward way, but simply using it as an opening or jumping off place. This is a kind of response that villagers often gave to my questions about the meanings of song lines or verses as well as in response to simple queries about vocabulary. The following song lyric provoked this kind of hypothetical contextual explanation:

On the uphill road, a walking stick, crooked on the handle.
Mother and father flashy and splendid, sons and daughters naked.

[ukālimā ṭekne lauro samāunemā bāngo
āmā bābu jhili-mili chhorā chhori nāngo]

A young village woman explained the first line of the couplet simply as “song words.” She elaborated on the second line, however, saying, “Well, say, Ang Ju is your *bhenajyu* (older sister’s husband), you sing this in order to tease him, saying, ‘look at you in your fancy clothes while your children run dirty and ragged.’” Such brief narratives are not presented as authoritative meanings, but as contexted possibilities, meanings that might come from the *man* (heart–minds) of those who sing or that might be evoked in the *man* of those who listen.

Then there is a final, sixth, category: a gloss, definition, or direct explanation of the word or phrase in terms of its semantic meaning. Although I did often receive glosses, of a sort, they did not predominate over other kinds of responses; indeed, it was sometimes difficult to elicit them at all.

Of the non-glossing kinds of responses I describe above, the first two, repetition and sound substitution, emphasize the sound qualities of language, its sensuous, material, voiced, and heard qualities. The third and fourth are specific to song: the third presuming lyric sound (rhyme, meter) or evocative content to be more significant than propositional coherence; the fourth presupposing meaning to arise out of the discursive context, the relationship between couplets. The fifth, hypothetical personal narrative, assumes language and meaning to be deeply contextual, even when the context is an imagined one. All highlight non-referential, poetic, or contextual features of language. Only the final category can be said to focus centrally on referential content. Glosses, or other forms that emphasize referentiality, are not extrinsic to Charigaonle metadiscourses; they are simply not *the* privileged mode of interpretation, particularly in relation to pleasurable forms of talk.⁸ Similarly, poetic or contextual features do not lie outside the ability of English speakers to understand; yet, our ethnographic training tends to centralize a content-based model of language. As an ethnographer, I felt uncomfortable when I couldn’t get *the gloss*, as if I were failing in both understanding and (textual) representation.

The Song

The transcript that follows provides a vivid example of how Charigaonle use the categories outlined above to talk about language. The conversation it records took place between Dil Bahadur and myself. Dil Bahadur, in his early thirties at the time, speaks Sherpa, Tamang, and Nepali on a daily basis; he also knows Tibetan and some Hindi.⁹ The conversations that I refer to here took place in the Nepali language. In the conversations, we listened to and discussed a Nepali-language solo song performance that I had recorded a few months earlier. The young woman singing on the tape we were transcribing was an unmarried woman, Mingma Sherpa, of about twenty. I had

known her for years and had asked her to teach me some songs, a request which Charigaonle have always responded to by singing into the tape recorder.

On that morning Mingma had arrived before breakfast, asking me if it was too early or would I like to wake up now. I replied that it wasn't and I would. We went outside, away from the house, because she said she felt shy about singing in front of her uncle, in whose house I was living. We sat on a big rock in the middle of a field of newly transplanted millet, and her several nieces and nephews—ranging in age from three to six years—played around us, in spite of my admonishing them not to make any noise during the recording. One child had a persistent cough, which can be heard on and off during the performance, and every time she coughed she was noisily shushed by the other children who also commented occasionally, scraped their nails on the rock near the microphone, and shouted at each other to be quiet.

Transcribing the Song

At the time of the conversation with Dil Bahadur, I had already spent many hours on my own transcribing the lyric and narrative material on my fieldtapes, including the songs sung by Mingma. I nonetheless wanted to confirm my transcriptions and elicit explanations for a few troublesome phrases that I could not understand. I further hoped to elicit evaluative comments about the performance and the lyrics, in order to gain some understanding of local aesthetic judgments, which are not always easily elicited through direct or abstract questions (cf. Briggs 1986; Feld 1990 [1982]). And, finally, I felt that my treatment of the material would be richer if I worked on it with local speakers rather than relying entirely upon my own understanding, dictionaries, or the interpretations of educated, English-speaking Nepalis from other areas of Nepal.¹⁰ Dil Bahadur was only one of several local speakers who assisted me in checking my transcriptions over a period of years. I began taping these sessions because I wanted to have more than my notes to fall back on in cases of ambiguous meanings or non-standard pronunciations or usages and because of my interest in how Charigaonle talk about meaning.

In the transcript below, Dil Bahadur and I were discussing phrases from the refrain of a *lok git* sung by Mingma, one she had learned from listening to a professionally-produced cassette. *Lok git* are made up of chains of rhyming couplets, like verses, which alternate with a repeated phrase or couplet, like a refrain. In Charigaon performances, there is no predetermined selection or order to the “verses.” A song, insofar as it has any abstract existence, is a melody and a refrain combined with the *potential* of any of a very large pool of possible lyric couplets—including lyrics composed locally, whether on the spot in performance or in anticipation of performance.

Throughout my transcriptions here, I leave the contested refrain in Nepali in order to track the transformations performed upon it. The refrain, as I hear Mingma

singing it—which is similar but not identical to what appears in the commercial version¹¹—goes something like this—although you will see how disputed this is between singer, transcription assistant, and ethnographer:¹²

sirkanda chandana
o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana

In fact most of this was perfectly clear to me; only three words were actually under scrutiny during our session: the phrase *sirkanda chandana* and the word *bandana*. Since *bandana* occurs in a phrase with the multipurpose verb *parnu*, I leave both untranslated. So, my level of comprehension of this refrain going into the session was as follows:

Sirkanda chandana.

Oh, (I would) leave (this) love and go, but *paryo bandana*.

The refrain as Mingma sang it sounded to me very much like what I could hear on the commercial cassette version; I had already noticed that when Dil Bahadur himself sang snatches of this song he sang it somewhat differently. So I knew that there was variation, and I hoped to be able to gloss both his version and her version and then get some discussion or critical commentary about the differences between them (and eventually compare them both with the commercial version).

At the time of the original taping, I had asked Mingma the meaning of the refrain, and she had repeated the words several times, becoming confused and uncertain. She had called the phrases *gitko sabdā* (song words) and under further prodding told me that the entire refrain meant “it’s like *sirkanda* is good, to part and leave is not good.” *Sirkanda* was, she finally said, “you know, *sirkhaṇḍa* that we eat,” making a slight sound substitution and referring to a narrow white root vegetable with a sweet dense flavor (Turner [1965 (1931)] gives *sagarkhaṇḍa*, though this is not the pronunciation used in Charigaon). But Mingma was unable or unwilling to isolate or gloss any of the other words. This is not atypical: villagers frequently pick up lyrics from professional folksongs, with their often fancier syntax, and sing them without worrying about their precise semantic meanings. Such phrases operate like vocables, but with the difference that they have semantic meaning to some (and, further, index more literate, more powerful, Nepali-only speaking outsiders).

The section of Mingma’s recorded performance that we were discussing here was extremely clean and clear. It was not raining, as it had been during other portions of the recording; the neighborhood children with their coughs and comments had given up interest and left, and all of my equipment was functioning properly. It is often the case with live village song performances that it is very difficult for any listener to hear what is going on. That was not the case here. I thought that with a little time and Dil Bahadur’s help it would be a simple matter to gloss the refrain—so

that I could write it down—and move on to what I considered the more interesting territory of the verses.

Transcripted Transcribing

In the transcript that follows, Dil Bahadur and I had just listened to the verse that begins Mingma's performance; I began recording our conversation as I queried Dil Bahadur about the refrain.¹³

- CJ: And from there?
 DBT: *Lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne . . .*
 Does (she) say “*sirikanjan santamā*” or what does (she) say?
 [sings] *O lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne ho birganjan santamā.*
- [CJ: ani tyahā dekhi?
 DBT: *lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne . . .*
 “*sirikanjan santamā*” bhanchha ki ke bhanchha?
 (sings) *o lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne ho birganjan santamā*]

Here, he sang the line, not fully repeating what she sang, but overriding part of her lyrics with something different. Realizing this, I asked him about what *he* was saying since I hoped to understand both her version and his. The first part of the transcript here, then, is where I tried to hear and repeat his version, and he confirmed or corrected me.

- CJ: *Mirganj*—what?
 DBT: *Birganjan santāna.*
 CJ: *Birganj*—
 DBT: . . . *ganjan . . . ganjan . . .*
 CJ: —*ganjan*?
 DBT: Mmm, *birganjan.*
 CJ: *Birganjan*?
 DBT: *Birganjan santamā.*
 CJ: *Santamā*?
 DBT: *Santānmā.*
 CJ: *Santānmā*?
 DBT: Yeah . . .
 (No), it's *santāna.*
 Did she say “*sanjamā*” or—?
 CJ: What is *birganjan*?
 DBT: Maybe (she) says “*birganjan santamā,*”
 most people say “*birganjan santāna.*”
 [sings] *O lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne ho birganjan santamā.*

- [CJ: mirganj—ke?
 DBT: birganjan santāna
 CJ: birganj—
 DBT: ganjan . . . ganjan
 CJ: ganjan?
 DBT: mmm, birganjan
 CJ: birganjan?
 DBT: birganjan santamā
 CJ: santamā?
 DBT: santānmā
 CJ: santānmā?
 DBT: ā . . .
 santāna bho
 “sanjamā” bhaneko ki—?
 CJ: ke ho, birganjan?
 DBT: “birganjan santamā” bhanchha holā
 bardi jastole “birganjan santāna” bhanchha
 (sings) o lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne ho birganjan santamā]

After these repetitions, I finally thought I knew what words he was using. I wrote down *birganjan santāna*, which more-or-less rhymes with but is otherwise quite different from *sirkanda chandana*. I continued by asking for clarification of the meaning of *birganjan santāna*. Dil Bahadur answered by telling me that she, Mingma, probably sang “*birganjan santamā*” (phonologically different yet again from his previous offerings), and then, as if to say “and even if she doesn’t—” he added that most people sing it that way. Finally, to drive the point home, he sang the refrain himself. Throughout, he conflates the two different phrases, substituting *birganjan santāna* not only for *sirkanda chandana*, but for *paryo bandana*. The two phrases fall into parallel sections of the melody so that it is easy to substitute them for each other, whether deliberately or otherwise. His version of the refrain glosses a bit differently from hers even apart from the phrases under discussion here. Where her version can be partially glossed as “oh, (I would) leave (this) love and go, but *paryo bandana*,” his version is “oh, to leave a love and where to go?—yeah!—*birganjan santāna*.” I was still trying to gloss the contested phrase, so I asked again:

- CJ: (Which) means?
 DBT: *Birganjan santāna* means?
 CJ: Yeah.
 DBT: Well, one, *birganjan santamā* means, like this, one (person) from Birganj,
 like that, like (some)one from Birganj’s, it’s like an answer to the song.
 Now (someone) goes on trek, a person from Birganj sings a song,

and *santamā*, that means that at that place their—
after saying their *santāna*—
they've got some *santān* there?
his companions, you know.

CJ: Oh.

DBT: Now, he has a family there, his own *santān*,
(he) has no other *santān*.
(She) says (it) like that . . . play it and see, now!
[REPLAY: *sirkanda chandana*
o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana]

[CJ: bhaneko?

DBT: “birganja santāna” bhaneko

CJ: ā

DBT: euṭā “birganjan santamā” bhaneko yaso euṭā birganjako,
tyastai euṭā birganja jastoko euṭā git ko jawāph jasto ho,
abo trekkingmā jānchha birganjako mānchhele git gāūchha
ani “santamā” bhane chāhī uniharuko tyahā—
uniharu ko “santāna” bhanepachhi—
uniharu kehi “santān” bhaeko tyahā?
usko sāthi haru chāhī

CJ: e

DBT: abo usko khālak chha tyahā ta āphno santān chha
arke santān chhaina
tyastai bhanchha . . . kichera¹⁴ hera na!
(REPLAY: *sirkanda chandana*
o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana)]

After his repetitions had failed to satisfy me as to meaning, he gave me a hypothetical situation, a spare narrative, as answer to my question: someone goes trekking, he is from Birganj, he sings the song and he has some relatives. Dil Bahadur also inserted the explanation, “it’s like the song’s answer” into the beginning of this narrative. Since the phrase is part of the refrain, not a verse, this explanation does not entirely make sense. Challenge-response sequences ordinarily make use of verses—and, in fact, he did not pursue it. I now understood; I knew what his words were *and* I knew what they meant. *Santān* means kin, descendants (in song, a final syllable, *-a*, is often added to consonant-final words). Birganj is a city in the low plains region in the south of Nepal; *Birganjan* refers to a person from Birganj.

By this time, Dil Bahadur had already made use of all but one of the first five of the categories I outlined above. He had repeated words, repeated them with sound substitutions, given me a brief narrative, and explained the words by reference to the

conventions of song. He had given me several phonological variations on *sirkanda chandana* and I was scrambling trying to keep up with them:

sirikanjan santamā
 birganjan santamā
 birganjan santāna
 birganjan santānmā
 . . . sanjamā
 birganja santāna

We thus have one Charigaon singer, Mingma, repeating a phrase she did not understand while singing the song; she was perfectly content not to know its meaning. Another Charigaon singer, Dil Bahadur, substituted a sound-alike phrase out of everyday parlance that could mean “(somebody’s) kin in Birganj” or “the kin of (someone) from Birganj.” In neither case does the phrase make a contribution to the song in terms of its propositional content. Both are thus “song words” in that sense, but they differ in register, meaning, and local comprehensibility. For the ethnographer, representing Mingma’s version poses a problem even if a gloss were to be obtained: finished ethnographic texts are not supposed to have this kind of blank in them; yet, representing the singer’s own sense of the phrase would necessitate leaving it untranslated, all sound and register and no content. Adequately representing Dil Bahadur’s version poses a different problem. It is on the surface less difficult because it is glossable; yet, his phrase is in the song because it sounds like something from the commercial version, which raises questions about how to represent such complexities of intertextual sound iconicity.

Dil Bahadur had succeeded in communicating his preferred version of the phrase that Mingma sang as *sirkanda chandana: birganjan santāna*. I had successfully understood it. But trapped within my notion of the translator’s task, I tried again to return to what Mingma sang on the tape and elicit a gloss for *her* words:

CJ: Oh, it (sounds) like she says something different.
 DBT: *Sirikanchan chantamā*.
 CJ: *Sir—lāeko māyā—*
 DBT: She says “*lāeko māyā*.”
 [REPLAY: *sirkanda chandana o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana*]
 DBT: Now she says “*lāeko māyā*.”
 [REPLAY: *sirkanda chandana o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana*]
 CJ: Oh, it’s from there that (she sings) “*lāeko māyā . . .*”
 DBT: *Lāeko māyā*.
 CJ: “*Sirgan—*”

- DBT: *Sirkanjan chantamā*.
 [sings] *Sirkanchan santamā*,
o lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne ho, birganjan santamā.
- [CJ: e, ule arkai bhanchha jasto chha
 DBT: “sirikanchan chantamā”
 CJ: “sir—lāeko māyā—”
 DBT: “lāeko māyā” bhanchha
 (REPLAY: sirkanda chandana o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana)
 DBT: abo “lāeko māyā” bhanchha ule
 (REPLAY: sirkanda chandana o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana)
 CJ: e, tyahā dekhi po “lāeko māyā . . .”
 DBT: “lāeko māyā”
 CJ: “sirkan—”
 DBT: “sirkanjan chantamā”
 (sings) sirkanchan santamā
 o lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne ho, birganjan santamā]

Here, Dil Bahadur gave a variety of phonological refinements to Mingma’s words, ending, again, with his own version:

sirkanchan chantamā
 sirikanjan chantamā
 sirikanchan santamā
 birganjan santamā

He simply could not make sense of what Mingma sang; he could not pinpoint it phonologically, did not understand it, and seemed to be uncomfortable taking a strong stand on what she was singing, phonologically, lexically, or semantically. I, on the other hand, continued to ask for such an authoritative pronouncement:

- CJ: [REPLAY: sirkanda chandana
o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana]
 Oh, and she (says)?
- DBT: Well, she says something else,
 but we (say)—
- CJ: She—*lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane. . .*”
 She says something else, right?
- DBT: Yeah, actually, they didn’t listen well to that tune and so just sang it
 any way.
 But we say “*lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne.*”

- CJ: Oh.
 DBT: First we had sung a little bit at that wedding, and then that song's . . . [indistinct]
 (We) had sung that song.
- [DBT: (REPLAY: sirkanda chandana
 o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana)
 CJ: e, ule chāhī?
 DBT: ule ta arkai bhanchha
 hāmīle ta—
 CJ: u— “lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane”
 ule arkai bhanchha, hoi
 DBT: ā, khās gari uniharule tyo bākā rāmro nasunna tyasai git gāechha
 hāmīle chāhī “lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne” bhanchha
 CJ: eh
 DBT: pahīle hāmīle tyo bihe mā ali ali git gāeko thiyo, ani
 tyai gitko . . . (indistinct)
 tyo git gāeko thiyo]

At this point, I tabled the phrase *sirkanda chandana* and moved on to the second phrase *paryo bandana*, trying to elicit both phonemic construction and meaning from Dil Bahadur. His patience was wearing thin, though. The more I pressed for definitive answers, the more variations he provided.

- CJ: *Lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo—*
 [REPLAY: sirkanda chandana
 o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana]
 —bandana?
- DBT: *Paryo bantamā.*
 CJ: What is *bantamā*?
 DBT: [sings] . . . *paryo bantamā* . . .
 CJ: *Bantamā* meāns?
 DBT: What does *bantamā* mean . . .
 “*Lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bantamā*” . . . (she) says!
- [CJ: “lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo—”?
 (REPLAY: sirkanda chandana
 o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana)
 “—bandana”?
 DBT: paryo bantamā
 CJ: bantamā ke ho?
 DBT: (sings) paryo bantamā
 CJ: bantamā bhaneko?

DBT: bantamā bhaneko ke ho . . .
 “lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bantamā” . . . bhanchha!]

He threw this last out quite sharply, with a rising intonation as if to say, “How should I know?” It is a truism in Charigaon that one cannot know what is in another’s heart–mind; furthermore, it is inappropriate to talk authoritatively about what other people say or mean. Dil Bahadur had sound cultural reasons to be uncomfortable with my project, but he continued, grumbling.

DBT: We say “*lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo santamā.*”
 There are two kinds of songs right here.

CJ: Oh, but what might *bantamā* mean?

DBT: Well what does *bantamā* mean?
 [mumbles] . . . *lāeko māyā chhoḍera* . . .

CJ: . . . *jāū bhane paryo* . . . *bandana* . . . *bantamā* . . . ?

DBT: *Lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo* . . .
 [sings softly] *O lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne paryo bantamā* . . .
 [thoughtfully] After saying “*paryo bantamā,*” well, one thing is . . .
ban . . .

is it as if the forest’s thickets have hidden it, or . . . ?

after saying “*bantamā*”?

like that, maybe.

Yeah, maybe like now (a) (piece) of the forest has covered this one
 ridge . . .

(She’s) working out the song’s answer and saying it like that,
 actually.

CJ: Yes, yes.

DBT: What comes into (her) heart–mind,
 (she) just works that out and says (it)!
 But it should be said “*sirkanjan santamā,*”
 but (she) said “*sirkanja santamā*” eh?

[DBT: hāmīle “*lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo santamā*” bhanchha
 dui kisimko git po paryo tyahī

CJ: e, tara bantamā bhaneko ke holā?

DBT: bantamā bhaneko ta ke?
 (mumbles) *lāeko māyā chhoḍera*

CJ: *jāū bhane paryo* . . . *bandana* . . . *bantamā* . . . ?

DBT: *lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo*
 (sings softly) *o lāeko māyā chhoḍera kahā jāne paryo bantamā*
 (thoughtfully) “*paryo bantamā*” bhanepachhi eṭṭā ke ho . . .
ban . . .

banko jangalmā chhekeko jasto ho ki . . . ? “*bantamā*” bhanepachhi?

- tyastai holā
 abo yo ḍāḍā bankole eṭā chhekeko jasto holā . . .
 tyastai gitko jawāph milera bhanchha ni
 khās gari chāhī
- CJ: ho, ho
- DBT: ke āūchha manmā, tyai milne garera
 bhancha ni
 tara “sirikanjan santamā” bhannu parne ho
 “sirikanja santamā” ta bhanyo, e?]

Here at last, after I had pushed him relentlessly, and after he had given two versions of Mingma’s second phrase (*paryo bantamā* and *paryo santamā*), Dil Bahadur came up with a gloss of sorts: *paryo bantamā* means that forest growth has covered and hidden a ridge top from sight. Repeating *bantamā*, *banta-* somehow became *ban*, the word for forest (*-mā* is a post-position meaning “in” or “on”). He followed his explanation immediately with a comment that Mingma was working out the song’s answer, explaining the creative process to me again, “What comes in (the) heart–mind, (she) just works that out and says it.” He also went on to give two other possibilities: what she “*should* have said” (*sirikanjan santamā*) and what she “*did* say” (*sirikanja santamā*); though, again, what he said she sang was not what it sounded like to me (or to others for whom I have played the tape). If this is a “gloss,” then, it is one that incorporates aspects of most of the other categories I have discussed: simple repetition and repetition with substitution, the song-as-dialogue explanation, and even the hazy edge of narrative as Dil Bahadur began to describe the hypothetical place the lyric might refer to. Our conversation continued, as I asked him once again to pin down her words.

- CJ: Yes, well, what did she say?
 [REPLAY: *sirkanda chandana*
o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana]
 “Sir . . . sirkanda”?
- DBT: She seems to say “*sirkancha chandamā*.”
- CJ: “Chand—chandana”?
- DBT: *Chandamā*.
- CJ: *Chandamā* . . . what is (that)?
- DBT: She says “*sirikanja chandamā*” okay?
 [REPLAY: *sirkanda chandana*
o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana]
 She says, “*paryo bantamā*,”
 it’s like she combined two songs.
 [REPLAY: *sirkanda chandana*
o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana]

- [CJ: ho, ke po bhanyo?
 (REPLAY: sirkanda chandana
 o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana)
 “sir . . . sirkanda”?
- DBT: “sirikanja chandamā” bhando rahechha
 CJ: chand—chandana
 DBT: chandamā
 CJ: chandamā . . . ke ho?
 DBT: sirikanja chandamā bhanchha ke?
 (REPLAY: sirkanda chandana
 o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana)
 “paryo bantamā” chāhī bhanchha
 ule ta duiṭā git mileko jasto
 (REPLAY: sirkanda chandana
 o lāeko māyā chhoḍera jāū bhane paryo bandana)]

Throughout our conversation, Dil Bahadur had become more and more irritated. By this time, he was rather wildly throwing out sound substitutions, as if hoping by pure chance to hit upon something that I would be able, or willing, to make sense of. In just under seven minutes, he had given me two alternatives for *paryo bandana* (*paryo bantamā* and *paryo santamā*) and almost a dozen for *sirkanda chandana*:

sirikanjan santamā
 birganjan santamā
 birganjan santāna
 birganjan santānmā
 . . . sanjamā
 birganja santāna
 sirikanchan chantamā
 sirikanjan chantamā
 sirikanchan santamā
 birganjan santamā
 sirikanja chandamā

None of the alternatives, with the exception of *birganjan santāna*, had any meaning to me (or apparently to Dil Bahadur).

In our transcribing conversations, my frustration was at Dil Bahadur's inability or refusal to gloss the phrases; *his* was at my refusal to pick up on a phrase and make an interpretation myself. I wanted him to give me an unambiguous reading of what we were hearing. He, for his part, wanted me to collaborate. He gave me many phonological variations, narratives, and oblique explanations about the song, but

I continued asking him to make an authoritative statement, to close down possibilities, and to single out one among many. For him the authority of a text or particular version was minimal, even irrelevant, but the responsibility—and license—of listeners to make interpretations and to produce their own versions was very great.

As I took notes during the conversation itself, I scratched out version after version, carefully writing in the latest possibility, each time hoping that I had achieved a “correct” or at least adequate transcription. Since that time, I have given up on achieving an invisible, magical, ethnographer’s transition from contexted sound to texted paper and turned towards thinking about what our interactions suggest in terms of a social semiotics.

Replacing the Gloss

I have grown to realize that while translation is an issue of some importance to *me*, it is not so much an issue or category of significance to my informants. By this, I do not mean that they were not interested in my *particular* project of translation. They were, on the contrary, delighted that I wanted to carry their stories and songs to “*Amrikā*.” My project focused on aspects of Charigaon life—song, verbal art, and linguistic playfulness—in regard to which villagers feel considerable pride and pleasure and that they are eager to share. Difficulties in obtaining help with my work did not have to do with a lack of interest in my project, but rather with the fact that people enjoyed telling stories, singing, and listening to recorded materials so much that they felt it indulgent to work with me, particularly when “real” (agricultural) work was waiting to be done.

What I mean to say is that my projects of writing and translating led me to focus on semantic meaning, which in turn obscured the extent to which pleasure and play, poetics and polysemy, participation and interpretation, sound and context are primary aspects of discourse practice in this community. While my focus on their expressive discourses was congenial to villagers, my insistence on entextualizing was problematic. Glossing, whether within or across languages, privileges referential content. In its most unequivocal form, Quine proclaims, “Empirical meaning . . . is what the sentences of one language and their firm translation in a completely alien language have in common” (2000:95). The fact that Dil Bahadur did not know what *sirkanda chandana* meant highlighted, even caricatured his resistance to glossing it, but did not create that resistance. After all, he *did* know what his own version, *birganjan santāna*, meant, but he did not easily or immediately gloss that for me either. The metalinguistic sensibility I have outlined in this article is not idiosyncratic; it is limited neither to the particular speaker nor to the rather artificial speech genre represented by my requests for a gloss. Nor do I have reason to think that I was encountering deliberate resistance, mockery, or obstruction from my informants—except, crucially, insofar as enacting a local cultural poetics resisted and

obstructed my monological stance on discourse and implicitly made fun of the serious straightforwardness of my focus on the gloss.

Sound Iconicity

The following story further explores sound iconicity as a form of play, suggesting the extent to which the pleasures of language sound are foregrounded in Charigaon. One evening as I was eating dinner around the firepit with Chhiringma, her five-year-old daughter Tasi, and Tasi's younger sister, Tasi said something that I didn't catch, in Sherpa. Her three-year-old sister, Min Doma, responded from her sickbed with a comment. Their mother laughed and then said to me, "I heard¹⁵ from Tasi '(I'll) eat some *chāna* [fried potatoes],' (and) Min Doma said '(are you) eating *chāna* or *sāna*?' " [Tasile 'chāna khāne' re, Min Domale 'chāna khāne ki sāna khāne?' bhanechha]. *Sāna* is a nonsense term that rhymes with *chāna*. Reduplications like *chāna-sāna* are very common in Nepali; they generally take the form of a rhyming repetition that substitutes "s" for the initial consonant of the first, semantically significant, word. These constructions are used to form a plural of sorts, but a plural that is expanded to include other similar or associated objects. For example, while *chiyā* means "tea," *chiyā-siyā* is used to refer to tea and its usual accompaniments; it means something like "tea-and-all." When the echo-word itself forms a recognized lexical item, this often forms the material for verbal play in Charigaon. *Māsu-sāsu* is a favorite example: *māsu* means "meat" and *sāsu* means "mother-in-law." When a host asks, for example, "Would you like to eat some meat-and-all?" [Māsu-sāsu khāne?], a common response is "(I'll) eat *māsu* [meat], but not *sāsu* [mother-in-law]!" [Māsu khāne, sāsu chāhī nakhāne!]. So, hearing the translation of the child's comments, I laughed, since I was clearly meant to; I didn't really see the point, however, since I didn't know of any semantic meaning for *sāna*.

A few moments later, though, Chhiringma explained further. The Sherpa-language word Tasi had used was *shyakpa*, indicating a dish of fried potatoes. Min Doma's joke, then, was (in the Sherpa language) "Shakpa na kyakpa?" where *kyakpa* (shit) reduplicates the sound of *shyakpa*. Her joke, then, was to say, "(Are you eating) fried potatoes, or (are you eating) shit?" and this is why her parents had laughed. In translating the joke to me, Chhiringma first translated the reduplicative effect, the sound qualities, of Min Doma's remark—at the expense of its meaning. Only later, almost as an afterthought, did she translate the meaning. If I had been doing the translating, I rather imagine that I would have done it the opposite way, mentioning the rhyme only after I had translated the meaning. The original joke itself, of course, depended on the *conjunction* of sound relationships of similarity (the rhyming *shakpa* and *kyakpa*) with meaning relationships of difference (the opposing categories of food and shit) and on the fact that the nonsense phrases that form the echo-construction can have meanings of their own.

In Charigaon, sound-iconicity rivals the meaning-centered gloss as a way that words or phrases are significantly connected, whether across or within languages. Charigaonle multilingual sensibilities have less to do with problems of preserving or fixing meaning—or even form—across languages than with interpretive possibilities, ways to keep meaning open, ways to play with both sound and meaning.

Contexted Meanings

In his work on entextualization, Greg Urban argues, “Discourse presenting itself through deictics and other devices as closely bound to the originator and to the local context of origination tends to be responded to rather than replicated. . . . In contrast, discourse marking itself as detached from the local is correspondingly more replicable and is therefore better culture” (1996a:42). While I cannot address the implications of the larger argument about culture here, I would suggest that although there may be features of some forms of Charigaon discourse itself that embed it in the originating context, there is also an overall metadiscursive sensibility that pushes towards embedding—whether in originating, new, or hypothetical contexts—and that this sensibility operates even when discourse features themselves facilitate detachability. Charigaon speakers tend to “respond to” discourses, whatever the level of their contextualizing features, rather than emphasizing replication.

The following, a more extended example of the hypothetical narrative as explanation, provides an example of the impulse to see discourse as embedded in contexts. The couplet under discussion was straightforward, containing ordinary everyday village vocabulary.

(A) truck arrived in Charikot.
Fall in love (with me), there’s no harm (in it)!

[charikoṭmā āipugyo ṭaraka
lāideu māyā pardaina pharaka]

I had no trouble understanding this couplet and was prepared to move on, when Dil Bahadur volunteered the following commentary:

DBT: (A) truck arrived in Charikot, not so?
And (the singer) said, “fall in love (with me), there’s no harm (in it)!”
On that truck
...
(She gave) it’s (the song’s) answer, to the boy:
“Me, I fell in love in the year nine¹⁶
(I) stayed and waited for that truck in Charikot”

When she (the singer) is giving that kind of answer, we give (her) that kind of answer,
that also is according to (one's) own heart–mind's thought (and) idea.

[DBT: charikoṭmā āipugyo ṭaraka, hoina?
ani “lāgideu māyā pharakai hūdaina,” bhanyo
tyo ṭarakmai
...
keṭālāi chāhī tyasko jawāph:
“maile chāhī māyā lāeko hunchha nau sālmai
tyo charikoṭmā parkera baseko tyo ṭarakai”
ule tyasto jawāph dīdākheri, hamile tyasto jawāph dine
tyo pani āphno manko bichār āidiyāle]

Here, Dil Bahadur sketched out a scenario, referring implicitly to another verse, one that he associated with the couplet we were discussing, but which was not actually in the performance we were transcribing. The couplet that came to his mind referred to having been in love since “the year nine.” He thus used his sense of how couplets can “answer” each other—even in absentia—as well as linking the couplets to an imagined context. He continued his explanation with a hypothetical narrative about himself (even though he had yet not been born in the year nine).

DBT: Now, what kind of answer I give, I had loved—fallen in love in (the) year nine, not so?
After saying “(the) year nine,” (that's) really a long time ago.
I fell in love in (the) year nine,
I too was sitting and waiting for that truck,
I—[breaks into song]—
fell in love in (the) year nine,
in (the) year nine, fell,
I waited for *this* truck.

[DBT: abo maile kasto jawāph dinchha bhane, maile māyā ta māyā ta
lāgeko thiyo nau sālmai, hoina?
“nau sāl” bhanepachhi, dherai agāḍi nai
maile māyā lāgeko nau sālmai
maile pani tyai ṭarak parkera basekai
maile—(breaks into song)—
māyā lāeko nau sālmai
lāeko nau sālmai
yahi ṭarak maile ni parkeko]

The idea that couplets come from the heart–minds of individuals, that they are voiced from a personal position, that they “answer” the utterances of others, and that

they are imagined to occur in and take meaning from personal contexts, is a powerful deterrent to entextualization, or at the least a powerful force for continual recontextualizations, for always thinking of discourse as connected to specific contexts.

Textual Authority

I want to return to the issue of authority in the transcript, specifically vis-a-vis Dil Bahadur's responses to Mingma's lyrics. In my conversation with Dil Bahadur I was asking him to help me transcribe a song that he himself knew and liked to sing. At first, he simply substituted his version for hers, not explicitly asserting its correctness or even his own preference for it. He was comfortable having her sing one thing while he sang another. But when I insisted that he hold the two versions up to each other, he chose his own, telling me that *they*—Mingma and her friends—*didn't listen well* (i.e. when they learned the song, whether from the commercial cassette or from live performers during some festive event). Dil Bahadur's assertion about "listening well" is interesting, given how closely Mingma's words resemble those of the commercial version and how far from it his own fall. But if we do not assume that "listening well" implies accurate replication of a recognized authoritative version, then the statement begins to make more sense. Given what I have argued so far, "listening well" seems to mean listening actively, *making* both sound and sense rather than merely reproducing them. In this case, it becomes clear why Dil Bahadur was frustrated with me: I was not listening well. From his perspective, I was not performing my share of the communicative task. He did not consider either his own words—or the intentions behind them—or Mingma's to be authoritative.

When I asked him about how he learned the song, Dil Bahadur referred me neither to the cassette as an authority nor to any authoritative version or individual. Rather, he referred to the fact that he was among the first in Charigaon to learn this song: he and his friends had gone to a wedding in a village a half day's walk from home, had picked up the song during the wedding festivities, and had brought it back with them. The basis for his assertion that he knew the song came from the process through which he learned it. His narrative traces a map of sorts, and it is this context—this map, this process, and this history—that he uses to assert the rightness of his version, rather than any authority or superior feature of the text itself (for example, he never claimed that her version was meaningless while his made sense).

Villagers often pick up variants from each other. They also are comfortable simultaneously singing different versions in group singing events (if Dil Bahadur and Mingma had participated together in a village singing event, it is quite probable that each would simply have sung his or her own version). In a subsequent conversation about the verses of this same song, Dil Bahadur spontaneously commented on

differences between a verse as she sang it and as he knew it with interest and appreciation rather than frustration or censure. It seemed to be the entextualizing context, the context upon which I was insisting, that he found so uncomfortable—not the variation itself.

Urban argues:

If a given instance of discourse is unique by virtue of its formal properties, as well as the infinitely rich specificity of the context in which it is embedded, by definition it cannot be reproduced. Replication, however, is an attempt at reproduction, at relocating the original instance of discourse to a new context. . . . If entextualization is understood as the process of rendering a given instance of discourse a text, detachable from its local context, replication is one way, seemingly, of implementing detachment. It tries to portray the textual as opposed to contextual aspects of the original discourse, and to capture, thereby, the decontextualized or polycontextual meanings associated with it. (1996a:21)

In this case, then perhaps Dil Bahadur was refusing detachment, refusing my project of entextualization. When we listened to tapes together, we were in a new context and, as such, had the opportunity to improvise, providing our own variations, interpretations, and playful permutations on the discourse. Dil Bahadur chose to replicate the discourse in such a way as to privilege the “infinitely rich specificity” and emergent possibilities of the *new* embedding context rather than according authority to any past version or fixity of the “text.”

As ethnographers, we need to continue to explore how deeply theoretical and ethnographic processes of transcription and translation are (cf. Schieffelin 1990; Ochs 1979; Preston 1982; Tedlock 1983; Hymes 1987). I want to suggest that problems of representation in anthropology are not limited simply to our representations of other people or “cultures,” but that we should give considerable thought to the representation of their voices, of their styles of speaking, listening, and making meaning, and of their forms of representation. Although I find it much *easier* to think in terms of an “original” version and its variants, such an approach not only privileges the chosen version, but—crucially—privileges a fixed approach to meaning. Taking local metadiscourses seriously provides real challenges to ethnographers committed to textual representation; it throws open the question of what it is, primarily, that we ought to be translating or representing with our own texts: content, sound, poetics, contexts, form? To what extent should local interpretive and representational norms guide our own? In this article, I have used conventional techniques of textual representation, but I have used them in ways intended to lay bare some of the problematics of transcription, translation, entextualization, and representation and to reveal something about Charigaonle approaches to discourse, textuality, and interpretation.

Conclusion: Ambiguity as Value and Resource

Charigaonle find monological, authoritative voicing problematic at best. They do not like to be told what to do and will go to great lengths to avoid telling others what to do. They similarly avoid asserting authority over discourse meanings. Cooperative and reciprocal forms of sociability and an egalitarian ideology are central to life and work in Charigaon. This results in a strong tension between social restraint and sociable participation, between the need to control ones actions and discourse so as not to impinge too much upon the agency of others and the demand to exercise ones *own* agency to talk and participate, actively and collaboratively, in social life. My process of text-making was fundamentally at odds with their processes of expression and interpretation. My text-making, to them, involved overspecification of discourse in a way that contravened both discursive and social norms. In asking Dil Bahadur to tell me what Mingma was singing and to tell me what various words meant, I was in essence asking him to behave in a socially inappropriate way to act big (*ṭhulo mānne*), as they say. At the same time that I pushed him into this untenably authoritative position, I was also refusing to participate appropriately in the communicative event, to exercise the right kind of agency, to take responsibility as an active listener. My blunders, then, were not simply obscure technical metalinguistic misunderstandings, but out-and-out violations of central social and interactional norms.

The communicative style that I have described occurs as part of more general cultural norms and also in a larger social and political context, a context I can only hint at here. The ideologies and practices of Charigaon Tamang and Sherpa contrast sharply with those of the dominant national Hindu culture in Nepal. Hindu social organization caste is predicated on explicitly ranked, relatively fixed social differences. Sherpa and Tamang, by contrast, emphasize shared sociability among persons of essentially equivalent status. Villagers consider explicit social control or the direct exercise of authority over others to be problematic; they display a profound ambivalence towards what they see as the authority, hierarchy, and reification of social identities represented by Hindu social organization. While villagers talk explicitly about their differences from high caste Hindus (accusing the latter of acting big and of refusing to sociably share food and drink, for example), they also *enact* those differences in their talk and in their interactional style. Their cultural style constitutes a resource not simply because it is *theirs*, but because if there is no basis textual or personal for asserting authority over discourse, meanings, or actions, then the authority claimed and wielded by Hindus and the textual and historical bases for that authority are constantly, if implicitly, called into question. In centralizing ambiguity and insisting on plural readings, Charigaonle generically refute the legitimacy of authority and fixity and thereby of the specific social hierarchy that surrounds them.

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Notes

¹ The entextualization of discourse is, of course, mediated by a series of processes and intentions (and this is only complicated by the presence of professional media such as cassettes or radio), as discourse is detached from one context, circulated and recontextualized through others.

² See Feld (1987), Haviland (1996), Maranhão (1993), McDowell (2000), Tedlock (1983), and Urban (1996a, 1996b) for related discussions.

³ The telling of myths in Charigaon, for example, is not reserved for particular tellers, nor are there fixed or authoritative versions. Although myths often deal with issues of clear social concern, wrongdoers are usually left unpunished in them, they have no clear morals, and they are not used to assert moral authority or social control over others.

⁴ As in speech act theory. There has been a number of compelling ethnographic challenges to such a notion of intentionality, for example Rosaldo (1982), Du Bois (1993), and Duranti (1993).

⁵ See Grandin (1987), Henderson (2003), and Moisala (1990) for further discussions of the national genre of *lok git* in terms of its inception, production, dissemination, and performers; see Jacobson (1998, 1999) for further discussions of how the genre is locally transformed, performed, and understood in Charigaon.

⁶ *Sarara* is a synesthetic term evoking the movement of the bus.

⁷ In Charigaon, a group of singers of a single sex—or even a mixed-sex group—will often sing *both* sides of the argument, alternating challenges with responses, male with female speaking positions within the song. In Charigaon performances, challenge-response sequences tend to occur in pockets of a few couplets at a time and not in sustained or actual “duels.” When Charigaonle talk about couplet sequences within a song, they do not, for example, reconstruct a linear “conversation” or story (as listeners from other areas of Nepal often did), but rather remark on momentary conjunctions or convergences—a challenge and response here, a pointed lyric there.

⁸ Pleasurable or poetic genres such as personal narrative, gossip, flirtation, and bragging are central in Charigaon daily life; they seem to be preferred to “straight” or “true” talk; see Jacobson (1999).

⁹ He is literate in Nepali, but not comfortably so; reading and writing are to him, and his fellow villagers, mysterious, mystifying, highly-charged, and potentially dangerous activities, due in part to the association of written texts with specialized ritual activity (see Jacobson 1999; cf. also March 1983).

¹⁰ I have, in fact, made use of all of these methods; two fluent English speakers from other areas of Nepal, Kamal Adhikary and Shambhu Oja, helped me make sense of many, many lyrics in 1991–93. I have also solved many problems with the help of dictionaries, particularly Schmidt (1993) and Turner (1965 [1931]). I have found, though, that when I compare the results of these methods, I often end up with multiple possibilities rather than finding them to converge into a definitive version. Different people actually *hear* different words, especially in sonically dense and disordered performance situations, and may interpret ambiguous phrases very differently. Moreover, Charigaon uses and pronunciations of many words and phrases differ from urban uses, and both can differ from dictionaries.

¹¹ I later was able to purchase the commercial cassette. It gives the title of this song as *shrikaṇḍa chandana* (transliterated from the devanagiri).

¹² I have favored what I think she is singing over what he thinks she is singing. This is mostly because in the end I cannot make out what he thinks she is singing and because of my need to write something here to anchor what follows.

¹³ Where I replayed Mingma’s song during the discussion, I have indicated this by [REPLAY: text replayed].

¹⁴ The verb *kichnu* is ordinarily used for “taking” (photographs) or “recording” (sound) and not for playback as Dil Bahadur has used it here.

¹⁵ The particle *re*, which I translate here as “I heard” is actually an evidential particle indicating simply that the information it follows is second hand; it is used, as here, to quote speech, but it has multiple functions. See Jacobson (1999) for a more extensive discussion of its poetic and narrative functions and its relationship to the problematic of discursive authority in Charigaon.

¹⁶ He refers here to the Nepalese year, *vikram sambat* 2009 (equivalent to 1952 on the Gregorian calendar).

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