Learn Nepali: Talk Later

By Mark Turin

I 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, Marathi and...Nepali. I ordered the course entitled ‘Learn Nepali: Essential words and phrases for absolute beginners’ and was rather bemused by the contents. 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. 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, Turkish 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 sophistication limits, 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 ajo ‘blue’). Scrolling down the list and forcing Nepal 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 klingon in Devanagari.

A second useful feature is the option of a female Nepali speaker instead of, or alongside, a male one. The language instruction 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 toaster. 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 idiolects 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. The CD-ROM is designed as a linguistic resource that is equally presents a brief exploration of the six emerging independent regions of Central Asia. The third part presents a regional survey of the emerging independent states. The second part covers the entire region in general and the neighboring states in particular. The final part offers the reader an insight into the future of this region. Life After the Soviet Union is recommended for those who seek a better understanding of the complexities that burden the emerging new states in the former Soviet south. 

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**Book Introduction:** Life After the Soviet Union

**Touraj Atabaki**

This introductory textbook is intended for a general readership of the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia and Azerbaijan. By utilizing the published materials as well as interviews with regional experts, the author successfully presents a brief exploration of the political, social, and economic conditions of the six emerging independent republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan. The book is divided into four parts. In the first part, the author provides a basic outline of the back- ground of these newly independent states from the Soviet era to their present independence status. The second part covers the entire region in general and the neighboring states in particular. The final part offers the reader an insight into the future of this region. Life After the Soviet Union is recommended for those who seek a better understanding of the complexities that burden the emerging new states in the former Soviet south.