

Rapporteur's Report

Webinar on “Cognitive Science and Psycholinguistics for Understanding Human Mind, Brain and Cognition: Prospects and Possibilities”

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Introduction

As a part of an ongoing series of webinars, this program – *Webinar on Cognitive Science and Psycholinguistics for Understanding Human Mind, Brain and Cognition: Prospects and Possibilities* – was organized on 26 February 2021 by Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) Alumni, Nepal Chapter in collaboration with Cognitive Science and Psycholinguistics Lab, Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University, Nepal and Language Acquisition and Language Processing Lab, Department of Language and Literature, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Norway. The program was initiated by Lekhnath Sharma Pathak, Secretary, NTNU Alumni Nepal Chapter and Founder, Faculty-in-Charge and Principal Investigator of Cognitive Science and Psycholinguistics Lab, Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. Dr. Ajay Risal (Associate Professor and the Head of Department of Psychiatry, Kathmandu University School of Medical Sciences) moderated the program. In the beginning of the program, Dr. Risal clarified that as its title suggested, the objective of the program was to discuss the prospects and possibilities of cognitive science and psycholinguistics in Nepal. To this end, stakeholders and experts in the field were invited as speakers and presenters. The panel of speakers included cognitive scientists, psycholinguists, mental health professionals, academic and administrative staffs of Tribhuvan University, and diplomatic representative of the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Nepal. Arranged in an alphabetic order of their first name, the invited speakers were:

- Associate Professor Dr. Balaram Prasain, Head of [Central Department of Linguistics \(CDL\)](#), Tribhuvan University (TU), Nepal
- Prof. Dubi Nanda Dhakal, Assistant Dean, [Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences](#), TU, Nepal
- [Dr. Evelyn Arko Milburn](#) Post-doctoral fellow, Department of Language and Literature, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Norway
- Mr. Jens Erik, Counsellor, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Nepal
- Dr. Lava Deo Awasthi, Chairperson, [Language Commission](#), Nepal
- Mr. Lekhnath Sharma Pathak, Faculty-in-Charge and Principal Investigator, Cognitive Science and Psycholinguistics Lab (*CoS-P Lab*), [CDL](#), TU, Nepal

- Prof. Mila Dimitrinova Vulchanova Director, [Language Acquisition and Language Processing Lab](#), NTNU, Norway and Dr. Valentin Vulchanov, Researcher, [Language Acquisition and Language Processing Lab](#), NTNU, Norway.

There was a consensus among the webinar attendees that

- cognitive science is a new field for Nepali academia in both research and teaching-learning,
- there is a possibility of research within cognitive science and its cross-disciplinary application, and
- stakeholders responsible for and holding decisive position in promoting research and education should foster the growth of the field in both research and teaching-learning of cognitive sciences.

This report is a condensed version of the views and opinions expressed by the speakers rather than a verbatim transcription of their presentation and oration. The discussion and topics are arranged thematically in lieu of a seriatum of speakers' presentation.

Cognitive Science in Nepal

As Mr. Pathak, Principal Investigator of the *CoS-P Lab* pointed out, cognitive science is an interdisciplinary field. Its goal is to understand human intelligence – the mind and brain – at multiple levels of complexity to which computer science, philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, neuroscience and biology contribute. After over 50 years of its conception as a field of research and study, cognitive science and the domains that contribute to understanding human cognition and intelligence have ripen in the Western world. As an example, Prof. Vulchanova gave a virtual tour of her lab and equipment in NTNU, and provided an overview of the research projects that have grown over the span of a few decades. In Nepal, however, there was no institutionalized research center to study human mind and brain until the establishment of *CoS-P Lab* in February 2021 in Tribhuvan University, Mr. Pathak highlighted.

Past and Present

Mr. Pathak, Prof. Dhakal and Prof. Prasain all of whom hold academic and administrative positions in Tribhuvan University (TU) stated it to be the fact that in Nepal, the root of cognitive sciences is in the Central Department of Linguistics (CDL) in TU. This point was also corroborated by Dr. Risal who holds an academic position as an Associate Professor in Kathmandu University School of Medical Sciences: He mentioned that he was aware only of TU as an academic institute that conducts teaching-learning and academic research on psycholinguistics and cognitive sciences in Nepal in the present moment. Mr. Pathak reported that few psycholinguistic studies had been conducted in CDL even before the formal establishment of the *CoS-P Lab* in February 2021. He reported that the findings of some of those studies have already been presented by him and his Masters student Ms. Sabita Rijal in the 3rd International Workshop of Society for Cognitive Science of Culture held in BITS Pilani, Goa, India from February 3 - 7, 2020. In the same Workshop, he

was also invited as a [keynote speaker](#) to talk about the relevance of literacy in cognitive science research in Nepal. Even though TU only has a 'dry lab' currently, as Mr. Pathak put it, such presence in an international scientific gathering indicates that psycholinguistics research within cognitive sciences has already started to make some progress in Nepal.

Collaboration

Science is a collaborative enterprise. And cognitive science by its nature is interdisciplinary. In addition to interdisciplinarity, collaboration in cognitive science also entails cross-cultural and cross-country collaboration. The speakers and participants showed a keen interest in interdisciplinary as well as international cross-cultural research endeavours.

In the national level, participants discussed the possibility of collaborating across different disciplines. As a practicing psychiatrist, Dr. Risal expressed his curiosity about the application of cognitive science research in clinical practice of psychiatry and mental health services. Prof. Vulchanova presented a recent study from her lab in NTNU on gestural communication in children with autism and suggested that such a study could inform mental health practice. She added that in fact, there are a number of findings from cognitive sciences which have informed and updated clinical practice. Dr. Risal expressed his interest in collaborating with *CoS-P Lab* to conduct studies that can inform clinical practise and mental health services in Nepal. It is to be noted that Dr. Risal is a faculty member at Kathmandu University (KU) and *CoS-P Lab* is housed in Tribhuvan University. Taking corollary from other projects in which Norway has collaborated with Nepal alongside the researchers from TU and KU, Mr. Erik (Royal Norwegian Embassy in Nepal) expressed his optimism that a research collaboration between NTNU, TU and KU could be successful in the domain of cognitive science as well. As an aside, [Dr. Milburn](#) (NTNU) added the importance of cross-cultural collaboration in psycholinguistics research with an example of learning and processing of second language in different socio-cultural contexts. Prof. Vulchanova also expressed her interest in conducting studies in collaboration with the Cognitive Science and Psycholinguistics Lab. Along the same line, Mr. Pathak provided a promising datum that in its very early days of conception, the *CoS-P Lab* has collaborated on a European Union funded DCOMM Project – a multi-lab research project to study spatial cognition across different languages worldwide.

Optimistic commitments

Prof. Dhakal encouraged the growth of cognitive science and psycholinguistics research in the [Central Department of Linguistics \(CDL\)](#), TU. He recalled the time of his chairmanship as the Head of CDL, and his support to Mr. Pathak's research initiative. He committed to continue his support in his current role as the Assistant Dean of the [Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences](#). He reiterated that he is committed to facilitate any kind of collaborative research that amalgamates psycholinguistics with other areas of humanities and specialities/sub-specialities of clinical sciences (medicine). Dr. Prasain was optimistic

that the programs like this webinar are helpful for getting ideas about how to make the psycholinguistics research richer in CDL, TU. He stated that as the Head of CDL, he is committed to do all in his power to support and formalize the outcome of the program. Although he was absent due to time constraints, it was reported that Dr. Awasthi (Chairperson of the [Language Commission of Nepal](#)) was also supportive of cognitive science research and was committed to facilitate the development of language sciences and psycholinguistics as a field of research and study.

Conclusion

The speakers and participants of the webinar almost unanimously agreed that cognitive science is new to Nepali academia, and all the major stakeholders have important role to play for its further growth. The institutionalization of a lab to formally study cognitive science in Tribhuvan University has sowed seed of research and teaching-learning; this is one of the first steps towards the growth and sprouting of cognitive sciences, locally and globally. Those who are in the decision-making position repeatedly expressed commitment to facilitate scientific research in Cognitive Science and Psycholinguistics Lab, and also cognitive sciences in general which can potentially grow beyond Tribhuvan University in the coming days. The theme of *collaboration* was embraced by national and international participants within- and cross-disciplines. The program pushed forward the discussion about the growth of cognitive science research in Nepal and ended with an enthusiastic and optimistic note for prospective students and researchers. It is to be noted that the common consensus reached in this program can only be achieved by its proper implementation: The commitment expressed by those in the decision-making position, and the research collaboration initiatives are two important themes to be followed-up after this webinar for the enrichment of the body of cognitive science research.