

Foreword

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When it comes to language, few corners of the globe are as diverse as South Asia. Throughout history, this has been an area of high multilingualism and intense linguistic contact, leading to often extreme processes of change, linguistic conflict and accommodation, as well as the emergence of new languages. However, while diversity may be the order of the day in South Asia, language obsolescence and loss have now become equally conspicuous. As a matter of fact, the most linguistically diverse countries in this region feature prominently in the worldwide charts of linguistic endangerment. In UNESCO's online (and constantly evolving) *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, for instance, India has more entries than any other country, viz. 197 (in December 2012). Other countries in the region with a significant presence in the *Atlas* include Nepal (71 languages listed), Pakistan (28), Afghanistan (23) and Bhutan (19); only the Maldives are absent.

In South Asian nations, there is an established tradition of research and reflection on the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity. Yet, given the enormity of the task, more needs to be done to understand the causes of linguistic endangerment and design solutions. It is the intention of this volume to contribute to the debate by focusing on specifically South Asian problems, processes and constraints, from both a synchronic and a

diachronic perspective. As expected, most of the languages studied are, by most definitions, currently endangered - the type of languages that might feature in UNESCO's *Atlas*. However, some authors also discuss languages whose vitality (and even dominance in some domains) seems assured in the near future. Their articles are a reminder that language endangerment is a complex and multi-faceted issue, and call for long-term approaches to language preservation.

The idea to edit a volume on language endangerment and language preservation in South Asia followed from a scholarly panel dedicated to the topic which convened at ISCTE-IUL in Lisbon (Portugal) on July 25th 2012, as part of the 22nd *European Conference on South Asian Studies*. I am particularly indebted to the authors for their contributions and patient revisions of their texts, and also to the numerous reviewers who collaborated in the editorial process. A special word of thanks goes to Pedro Pombo for his crucial assistance with formatting the text for publication. Finally, I thank Nick Thieberger for the opportunity to publish this volume as a companion to *Language Documentation & Conservation*. The journal's open-access policy ensures that these articles can circulate easily and widely; it is hoped that the insights, warnings and suggestions in these pages will be useful not only to scholars, but also to speakers, language activists and policy-makers alike.