

Learn Nepali: Talk Later

Report >
South Asia

Consumers learning European languages today can choose from a growing list of instructional materials, ranging from traditional pocket-sized Berlitz travel companions to interactive CD-ROMs. The latter have the advantage of being designed as linguistic resources that the learner can personalize and hold his/her attention. For the most part, only the commercially viable language courses have been made interactive (such as Spanish, German, and Russian), while minority languages materials, into which category Nepali certainly falls, offer at best an audio tape of sample conversations alongside a printed course book.

By Mark Turin

It was thus with some surprise that I came across EuroTalk Interactive's *Talk Now!* series of CD-ROMs, offering multimedia instruction in lesser-known languages such as Assamese, Farsi, Kannada, Manx and...Nepali. I ordered the course entitled 'Learn Nepali: Essential words and phrases for absolute beginners' and was rather bemused by the contents.

Double-clicking the rainbow coloured *Talk-Now!* icon on the desktop, takes the user to a secondary folder. While the natural choice would be to click the icon labelled 'Learn Nepali', my eye was drawn instead to a folder underneath which reads, in rather small and blocky Devanāgarī, *klīngon siknuhos*. This I can only interpret to mean 'learn Klingon', the language spoken by the race immortalized in Star Trek. More surprising still, in ways that I will describe later, is that the Klingon leitmotif pervades the whole CD-ROM. Clicking on the icon labelled Klingon sadly leads nowhere and the user is left with the feeling that a Nāgarī-literate computer programmer is having a laugh at someone's expense, in this case probably the company's (EuroTalk). After all, it is likely that neither EuroTalk's managerial staff nor users of the CD-ROM read Devanāgarī script.

On double-clicking the more promising 'Learn Nepali' icon, the user is required to personalize the interface by typing a name. A very pleasant (if uncommon) Nepali voice greeting, *śubha din* (Good Day), is then heard followed by a loud American shouting 'Good Afternoon'. While the top left of the home screen is dominated by administrative features, including purchasing other EuroTalk CDs, the prominent graphic of a CD in the middle of the screen labelled 'Learn Nepali' is strangely not clickable. The user is to click a small start arrow instead, once again to enter a name, only to hear the same enthusiastic American voice say 'Welcome to EuroTalk', the irony of which is all too apparent when starting to learn a South Asian language.

The content of the CD-ROM is housed within a subdivided roulette wheel of clickable segments, including 'First Words', 'Countries', 'Numbers', 'Phrases' and 'Food'. The subdivisions are sensible and useful, and navigation through the different sections is likewise intuitive. In each subsection, the user must choose an approach fitting his or her needs: word practice, speaking practice, an easy game or a more challenging one. The overarching structure is heavily dependent on graphics rather than text, and success is measured by passing tests. This approach will appeal to younger learners, but university students, researchers, healthcare or development professionals who are hoping to learn Nepali as part of their vocational preparation may find the interface childish and frustrating. Many educational CD-ROMs offer level or aptitude switching: the lower level being visually rich and structured around guided tours, tests and games, while the higher level concentrates more on in-depth language use and rich

content. This type of stratification, if well implemented, might enhance the EuroTalk CD-ROM and be less off-putting to adult learners.

Form

Two features of the *Learn Nepali* CD-ROM warrant special praise. First, it is possible to study Nepali through the medium of a language other than English. At any point in the course, the user may choose to alter the 'help' language (the language of instruction) from its default American English to British English, Hindi, Icelandic, Tibetan or any of seventy others. This is a powerful facility that will significantly increase the overall user base of the package, and is a feature not readily incorporated into other language learning tools. There are some limitations, as one would expect: some languages offer voice-over tracks while others are strictly textual (for example, the written Zulu word for 'blue' is offered when listening to the pronunciation of the Nepali word *nilo* 'blue'). Scrolling down the list, I noted that Nepali is also available, meaning that Nepali could be learned through Nepali, a somewhat unconventional way of achieving monolingual language instruction. Star Trek is ever present in the menu structure, however, as the language listed as 'Nepali' in Roman script is written as *klīngon* in Devanāgarī.

A second useful feature is the option of a female Nepali speaker instead of, or alongside, a male one. The language course is presented by two animated guides, a Caucasian man and an equally white woman. On hearing a word, the user can opt for a Nepali woman's voice instead of a Nepali man's simply by clicking on the relevant torso. The importance of this feature has less to do with sexual politics, since women's voices are just as often featured in language learning tools as men's, and rather more to do with speech variation and linguistic choice. Tapes which accompany instructional materials may contain role plays and vocabulary lists, but rarely can the user hear the same words or phrases being repeated by speakers of the opposite sex. Users of the EuroTalk CD-ROM stand a better chance of understanding, and of being understood, if and when they finally communicate in Nepali simply on account of having heard different accents and idioms from the outset.

Content

While the linguistic content of this beginners' CD-ROM is acceptable, it is marred by an overarching cultural uniformity. EuroTalk Nepali is an exercise in unreconstructed ethnocentrism, underpinned by the assumption that each and every culture (and thus by extension, its language) has similar patterns of social, cultural, and economic interaction. Sapir and Whorf would turn in their graves if they knew what was being peddled in the name of language pedagogy.

The lack of cultural tuning is best illustrated with examples, and is particularly apparent in the sections 'First Words' and 'Phrases'. The list of 'First Words' starts out, naturally

enough, with 'Yes' and 'No', but then, third in the list we are offered 'telephone' (pronounced *teliphon*), soon thereafter 'wine' (rendered as *wain*) and finally near the bottom, *kredit kārḍ* (credit card). In their defence, these are all now available in Nepal (but I am pretty sure they were not when the CD-ROM was created), and visitors to the country may indeed be in need of wine, but including these items in a list of 'First Words' seems a little far-fetched. Likewise, the 'Phrases' section is indicative of this globalized approach. The learner is encouraged to repeat and commit to memory sentences such as 'where is the train station' (*rel steshan kahā cha?*) and 'where is the beach?' (*samudrā kinār katā cha?*). While the latter example is of little use anywhere in the Nepali-speaking world, the former may at least be of some utility in Darjeeling or Sikkim. Generally speaking, in fact, the content of the course is more suited for use in the Nepali-speaking regions of India than anywhere in Nepal itself.

My suspicion is that every CD-ROM within the *Talk Now!* series has an identical database structure which includes exactly the same words, phrases, and examples. The result is a single product with voice-overs in different languages, but marketed as seventy-five different language courses.

EuroTalk Interactive's *Learn Nepali* CD-ROM is a mixed bag. While the interface is effective, the games and tasks engaging (if childish), and the choice of both male and female Nepali voice commendable, the utility of the course is compromised by the problems outlined above. The seamless integration and slick interactivity of the CD-ROM, combined with the lack of cultural applicability, make it a triumph of form over content. ◀

- EuroTalk, *Talk Now! Learn Nepali CD-ROM: Essential words and phrases for absolute beginners*, London: EuroTalk (2000), ISBN 1-8662-21088-8. [System requirements: Windows 95/98/NT/2000 or Mac OS 7 or above. Computer must have colour display, sound, 16 MB of free memory, CD-ROM drive and preferably a microphone].

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