REVIEW ARTICLE

BEGINNING TO READ NEPALI:
MERO NEPĀLĪ KITĀBA AS A TEXTBOOK

Ramawatār Yadav

Background

mero nepālī kitāba (henceforth MNK) is a textbook for Grade 1 written by Divakar Dhungel and published by MOEC: CTSDC/BPEP Primary Curriculum and Textbook Development Unit in 2049 v.s. Printed at the Janak Educational Materials Centre, Sanotthi, MNK contains a total of 39 lessons and 56 exercises, and it is heavily illustrated. A Teacher’s Guide, henceforth TG, (MOECSW: CTSDC/BPEP Primary Curriculum and Textbook Development Unit, 2049 v.s.) is also prepared to aid the teachers of Nepali to use MNK effectively.

MNK, we are told in the foreword, is prepared after three full years of preparation and extensive consultation with hundreds of teachers, parents, headmasters, educationists, resource persons, linguists, and Nepali experts (p. 3). It is therefore appropriate to look closely into the contents of MNK.

According to the preface, the objective of MNK is to teach such linguistic skills as listening, speaking, reading, and writing to grade 1 learners of Nepali (p. 4). Closer scrutiny reveals that the great majority of lessons are devoted to teaching writing and reading and only a few to listening and speaking.

Imperfections of MNK

MNK is replete with imperfections; only prominent ones will be mentioned here.

Lack of fit between Curriculum and MNK

A grievous imperfection of MNK is the gross lack of fit between the curricular goals set in the Grade 1 Nepali Curriculum (printed on pp. 6-8 in TG) and the MNK as a prescribed textbook. A few examples are cited below for illustration.

The Curriculum states that the case markers ले ‘Nominative/Instrumental’, लाई ‘Accusative-Dative’, मा ‘Locative’ and बाट ‘Ablative’ will be taught to Grade 1 learners of Nepali. However, Lessons 21 and 22 teach such possessive forms as उसको ‘he-Possessive’ (p. 64), हँसको ‘duck-Possessive’ (p. 64), पैचराको ‘tap-Possessive’ (p. 64), and गढङ्को ‘Ganga-Possessive’ (p. 67); Lesson 28 and the accompanying Exercise (pp. 82-83) also teach a
number of pronominal possessive forms such as मेरो मिसा ‘I-Possessive’, तिन्होलिमा ‘You (Mid Honorific)-Possessive’ and उमा ‘We-Possessive’.

The Curriculum states that the personal pronouns म ‘I’, तिन्ह ‘You (Mid Honorific)’, उम ‘We’, लगाई ‘You (Honorific)’ and the interrogative pronouns को ‘who’, कुन ‘which’, के ‘what’, and किन ‘why’ will be taught to Grade 1 Nepali learners. But, the third person pronouns उ ‘he’, उन ‘they’ (pp. 84-85) and the second person pronoun त ‘You (Nonhonorific)’ (p. 84); and the interrogative pronouns कसा ‘how’ (pp. 92, 94) कति ‘how much/how many’ (pp. 98, 99), कस्तो ‘of what type’ (p. 105), and कहाँ ‘where’ (p. 105) also form the subject matter of MNK.

The Curriculum states that under Tense सामान्य वर्तमान ‘simple present’ and सामान्य भूत ‘simple past’ tenses will be taught to first graders. On p. 90, however, a complex tense form expressing indefinite mood is introduced, e.g., गन्ता होला ‘will/may have done’. The expression is a rather complex conjunct verb construction: तिराच गन्ता होला ‘will/may have thought over’. Similarly, on p. 96 the present continuous tense verb forms, e.g., पुलिएको ‘is blossoming’, ‘किन रहेको ‘is buying’ etc. are also introduced into the text.

The Curriculum states that the negative marker होइन ‘is-Neg’ will be taught to Grade 1 pupils of Nepali. On p. 18, however, the stylistically variant negative marker हैन ‘is-Neg’ is also introduced.

Finally, the Curriculum states that the first grade pupils will be taught to read, write and understand simple sentences in Nepali. However, on p. 80, a number of complex adverbial subordinate clauses using perfective/absolute particles are used, e.g., केटु गन्ती लगाई व्याख्याले बटी गुहाई ‘Having worn the shorts and vest, the child rolled the box’; ठकङ बीकी वच्ची गयो ‘Having carried the basket, the little child went’; बूढङ मान्छिले गली टेक्दै हाक्टरलाई बोलाई ‘Having held a walking stick, the old man called a doctor’. Other examples also exist: मूला खाई मुटामा बस ‘Having eaten the radish, sit on the stool’ (p. 49); केरा लिङ्घे खेतमा जाओ ‘Having carried the bananas, go to the field’ (p. 52).

**Vocabulary**

Textbook writing is a difficult job, and it requires professional skill and acumen. Textbook writing also entails a thorough linguistic research in the area of vocabulary frequency count. Without such a count, it may not be easy to specifically determine the exact content of the teaching materials, and the well-known principles of selection, gradation and presentation may not be adhered to. Exactly how important the study of word frequency might turn out to be is evident from a gleaning of Lesson 1 (p. 7) and Exercise 2 (p. 33) of MNK. The first lesson of MNK, a textbook meant to be used all over the country by non-Nepali speaking children alike, contains such infrequently
used lexical items as अग्न्यो ‘burning log’, and उद्धारा ‘to flick away’. Exercise 2 (p. 33) of MNK uses such lexical items as क (whatever it may mean!), प (a tatsama word meaning ‘letter’) and स (since when did number ‘seventeen’ become a lucky number in Nepal?). As a matter of fact, the very first vocabulary item in Exercise 1 (p. 33) is क ‘hand’: are we to assume then that क is the most frequently used word in the Nepali language?

The quality of MNK as a textbook is gravely marred by the use of a number of stylistic and dialectal/sociolectal/ idiolectal variants, e.g., आज (p. 43), शा (p. 46), and जाँ (p. 52) – all meaning ‘come-Imperative-Nonhonorific’, and जा (p. 52) and, जाँ (p. 52) – meaning ‘go-Imperative-Nonhonorific’. A more precocious child, on the basis of analogy, may come up with डेऊ (for डेख) ‘give-Imperative-Nonhonorific’ – a form which is not used in MNK. A more confusing example is छन् ‘is’ which is used both as a third person present tense singular/respectual as well as a third person present tense plural/respectual marker, e.g., राम घरमा छन् (p. 86) ‘Ram (Singular-Honorific) is inside the house’ and उनीहरु घरमा छन् (p. 84) ‘They (Plural-Honorific) are inside the house’. The confusion is further compounded when the young reader is confronted with बकुल्ला and बकुल्लौ ‘crane’ (p. 77) and बिराला and बिरालो ‘cat’ (p. 110) in the very same lessons. Apparently, there is a linguistic reason for this confusion. In Nepali there is a rule whereby a number of canonical forms ending in -ा undergo a morphophonemic alternation of the type o → a upon addition of case morphemes and postpositions. For example:

andho ‘blind’, but andhā-le ‘blind-Nom’ (p. 77)
andho ‘blind’, but andhā-la ‘blind-Acc/Dat’ (p. 77)
kamilo ‘ant’, but kamila-la ‘ant-Acc/Dat’ (p. 58)
bakullo ‘crane’, but bakullā ‘crane-Nom’ (p. 77)
cucco ‘beak’, but cucća-le ‘beak-Instr’ (pp. 76-77)
dulo ‘hole’, but dulā-bhītra ‘hole-inside (Loc)’ (p. 110)
bacco ‘child’, but baccā-kā ‘child-Poss’ (p. 77)

On the other hand, the canonical form phucco ‘child’ undergoes a morphophonemic alternation of the type o → e upon addition of case morphemes, e.g.

phucco, ‘child’ but phucce-le ‘child-Nom’ (pp. 76-77)
phucco ‘child’, but phucce-la ‘child-Acc/Dat’ (pp. 76-77)
phucco ‘child’, but phucce-ko ‘child-Poss’ (pp. 76-77)

It is unfortunate that MNK attempts to teach both types of complex morphophonemic alternation rules to first graders in one and the same lesson
(Lesson 26; pp. 76-77). It would have paid the author had he made a judicious selection of the more frequent and appropriate vocabulary in _MNK_ and graded them in such a manner that the stylistically variant as well as complex forms may be introduced in higher grades.

**Spelling**

A major thrust of _MNK_ is to teach the young pupil to write Nepali in a correct manner. Unfortunately, _MNK_ tends to employ a rather inconsistent spelling system and causes unwarranted grief and consternation to the first grader. _TG_ offers no relief either. For example, in an effort to teach how to write clusters, _MNK_ recommends to omit the vertical bar of the first letter of a two-letter cluster, e.g. क + र + दा = कःदा (pp. 68, 72) ‘flag’ (also written as फन्डा on p. 11) and ढ + नृ + झी = गन्द्वी (p. 66) ‘vest’. The letter containing no vertical bar is combined with the following letter to form a two-letter cluster in the following manner:

- ब + त्र + टा = बट्टा ‘box’ (p. 79)
- क + ट्र + ठु = कट्ठू ‘shorts’ (p. 79)
- ल + र + ठि = लट्ठी ‘a walking stick’ (p. 79)

Immediately after, on p. 80, the same lesson (i.e., Lesson 27) also teaches to write बट्टा as बट्टा and लट्ठी as लट्ठी.

The words containing -क्क- and -क्त- clusters are written in the following manner:

- हृ + क + का = हुकका ‘hookah’ (p. 79)
- ठ + क् + की = ठवकी ‘basket’ (p. 79)
- ढा + क + ठर = ढाकटर ‘doctor’ (p. 79)

However, _TG_ teaches to represent these very same clusters as हुकका and ठवकी (p. 126); both _MNK_ and _TG_ allow कट्ठू to be written as कट्ठू. In other words, the second consonant-letter is allowed to be represented underneath the first consonant-letter in the above examples. Under the circumstances, isn’t it likely that a more precocious child, upon the basis of analogy, may tend to write ढाकटर ‘doctor’ as ढाकूर? I presume that probably only a homorganic consonant-letter is allowed to be represented underneath the preceding consonant-letter in Nepali, but it is not quite clear.

Inconsistencies in the spelling system persists: whereas the -ङ - cluster is represented as गङ्गा ‘Ganga’ and चङ्गा ‘kite’ (p. 67) in _MNK_, both _MNK_ and _TG_ tend to represent the very same cluster as सङ ‘with’ (p. 38 and p. 128, respectively) and not as सङ्ग.

A more curious example is the representation of the back rounded vowels following a consonant in Nepali. In sharp contradistinction with the
prevailing practice in other Indo-Aryan Languages using Devanagari, MNK observes a peculiar practice of the type shown below:

कुकुः ‘dog’ (p. 45)
कुबुः ‘cock’ (p. 45)
पुःल ‘egg’ (p. 46)
पूःल ‘flower’ (p. 48)
पुःल्ल ‘butterfly’ (p. 45)
मूःल ‘radish’ (p. 48)
धूःप ‘incense’ (p. 49)
बूःः ‘old man’ (p. 49)
पूःज ‘worship’ (p. 49)

The above examples clearly demonstrate that while the back rounded vowels are represented under the vertical bar of the consonant-letter in ख, खु, खू, खृ, खृृ, and ꖂ, they are not done so in खुः, खृः, and ꖂ. Instead, they are represented underneath the tail-like part following the vertical bar of the consonant-letter. Such a practice confuses the young learner and renders the writing system of Nepali less practical and even less scientific.

**Presentation**

In general, the material is well-presented in MNK; a veritable feature of the textbook is that it is amply illustrated. A number of lapses remain, however. To cite a glaring example, the language of command used in most Exercises of MNK is vague. The command given is: खिलने शब्द कार्पिमा लेख ‘Write down the matching word in answer-copy’. The command, however, should read: चित्र हेर। चित्र संग खिलने शब्द कार्पिमा लेख। ‘Look at the picture. Write down the word that matches with the picture in answer-copy’. This lapse occurs throughout MNK (pp. 33, 34, 37, 41, 44, 47, 50, 53, 56, 59, 62, 68, 70, 78, 81, 85), and it diminishes the pedagogic value of an otherwise well-written text.

**Summing Up**

To sum up, MNK may be a suitable textbook for Nepali-speaking pupils of Grade 1; for non-Nepali-speaking pupils, however, MNK may turn out to be an inept specimen of a textbook. Rather than lessen the existing high rate of educational wastage and attrition in primary education in Nepal, MNK may continue to contribute to it.