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On the etymology of Nepali *jhyāl* [1]

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Abstract: Nepali *jaskel/jaskelo* 'side door, window' is proposed as the immediate source of *jhyāl* 'window', whose etymology has long been disputed. The origin of *jaskelo* remains unknown.

1. Introduction

Nepali *jhyāl* 'window' appears to be a Nepalese lexical innovation, surrounded as it is, in neighboring Indo-Aryan languages (and even in the Nepali of Dorjiling) by *khirkī*/*khiḍkī* . Turner proposed no etymology in his great Nepali dictionary (1965[1931]), and the word does not appear in his Indo-Aryan comparative dictionary (1966, 1985).

Other lexicographers have tried to fill this gap. Bal Candra Sharma, in the first Royal Nepal Academy dictionary (1962/1963), declared that the word was of Newar origin (cf. modern Newar *jhyā:*), a hypothesis which gave rise to lively controversy. In a characteristically polemical article, "*jhyāl kasko* [whose is window?] ", Mahananda Sapkota (V.S. 2027 = 1970 C.E.) refuted the idea of Newar origin and identified *jhyāl* as a descendant of Sanskrit *jāla* 'net'. This etymology appeared in the second Royal Academy Dictionary (Pokharel 1983/4).

On the semantic side, Sapkota's argument for *jāla* as the source for 'window' depends on the topological resemblance between lattice-windows, or even woven bamboo shutters, and nets. There is support for this connection in Sanskrit itself;

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Monier-Williams (1970:419-420) cites 'lattice-window' as a secondary meaning of *jāla*. Turner, in his comparative dictionary (1966, no. 5213), cites one or two instances where modern descendants of Sanskrit *jāla* have the secondary meaning 'window'. But he was not moved to include Nepali *jhyāl* among these.

One point raised by Sapkota against Newar origin was quickly refuted by the Newar scholar Indra Mali. Newar origin does not imply the unmotivated addition of final *l* by Nepali speakers. Modern Newar *jhyā:* is a regular reflex of older Newari *jhyāl*, which itself continues an still older form *jhyār* (Mali 1970).[2]

My purpose is not to review this old controversy in detail, but to introduce a new piece of evidence. In the end, the best argument against an etymology is a more convincing one.

The controversy over *jhyāl* was fresh in my mind when, in 1972, in a Hayu village in Ramechhap, among houses which had no windows, I learned the Nepali word *jaskelo*, used for the small side door on the downhill side of the house. Turner (1965:211) has the following:

> **jaskel,** in *jaskel dailo* a small gate at the side of the house, wicket-gate.
>
> **jaskelo**, s. A small window. [cf. *jaskel*.]

(I have since heard *jaskelo* used for small windows in Achham.) This, I thought, was the origin of *jhyāl* .

The word *jaskel* is not attested in other Indo-Aryan languages or in Newar.

Semantically, the relationship between 'door' and 'window' is a classic one. As Buck (1949:469) remarks concerning Indo-

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[2] I do not know the precise phonetic significance of the final -r in this written form.

European generally, “Words for ‘window’ are connected with those for ‘door’, ‘light’, ‘wind’, and ‘eye’.” Nepali *khirkī* and widespread related words in India (Turner 1966 no. 3770) are examples.

Phonetically, I do not know of any exact parallel to the change from *jaskelo* to *jhyāl,* but it appears less difficult than the complexification of *jāl*.[3] In particular, the *e* of *jaskel* is a plausible source for the *yā* of *jhyāl*.

Accepting *jaskel* as the source of *jhyāl* leaves a number of questions unanswered, but it does appear to rule out any role for *jāla* ‘net’. The origin of *jaskel* itself, and the date and the authors of its transformation to *jhyāl* are questions that remain for further research.

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[3] Mali also found the change from *jāla* phonetically unnatural. Sapkota cited the development *ãdhyāro < ãdhakār* as evidence for a “fondness for *y* in Nepali folk-speech”.

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