



# South Asia Language Resource Center

## SALRC GRANT PRE-PROPOSAL APPLICATION FORM WINTER 2003-2004

Proposal title

**A web-based course in natural language Nepali**

Language(s)

**Nepali**

Have you previously received SALRC funding for an unrelated project?

**No**

Project period

**May 2004 - April 2005**

Requested funding amount

**\$ 20,000**

Is this proposal an extension or expansion of a previously SALRC funded project?

**No**

Are you applying for a Small Grant (under \$5,000) or for a Standard Grant?

**Standard Grant**

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# South Asia Language Resource Center

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Description of proposal (do not exceed three pages in this pre-proposal):

**see following page**



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## The Nepali Language

The Nepali language is spoken by around 20 million people in the Kingdom of Nepal, where it is the national and official language. About 11 million of these speakers use Nepali as a mother tongue. Outside of Nepal, Nepali is also spoken in north-east India and in much of Bhutan. On account of its widespread use in the states of West Bengal (particularly in the district of Darjeeling) and Sikkim, the Indian Constitution recognizes Nepali as a major language of India. While Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan, Nepali is widely spoken by many people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and is used as a *lingua franca* by many more. Nepali is therefore a major regional language that crosses several South Asian borders.

## Cornell's Nepali Language Program

Cornell University has an established and internationally-respected Nepali language program which is taught by native speakers through the academic semesters as well as in the summer. While other US universities also provide Nepali language instruction during the summer (most notably the University of Wisconsin-Madison), the academic year program at Cornell is unique for three reasons:

- (i) from the first day of the basic course, students are required to learn the Devanagari script along with colloquial spoken Nepali. Cornell's Nepali language program is the only course in the US which focuses on literacy as well as speech, and which does not use Indological transliteration for Nepali words.
- (ii) the course is entirely natural language based and taught by native speaker instructors, providing the students with a solid foundation in vernacular Nepali as it is actually used across South Asia.
- (iii) the course explicitly builds towards advanced language study in various disciplines. In a single academic year, the Nepali language instructors commonly teach intermediate and advanced classes to graduate students in disciplines as diverse as anthropology, forestry, computer science, botany and rural sociology.

In short, Cornell's Nepali language course is unique in the US context.

## Existing Resources

Banu Oja and Shambhu Oja, Cornell's two award-winning Nepali teachers, have a combined teaching experience of 30 years. In 1992, they wrote *Nepali: A Beginner's Primer, Conversation and Grammar* (172 pages) and *Nepali-English, English-Nepali Glossary* (189 pages). Both were subsequently published by the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell, and continue to be used by students at Cornell, other US academic institutions and by students abroad at international universities. These two invaluable Nepali course texts are now languishing in archaic digital file formats (Corel WordPerfect version 3) using a legacy Nepali font which is no longer supported by modern operating systems (Kanchi).



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## The SALRC proposal

Our proposal is to digitally rehabilitate and refresh these excellent pedagogical learning resources by constructing a *web-based course in natural language Nepali*. The result will be a beginner-level course which teaches both spoken and literary Nepali in a natural language environment.

A constellation of factors make 2004-2005 an extremely fortuitous time to initiate this project.

First, previous online resources for Nepali have been plagued by a plethora of custom-made Nepali fonts which are mutually incompatible due to different encodings (numeric codes that are mapped to character images or glyphs). Such fonts are also for the most part developed by and for individuals, thus limiting their widespread use and dissemination. The ultimate solution to such problems is the development of a Unicode environment for Nepali. Unicode is an international organization that provides a standard encoding for all of the world's major languages. Nepali is now included in the Unicode standard, under Devanagari, and the Kathmandu-based Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya <[www.mpp.org.np](http://www.mpp.org.np)> has released a Nepali Unicode font package including an installer for the Nepali Unicode Environment, a Nepali Typing Tutor (TypeMaster), a Sort Utility (Krama) and a Font Converter Utility (Converter). The recent provision of a stable Nepali Unicode font makes our proposal for a web-based course for the language timely and guarantees lasting utility.

Second, Mark Turin, a Research Associate presently at Cornell and the Director of the Digital Himalaya Project <[www.digitalhimalaya.com](http://www.digitalhimalaya.com)> based at Cambridge University, United Kingdom, is working closely with Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya to develop a set of robust and cross-platform input systems using varying keyboard layouts for Nepali Unicode. Turin has taught Nepali in Cambridge and Oxford universities in the UK, as well as at Leiden University in the Netherlands, and is a leading international expert on Nepali language and linguistics. He is committed to providing expert advice and consultation to the project.

Third, Cornell University is extremely active in web-based language learning and has excellent supporting resources to make the project a success. Primary institutional units offering active support include the Language Resource Center <<http://lrc.cornell.edu/>>, the Cornell Institute for Digital Collections (CIDC) <<http://cidc.library.cornell.edu/>> and the Department of Anthropology <<http://falcon.arts.cornell.edu/Anthro/>>.

Fourth, Cornell University and the Digital Himalaya Project have developed a close working relationship with the *Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library* based at the University of Virginia <[www.thdl.org](http://www.thdl.org)>. THDL have developed an integrated digital learning environment for Asian languages and are eager to collaborate with and support our web-based Nepali course.



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## Implementation Schedule

If the grant is secured, work will start in May 2004, according to the following schedule:

- *re-recording or digitization of existing audio tapes of natural language conversations which accompany the course in Nepali (in Cornell's Language Resource Center)*
- *retyping of the language course and the accompanying glossary in Nepali Unicode by fluent Nepali speaker in preparation for checking by original authors of the texts*
- *construction of HTML/XML pages with hot links to audio streams of colloquial conversations for proficiency testing online, using the transcription software suite QuillDriver-Savant devised at UVa for the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library*
- *user feedback: assess utility by asking current students of Nepali at Cornell to use and critique the web-based course*
- *based on students' experience, build the final robust, integrated and multimedia web-based course in natural language Nepali*

## Budget

The total budget requested is \$20,000. The primary need is to fund salaries for processing content (retyping, checking, webpage construction and consultation). All other work will be donated or paid as cost-share by interested and concerned faculty, such as the Principal Investigator Professor Kathryn March who will contribute 5% of her time to overseeing and managing the project. Technology and server costs will be covered by Cornell.

<i>Item/Expense</i>	<i>Cost in \$ USD</i>
Shambhu Oja (Senior Lecturer in Nepali) Relief from teaching to work on web-based tools, \$4,000 + 33% fringes	\$5,320
Retyping and checking of the entire course in Nepali and associated glossary, by fluent Nepali speaker, \$7,500 + 33% fringes	\$9,980
Recording of 6 hours of natural language conversation by two native Nepali speakers (male and female)	\$500
Nepali Unicode support and development of additional functionality from Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya in Nepal	\$1,200
Mark Turin (Digital Himalaya Project) Consultation on language and web-delivery of Nepali language tools, and integration with existing multimedia resources on Nepal (films, photos)	\$3,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$20,000</b>