Uday Raj Aaley: Language teacher



MEET THE PROFESSIONALS



Participants in the Kusunda class. On the left Uday Raj Aaley, on the right Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda and Kamala Sen Kusunda

Which language do you teach, and to whom?
I teach the Kusunda language to young people of the Kusunda tribe in Nepal. Although they belong to the Kusunda tribe, they never learnt to speak their own language.

What is so special about the Kusunda language?
The Kusunda language is widely regarded as a language isolate, not known to be related to any other language or language family. Unfortunately, the language is also critically endangered, with only two native speakers left.

When did you start teaching Kusunda and how did you get into the role of teacher?
I started teaching the Kunsunda language in January 2019. The Language Commission of Nepal selected me as teacher because of my previous work on the language and my contacts with members of the Kusunda community. I conduct the classes together with the last two speakers, Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda and Kamala Sen Kusunda. Actually, they are the main teachers as they hold all the knowledge on Kusunda. I organise and facilitate the classes, structuring them, transferring the knowledge from the two speakers to the participants, and testing the knowledge that the participants have gained and the progress that they have made. During the first session, we conducted a total of 90 hours of Kusunda classes.

How are your students selected?
There were 20 participants in our first session. Most participants are secondary level students, but five of them do not attend school. The participants are members of the Kusunda tribe of the Dang, Rolpa, Pyuthan and Surkhet districts in Nepal, and they are aged between 10-35. They are provided lodging and food during their stay in Kulmohar, of the Lamahi Municipality, for the entire duration of the session, which takes place during their school holidays.

We teachers are provided a basic salary. This is all sponsored by the Language Commission of Nepal, through their Transferring Endangered Languages to the New Generation project for

revitalising the endangered languages of Nepal. The Kusunda people are extremely grateful to the Government of Nepal for providing them with this opportunity.

What are some of the main problems you face in teaching Kusunda?

The main problems that we face are the lack of a grammar of the Kusunda language and the absence of teaching materials for the language. This makes it hard for us to teach the language and for the participants to study it. We have to improvise a lot, for example when teaching the spelling of Kusunda in Devanagari script and the grammatical features and structure of the language. Still, we are doing the best we can.

What do you think needs to happen in order to save the Kusunda language?

The Kusunda community is marginalised and has lacked educational opportunities. Although the initial Kusunda classes that we conduct have aroused the awareness of the community, this itself may not be sufficient to revitalise the language. It is essential to conduct an intensive study of the language that will result in a proper functional grammar, a dictionary, a collection of stories and subsequent teaching materials.

Most of the research materials on Kusunda that are available are written in English and by linguists, for linguists. They are valuable, but highly descriptive. They are good for typological comparisons and finding out more about the position of Kusunda among the world's languages. But practically, we are looking for a prescriptive grammar, written in English and Nepali, and ultimately in Kusunda, which will enable us to teach the language and thus save it.

A prescriptive grammar would generalise and formalise the Kusunda language, maybe to a more abstract level that may not fully represent the language as it was once spoken. Distinctive phonemes may be lost, or complex aspects of Kusunda grammar, such as the person-marking system, simplified. However, languages always change, and in order for the language to survive, we have to make concessions. It is impossible to expect Kusunda to survive only as a spoken language, because there are simply not enough speakers. We need to multiply the number of speakers through teaching young Kusunda people to speak and write their language. Once more people know the language, they will communicate in Kusunda, transfer it to their children, and the language will prosper.

Is there any way that the readership of Babel magazine could help?

I think that the readership of Babel can help to save Kusunda by supporting research as well as the preparation of educational materials. It may be through getting personally involved, helping us by writing on a certain aspect of the Kusunda language, clarifying a phonological issue, describing some aspect of the grammar, developing the orthography, or making teaching materials.

We have made a lot of audio and visual Kusunda materials available online in open access on the platform Zenodo (zenodo.org/record/3401526#.XfS74dVKjX4). This was made possible through the support of the Endangered Language Fund, the European Research Council, and crowdfunding at GoFundMe (gofundme.com/f/saving-the-kusunda-language-in-nepal), for which we are very grateful. Anyone can access these data and work with them. We just hope that people will share their findings with us and help us to benefit the Kusunda community through the revitalisation of their language. For those unable to get involved themselves, any other support is highly appreciated.

How do you see the future of the Kusunda language?

Revitalisation of a vanishing language is a difficult job. Especially when the language has only two speakers. But there is hope, because the Kusunda people are excited to learn their language. Young Kusunda people from various districts have been participating in the classes. If the classes continue over an extended period, the participants will become more familiar with the language and speak it more fluently. However, we cannot be complacent. There are only two native speakers left, so we need to hurry to describe the language and teach it.

My main motivation is the wish and desire of the Kusunda people themselves to revitalise their language. If they had resigned themselves to the idea that their language was to become extinct, as many linguists in the past have, I would not have put in the time and effort. ¶

Postscript: Despite the demise of our Kusunda teacher Gyani Maiya, we have started the second session of Kusunda classes. Kamala and I are determined to continue in Gyani Maiya's spirit, and build on the wisdom that she taught us. Uday Raj Aaley