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## Status of the mother tongues in the 2021 census of Nepal

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### Abstract

*Mother tongues belonging to different genealogy present an appalling view in terms of vitality and levels of language use. The 2021 census has identified 124 mother tongues belonging broadly to four major language families, viz., Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian including one language isolate. There are 47 Indo-European mother tongues. They are spoken by 83.07% of the total population. The numbers of Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic mother tongues amount to 72 and three, respectively. They are spoken by 16.59% and 0.19% of the total population, respectively. Dravidian and language isolate each counts single language spoken by less than one percent. The mother tongues broadly belonging to major language families further belong to different sub-groups. Only 16.9% of the total mother tongues are destined to have speakers more than 1,00,000. Of such mother tongues, 13 belong to Indo-European and 8 belong to Sino-Tibetan. Only 47.6% mother tongues are safe. Around 30.6% are vulnerable and 8.9% are shifting. Around 52.4% mother tongues are facing different labels of endangerment. Around 43.46% mother tongues have sustainable levels of language use. The existing anomalies appeared in the counting of the mother tongues may be mitigated by conducting a separate language census and framing a formal language policy.*

**Keywords:** Mother tongues, vitality, shifting, language use, language policy

### INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to provide classification and assessment of vitality and levels of language use of the mother tongues (viz., first acquired language)

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enumerated in the 2021 census of Nepal. It also sheds some cursory lights on the anomalies in the counting of the mother tongues and suggests some ways to mitigate such anomalies in the days to come. Nepal lacks an independent and scientific census of the mother tongues. Thus, the general census is the only official source of information on the number of languages, vocabulary, number of speakers, and their locations. Following almost the same processes, counting languages and their speakers' numbers started from the 1952-1994 censuses and continued up to the 2021 census. However, there are apparent anomalies in the counting of the mother tongues in Nepal. In the 2021 census, around 124 forms of speech are recognized as mother tongues. In this census, twelve new forms of speech have been added and twelve languages enumerated previously as mother tongues have been collapsed into the category of 'others'. Besides, it has also enumerated 124 ancestral languages. The addition of new mother tongues, collapsing mother tongues, and enumeration of ancestral languages necessitate a fresh analysis of the mother tongues in terms of genealogy, vitality, and levels of language use for academic and language development purposes.

This paper is organized into seven sections. In Section 1, we introduce setting of the study. Section 2 presents the methodology employed in the study. Section 3 briefly provides classification in terms of genealogy and number of speakers whereas in Section 4, we present a vitality assessment of mother tongues. Section 5 briefly looks at the levels of use of mother tongues. In Section 6, we deal with some anomalies in counting of the mother tongues and provide some ways for mitigating them. Section 7 presents a conclusion of the paper.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper has employed descriptive research as the model for analyzing data and description. As mentioned already, it has used the data on mother tongues garnered in the 2021 census. This paper provides genealogical classification based on Regmi (2021a & b), Yadava (2003), Epple et al. (2012) and Bradley (1997; 2002) and assesses vitality and levels of language use employing the model referred to as the Sustainable Use Model for Language Development developed in Lewis and Simons (2010 & 2017). This model gives a theoretical framework which aims at assisting language development practitioners to understand the present state of affairs and understand appropriate ways for language development. The apparent anomalies in the counting of mother tongues are mitigated from the perspective of linguistic identity informed from Fairclough (1989) which argues for deep relation between language and power. Data have been presented through tables and figures as required.

## CLASSIFICATION

### Genealogical classification

Mother tongues (MT) genealogically belong to the four major language families, viz., Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian, and a language isolate. Table 1 presents the number of mother tongues, their speakers, and percentage in terms of language family.

**Table 1**

*Number of mother tongues, their speakers and percentage*

	Language family	No. of MT	No. of speakers	% of the speakers
1.	Indo-European	47	24227411	83.07 %
2.	Sino-Tibetan	72	4837808	16.59%
3.	Austro-Asiatic	3	55916	0.19%
4.	Dravidian	1	38873	0.13%
5.	Language isolate	1	23	0.00%
	Others		4201	0.01%
	Not stated		346	0.00%
	Total	124	2,91,64,578	100%

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

Table 1 shows that there are 47 Indo-European mother tongues which are spoken by 83.07% of the total population. Similarly, there are 72 Sino-Tibetan mother tongues which are spoken by 16.59% of the total population. In this census, mother tongues spoken by 0.01% (4201) and 0.00% (346) have been designated as 'others' and 'not stated', respectively. We briefly deal with the mother tongues with their speakers in terms of sub-groups/sections of the major language family as follows:

### *Indo-European*

Except English and Sanskrit, 47 mother tongues may be subsumed into a broad sub-family referred to as Indo-Aryan. They are further sub-divided into different sub-groups as follows:

#### **a. Eastern Indo-Aryan**

There are nineteen mother tongues belonging to the Eastern Indo-Aryan, a major section of the Indo-Aryan language family. Table 2 presents such mother tongues with their speakers and percentages.

**Table 2***Eastern Indo-Aryan mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

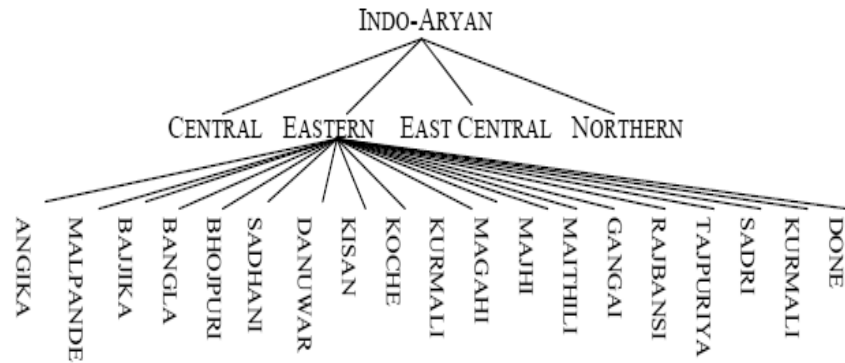
	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Maithili	3222389	11.05
2.	Bhojpuri	1820795	6.24
3.	Bajjika	1133764	3.89
4.	Magahi	230117	0.79
5.	Rajbanshi	130163	0.45
6.	Danuwar	49992	0.17
7.	Angika	35952	0.12
8.	Majhi	32917	0.11
9.	Ganagai	26281	0.09
10.	Bangla	23774	0.08
11.	Tajpuriya	20349	0.07
12.	Kewarat	3469	0.01
13.	Done	3100	0.01
14.	Sadri	1347	0.00
15.	Kisan	1004	0.00
16.	Kurmali	397	0.00
17.	Koche	332	0.00
18.	Malpande	161	0.00
19.	Sadhani	122	0.00
		67,36,425	23.08%

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

Table 2 shows that 67,36,425(23.08%) people speak the mother tongues belonging to Eastern Indo-Aryan language group. Figure 1 presents the position of the mother tongues belonging to the Eastern Indo-Aryan section among the Indo-Aryan mother tongues in Nepal (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021b).

**Figure 1**

*Eastern Indo-Aryan mother tongues among the Indo-Aryan*



**b. Central Indo-Aryan**

There are eight mother tongues belonging to Central Indo-Aryan. Table 3 presents them with their speakers and percentages.

**Table 3**

*Central Indo-Aryan mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

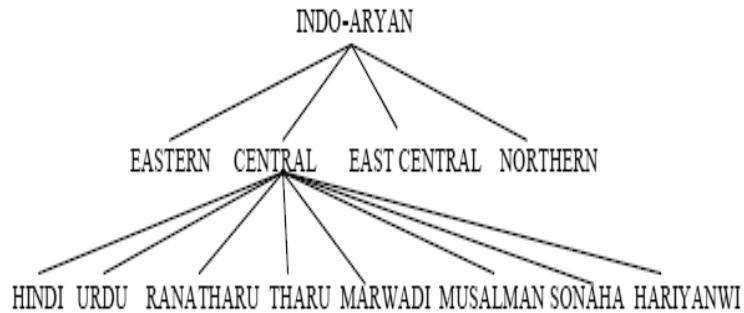
	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Tharu	1714091	5.88
2.	Urdu	413785	1.42
3.	Hindi	98399	0.34
4.	Ranatharu	77766	0.27
5.	Marwadi	21333	0.07
6.	Musalman	16252	0.06
7.	Sonaha	1182	0
8.	Hariyanwi	114	0
		2342922	8.04%

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

Table 3 shows that 2342922 (8.04%) people speak the mother tongues belonging to the Central Indo-Aryan language group. Figure 2 presents the position of the mother tongues belonging to the Central Indo-Aryan section among the Indo-Aryan mother tongues in Nepal (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021b).

**Figure 2**

*Central Indo-Aryan mother tongues among the Indo-Aryan*



**c. East Central Indo-Aryan**

A total of four mother tongues may be ascribed as belonging to the East Central Indo-Aryan. Table 4 presents the East Central Indo-Aryan mother tongues with their speakers and percentage.

**Table 4**

*East Central Indo-Aryan mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

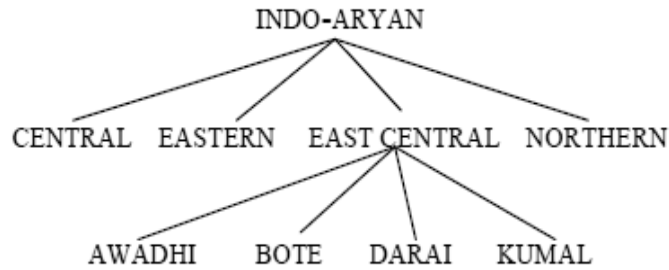
	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Avadhi	864276	2.96
2.	Kumal	18435	0.06
3.	Darai	12156	0.04
4.	Bote	7687	0.03
		902554	3.09%

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

Table 4 shows that 902554 (3.09%) people speak the mother tongues belonging to East Central Indo-Aryan language group. Figure 3 presents a tentative position of the mother tongues belonging to the East Central Indo-Aryan section among the Indo-Aryan mother tongues of Nepal (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021b).

**Figure 3**

*East Central Indo-Aryan mother tongues among Indo-Aryan*



**d. Northern Indo-Aryan**

A total of twelve mother tongues may be attributed as belonging to the Northern Indo-Aryan.<sup>2</sup> Table 5 presents Northern Indo-Aryan mother tongues with their speakers and percentage.

**Table 5**

*Northern Indo-Aryan mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Nepali	13084457	44.86
2.	Doteli	494864	1.7
3.	Baitadeli	152666	0.52
4.	Achhami	141444	0.48
5.	Khash	117511	0.4
6.	Bajhangi	99631	0.34
7.	Bajureli	56486	0.19
8.	Darchuleli	45649	0.16
9.	Dadeldhuri	21300	0.07
10.	Jumli	8338	0.03
11.	Dailekhi	4989	0.02
12.	Sign language	1784	0.01
		14229119	48.78%

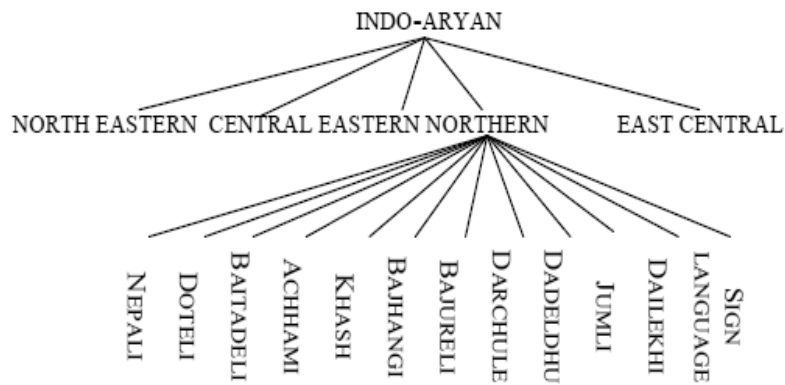
*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

<sup>2</sup> In Nepal sign language is used mostly in the Nepali speaking communities. Thus, it has been ascribed as belonging to Northern Indo-Aryan.

Table 5 shows that 14229119 (48.78%) people speak the mother tongues belonging to the Northern Indo-Aryan language group. It is the largest language group in terms of number of speakers. It includes Nepali and other mother tongues which are linguistically very similar to Nepali. Figure 4 presents a tentative position of the mother tongues belonging to the Northern Indo-Aryan section among the Indo-Aryan mother tongues of Nepal (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021b).

**Figure 4**

*Northern Indo-Aryan mother tongues among the Indo-Aryan*



**(e) North Eastern, West Germanic and Indo-European**

Punjabi and Sindhi belong to the North Eastern Indo-Aryan. There is only one West Germanic language, viz., English with 1,323 mother tongue speakers. Sanskrit, an Indo-European language, has 13906 mother tongue speakers. Table 6 presents the North Eastern Indo-Aryan, West Germanic and Sanskrit as mother tongues with their speakers and percentage.

**Table 6**

*Northern Indo-Aryan, West Germanic and Sanskrit with their speakers and percentage*

	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>Language family/Group</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Punjabi	Northern Indo-Aryan	871	0.00
2.	Sindhi	Northern Indo-Aryan	291	0.00
3.	English	West Germanic	1323	0.00
4.	Sanskrit	Indo-European	13906	0.05
			16391	0.05

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*



Table 6 shows Sanskrit, a stable language, has been recorded by a total of 13906 speakers as their mother tongue. The total number of Punjabi speakers is less than one thousand. English is also recorded as the mother tongue by 1323 people.

### *Sino-Tibetan mother tongues*

A total of 72 mother tongues belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family may be further sub-divided into different sub-groups/sections as follows:

#### a. Central Bodish

A total of thirteen mother tongues may be classified as belonging to the Central Bodish, a major section of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Specifically, these mother tongues belong to gTsang cluster under the Central Bodish sub-section among the Tibeto-Burman mother tongues. Table 7 presents the Central Bodish mother tongues with their speakers and percentage.

**Table 7**

*Central Bodish mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

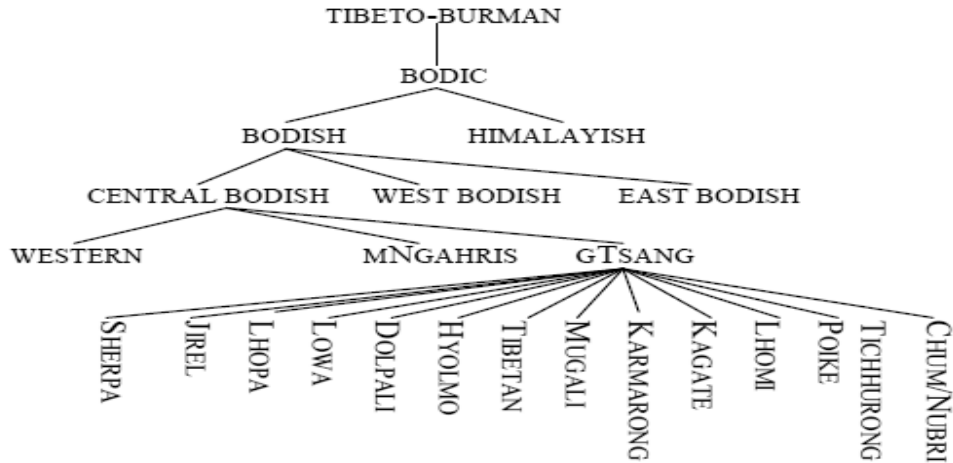
	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Sherpa	117896	0.4
2.	Hyolmo/Yholmo	9658	0.03
3.	Jirel	5167	0.02
4.	Tibetan	5053	0.02
5.	Chum/Nubri	4284	0.01
6.	Dolpali	3244	0.01
7.	Mugali	2834	0.01
8.	Karmarong	2619	0.01
9.	Lhopa	2348	0.01
10.	Lowa	624	0
11.	Kagate	611	0
12.	Lhomi	413	0
13.	Tichhurong Poike	410	0
		155161	0.52

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

Table 7 shows that 155161 (0.52%) people speak the mother tongues belonging to Central Bodish language group. Sherpa is the largest language in terms of number of speakers. Figure 5 presents the position of the mother tongues belonging to gTsang cluster under the Central Bodish sub-section among the Tibeto-Burman mother tongues in Nepal (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021a).

**Figure 5**

*Central Bodish mother tongues among the Tibeto-Burman*



**b. West Bodish**

A total of eleven mother tongues may be recognized as belonging to the West Bodish. Table 8 presents the theme with their speakers and percentage.

**Table 8**

*West Bodish mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

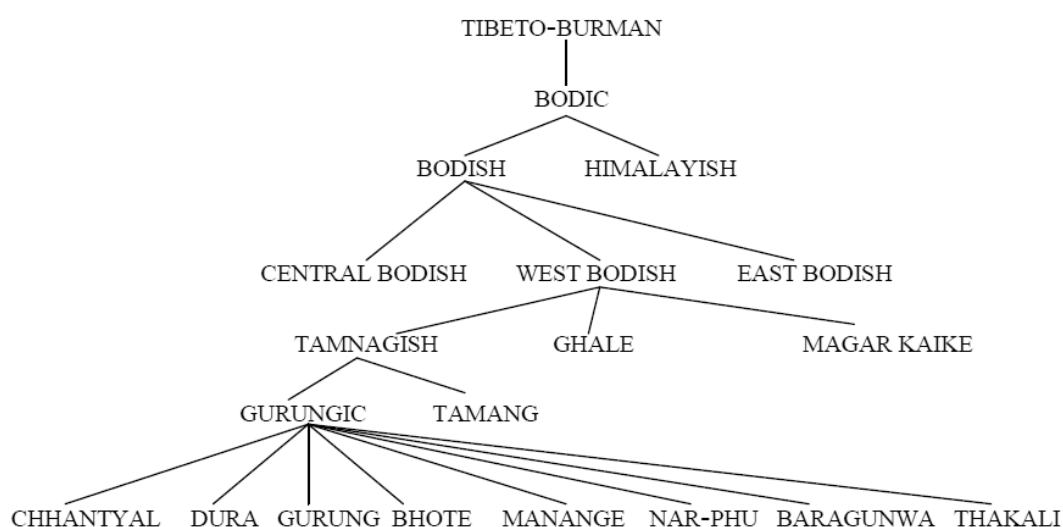
	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Tamang	1423075	4.88
2.	Gurung	328074	1.12
3.	Ghale	23049	0.08
4.	Bhote	12895	0.04
5.	Chhantyal	4282	0.01
6.	Thakali	4220	0.01
7.	Manange	2022	0.01
8.	Dura	1991	0.01
9.	Baragunwa	1536	0.01
10.	Magar Kaike	1225	0
11.	Nar-Phu	428	0
		1802797	6.17

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

Table 8 shows that 1802797 (6.17%) people speak the mother tongues belonging to the West Bodish language group. Tamang is the largest mother tongue in terms of number of speakers. Figure 6 presents the position of the mother tongues belonging to the West Bodish sub-section among the Tibeto-Burman mother tongues in Nepal (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021a).

**Figure 6**

*West Bodish mother tongues among the Tibeto-Burman*



### c. Central Himalayish

A total of eleven mother tongues may be classified as belonging to the Central Himalayish. Table 9 presents the Central Himalayish mother tongues with their speakers and percentage.

**Table 9**

*Central Himalayish mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Nepalbhasha (Newari)	863380	2.96
2.	Magar Dhut	810315	2.78
3.	Magar Kham	91753	0.31
4.	Chepeng	58392	0.2
5.	Thami	26805	0.09
6.	Bhujel	13086	0.04
7.	Pahari	5946	0.02

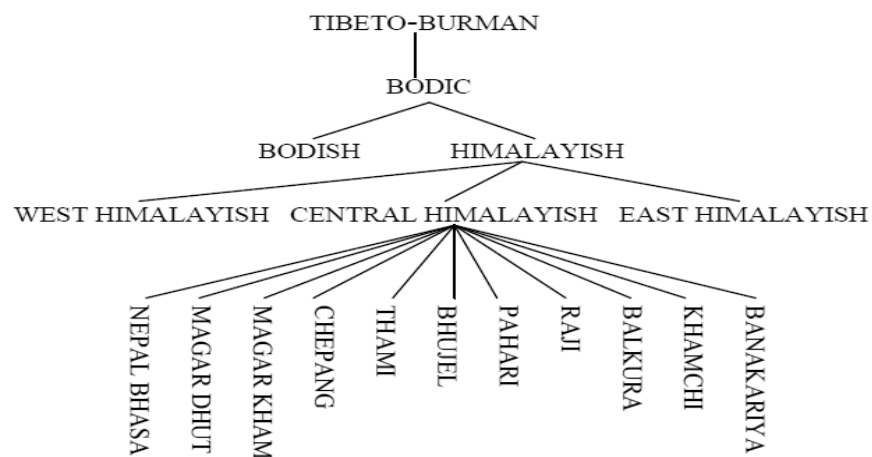
8.	Raji	4247	0.01
9.	Balkura/Baram	1539	0.01
10.	Khamchi(Raute)	741	0
11.	Bankariya	86	0
		1876290	6.42

Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021

Table 9 shows that a total of 1876290 (6.42%) people speak the mother tongues belonging to Central Himalayish group. Nepalbhasa(Newari) is the largest mother tongues among this group. It is spoken by 2.96% of the total population. Figure 7 presents the position of the mother tongues belonging to the Central Himalayish sub-section/group among the Tibeto-Burman mother tongues of Nepal (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021a).

Figure 7

Central Himalayish mother tongues among the Tibeto-Burman



#### d. Eastern Kirati (East Himalayish)

A total of nineteen mother tongues belong to the Eastern Kirati group. Table 10 presents the Eastern Kirati mother tongues with their speakers and percentages.

**Table 10***Eastern Kirati mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

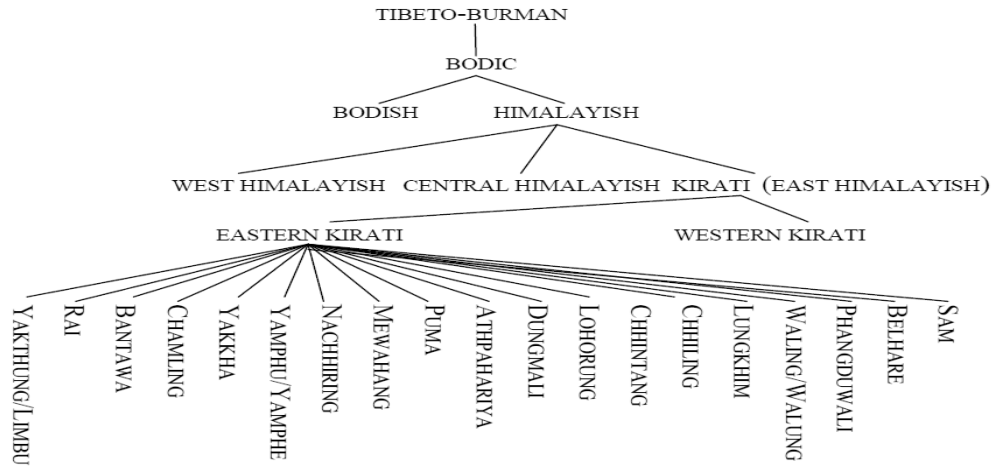
	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Yakthung/Limbu	350436	1.2
2.	Rai	144512	0.5
3.	Bantawa	138003	0.47
4.	Chamling	89037	0.31
5.	Yakkha	14241	0.05
6.	Yamphu/Yamphe	10744	0.04
7.	Nachhiring	9906	0.03
8.	Mewahang	7428	0.03
9.	Puma	6763	0.02
10.	Athpahariya	5580	0.02
11.	Dungmali	5403	0.02
12.	Lohorung	3884	0.01
13.	Chhintang	2564	0.01
14.	Chhiling	2011	0.01
15.	Lungkhim	702	0
16.	Waling/Walung	545	0
17.	Phangduwali	247	0
18.	Belhare	177	0
19.	Sam	106	0
		792289	2.72

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

Table 10 shows that 792289 (2.72%) people speak the mother tongues belonging to Eastern Kirati group. Figure 8 presents the position of the Eastern Kirati mother tongues among the Tibeto-Burman mother tongues of Nepal (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021a).

**Figure 8**

*Eastern Kirati mother tongues among the Tibeto-Burman*



**e. Western Kirati**

A total of thirteen mother tongues may be recognized as belonging to the Western Kirati group. Table 11 presents them with their speakers and percentage.

**Table 11**

*Western Kirati mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

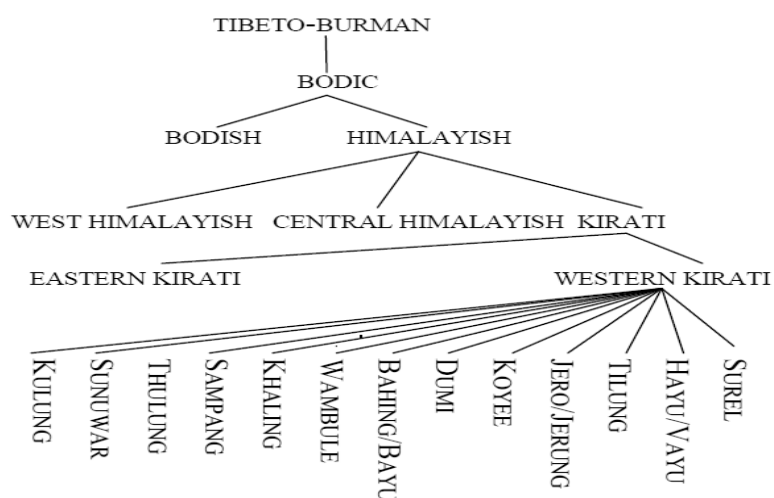
	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Kulung	37912	0.13
2.	Sunuwar	32708	0.11
3.	Thulung	24405	0.08
4.	Sampang	21597	0.07
5.	Khaling	16514	0.06
6.	Wambule	15285	0.05
7.	Bahing/Bayung	14449	0.05
8.	Dumi	8638	0.03
9.	Koyee	4152	0.01
10.	Jero/Jerung	2817	0.01
11.	Tilung	1969	0.01
12.	Hayu/Vayu	1133	0
13.	Surel	174	0
		181753	0.61

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

Table 11 shows that a total of 181753 (0.61%) speak the mother tongues belonging to Western Kirati group. Figure 9 presents the position of the Western Kirati mother tongues among the Tibeto-Burman mother tongues (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021a).

**Figure 9**

*Western Kirati mother tongues among the Tibeto-Burman*



**f. West Himalayish, SAL and Central Tibeto-Burman**

**i. West Himalayish**

Byansi and Dhuleli belong to the West Himalayish group. Table 12 presents them with their speakers and percentages.

**Table 12**

*West Himalayish mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Byansi	1706	0.01
2.	Dhuleli	786	0
		2492	0.01

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

**ii.SAL**

Dhimal and Meche are the only two mother tongues belonging to the SAL group. Table 13 presents them with their speakers and percentages.

**Table 13**

*SAL mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Dhimal	20583	0.07
2.	Meche	4203	0.01
		24786	0.08

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021*

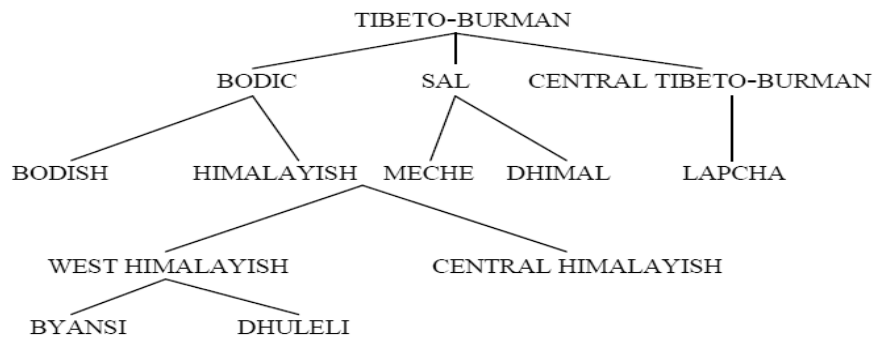
**iii. Central Tibeto-Burman**

Lapcha with 2240 speakers is only one mother tongue belonging to the Central Tibeto-Burman group.

Figure 10 presents the position of the mother tongues belonging to the West Himalayish, SAL and the Central Tibeto-Burman mother tongues among the Tibeto-Burman mother tongues of Nepal (Slightly adapted from Regmi, 2021a).

**Figure 10**

*West Himalayish, SAL and the Central Tibeto-Burman mother tongues among the Tibeto-Burman*



***Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Language Isolate, Others and Not-stated***

**a. Austro-Asiatic**

There are three mother tongues belonging to the Austro-Asiatic group. They include Santhali, Munda/Mudiyari and Khariya. Table 14 presents the Austro-Asiatic mother tongues with their speakers and percentages.



**Table 14***Austro-Asiatic mother tongues with their speakers and percentage*

	<b>Mother tongues</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	Santhali	53677	0.18
2.	Munda/Mudiyari	2107	0.01
3.	Khariya	132	0
		55916	0.19

*Source: National Population and Housing Census, 2021***b. Dravidian**

There is only one mother tongue belonging to the Dravidian language family. It is Uranw/Urau with a total of 38873 (0.13%) speakers.

**c. Language isolate**

Kusunda has only 23speakers. It does not belong to any language family.

**d. Others and Not-stated**

The mother tongues with a total number of speakers 4201 (0.0%) and 346 (0.0%) are counted as 'others' and 'not stated', respectively.

**Classification in terms of the number of speakers**

The mother tongues classified genealogically may be categorized into three groups in terms of number of speakers; namely, mother tongues with more than 1,00,000, 10,000 to 1,00,000 and less than 10,000. Table 15 presents the classification of the mother tongues in terms of number of speakers along with language family.

**Table 15***Classification of the mother tongues in terms of number of speakers along with language family*

<b>Language family</b>	<b>No. of speakers</b>			<b>Total</b>
	<b>More than 1,00,000</b>	<b>10,000 to 1,00,000</b>	<b>Less than 10,000</b>	
Indo-European	13 (10.5%)	17 (13.7%)	17 (13.7%)	47
Sino-Tibetan	8 (6.4%)	17(13.7%)	47 (37.9%)	72
Austro-Asiatic	-	1 (0.8%)	2 (1.6%)	3
Dravidian	-	1 (0.8%)		1

Language Isolate	-		1 (0.8%)	1
	21 (16.9%)	36 (29.03%)	67 (54.03%)	124

Table 15 shows that only 21 mother tongues (viz., 16.9%) have speakers more than 1,00,000. Of such mother tongues, 13 mother tongues belong to Indo-European and 8 belong to Sino-Tibetan. The mother tongues which have speakers from 10,000 to 1,00,000 amount to 36 (viz., 29.03%). Similarly, 67 (54.03%) mother tongues belong to a group having less than 10,000 speakers. Most of these mother tongues belong to Sino-Tibetan language family.

## ASSESSMENT OF VITALITY

### Vitality in terms of EGIDS levels

Mother tongues enumerated in the 2021 census present an appalling situation of vitality. Table 16 presents an assessment of the vitality based on the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) model proposed by Lewis and Simons (2010).

**Table 16**

*Vitality of the mother tongues*

Level	Label	No. of MT	%	UNESCO LABELS
0	INTERNATIONAL	1	0.8%	Safe
1	NATIONAL	1	0.8%	Safe
2	PROVINCIAL	3	2.4%	Safe
3	WIDER COMMUNICATION	-	-	-
4	EDUCATIONAL	7	5.6%	Safe
5	DEVELOPING	7	5.6%	Safe
6a	VIGOROUS	40	32.3%	Safe
6b	THREATENED	46	37.1%	Vulnerable
7	SHIFTING	11	8.9%	Definitely Endangered
8a	MORIBUND	2	1.6%	Severely Endangered
8b	NEARLY EXTINCT	4	3.2%	Critically Endangered
9	DORMANT	1	0.8%	Extinct

10	EXTINCT	1	0.8%	Extinct
		124	100%	

Table 16 shows that 37.1% (46) mother tongues are vulnerable. Only child bearing generations are transmitting such mother tongues to their children. Likewise, 8.9% (11) mother tongues are shifting and 1.6% (2) are moribund. Similarly, 3.2% (4) are nearly extinct, 0.8% (1) dormant and 0.8% (1) extinct. Generally, 52.4% mother tongues are facing different labels of language endangerment. Using UNESCO Labels, mother tongues from Level 0 to 6a (Vigorous) are taken as Safe and from Level 6b to 10 are defined as unsafe. The number of safe mother tongues totals to 47.6% (59).

### Vitality in terms of language family

Broadly, mother tongues belonging to different language families may be classified as safe and unsafe. Table 17 presents the safe and hazardous mother tongues assessed regarding language family.

**Table 17**

*Safe and unsafe mother tongues in terms of language family*

	<b>Indo-Aryan (47)</b>	<b>Sino-Tibetan (72)</b>	<b>Austro-Asiatic (3)</b>	<b>Dravidian (1)</b>	<b>Language Isolate (1)</b>	<b>Total</b>
SAFE	32 (68.08%)	25 (34.7%)	2 (1.6%)	-	-	59 (47.6%)
UNSAFE	15 (31.12%)	47 (65.3%)	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)	1 (0.8%)	65 (52.4%)

Table 17 shows that of a total of forty-seven Indo-Aryan mother tongues, 32 (68.08%) are safe and 15 (31.12%) mother tongues are unsafe. However, of a total of 72 Sino-Tibetan mother tongues, only 25 (34.7%) mother tongues are safe and 47 mother tongues (viz., 65.3%) are unsafe. Kusunda and Uranw are also unsafe. Only Austro-Asiatic mother tongues are safe. Around two-third Sino-Tibetan mother tongues are unsafe.

### LEVELS OF LANGUAGE USE

Mother tongues may be broadly categorized into sustainable and non-sustainable in terms of levels of language use within the perspective of Sustainable

Use Model (Lewis & Simons, 2017).<sup>3</sup> Only 113 mother tongues are put into category of sustainable and non-sustainable use. Table 18 presents sustainable and non-sustainable levels of use of mother tongues.

**Table 18**

*Sustainable and non-sustainable levels of use of mother tongues*

	<b>Levels of use</b>	<b>Labels</b>	<b>Vitality levels</b>	<b>No. of MTs</b>	<b>%</b>
1.	Sustainable language use	Sustainable literacy	7(Educational)	8	7.07%
		Sustainable orality	6a (Vigorous)	40	35.39%
2.	Non-sustainable language use	Transitory levels	7(Developing)	6	5.30%
			6b (Threatened)	46	40.70%
			7 (Shifting)	11	9.73%
			8a (Moribund)	2	1.76%
				113	100%

Table 18 shows that only two levels of language use, viz., 4 (Educational) and 6a (Vigorous) correspond to two sustainable labels, viz., sustainable orality and sustainable literacy, respectively. There are only 48 mother tongues (43.46%) which have sustainable levels of language use.<sup>4</sup> Around sixty-five mother tongues (57.54%) may be labeled as lacking sustainable language use. Such mother tongues have been labeled as 5(Developing), 6b (Threatened), 7(Shifting) and 8a (Moribund). They may be labeled as transitory levels (Lewis & Simons, 2017). Such mother tongues are likely to deteriorate to the next lower level unless some community-based interventions are made. Mother tongues labeled as 5 (Developing) have to be uplifted from incipient literacy to 4 (Educational), viz., the sustainable literacy. Similarly, 46 mother tongues labeled as 6b (Threatened) are likely to go down to 7(Shifting) unless they are uplifted to 6a (Vigorous), viz., sustainable orality by carrying out specific activities within the framework of Sustainable Use Model.

3 Mother tongues leveled as International (1), National (1), Provincial (3), Nearly extinct (4), Dormant (1) and Extinct (1) do not, theoretically, involve in the assessment of sustainability.

4 In the languages with sustainable literacy, both written and oral use is maintained over the long term. However, in the languages with sustainable orality, only oral use for everyday communication is kept up (Lewis & Simons, 2017).

## ANOMALIES IN COUNTING MOTHER TONGUES

No doubt, respecting the identity of new mother tongues is a progressive aspect. Twelve mother tongues, viz., Rana Tharu, Bhote, Chum/Nubri, Kewarat, Done, Mugali, Karmarong, Baragunwa, Lowa, Nar-Phu, Tichhurong Poike and Munda/Mundari have received official recognition. However, there does not seem to have paid a serious attention in recording new mother tongues. Lowa, for instance, is not different from Lopa, a language spoken as mother tongue in Upper Mustang. However, Lowa has been recorded as separate mother tongue. Similarly, without having basic study, mother tongues like Oriya, Assamese, Garhwali, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Dzongkha, Mizo, Kuki and Nagami which were enumerated as mother tongues in the 2011 census ( CBS, 2012) have been collapsed in the category of 'Others'. In Nepal, English, an international language, has been groundlessly counted as mother tongue. Moreover, non-indigenous mother tongues such as Hariyanwi, Punjabi and Sadhani have also been recognized as the mother tongues in the 2021 census. Sanskrit is a stable language which is not apparently learnt as mother tongues. However, it has been recorded as mother tongues with 13,906 speakers. Lungkhim was reported as having only four fluent speakers. However, this census has reported that Lungkhim has 702 mother tongue speakers. Dura, Waling and Kusunda also present unbelievable number of speakers. In this census, a total of 31 mother tongues belonging to Kirati group excluding Rai have been counted as mother tongues. Linguistically, the position of Rai as mother tongue has not been ascertained yet. However, as in 2021 census, Rai has been counted as a separate mother tongue. Dailekhi, Gangai, Tajpuriya and Koche have dubious position as distinct mother tongues. In Ghale, a mother tongue, the numbers of speakers have been counted on the basis of ethnicity as the Ghale and Gurung speakers. Such anomalies in the counting of mother tongues are likely to occur for different reasons. There is lack of a formal linguistic policy in Nepal. Some sporadic provisions have been made in some legal documents and the constitution. However, they lack implementation mechanism. There is a lack of a detailed study of sociolinguistic situation of Nepal. More importantly, for ethnic identity and power, ancestral languages have been recorded as mother tongues. It is not easy and possible to frame a formal language policy with clear mechanism for implementation based on the current data. Therefore, with consent of linguistic community, involvement of experts, and full participation of government at all three levels, linguistic census has to be conducted for the reliable and convincing data on mother tongues in Nepal.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has classified the mother tongues in terms of genealogy and speakers' numbers, assessed vitality and levels of language use, pointed out some

anomalies in counting and suggested some ways to mitigate such anomalies in the days to come. The 2021 census has identified 124 mother tongues belonging broadly to four major language families, viz., Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian including one language isolate. There are 47 Indo-European mother tongues. They are spoken by 83.07% of the total population. They are further classified into different subgroups. Eastern Indo-Aryan comprising 19 mother tongues with 67,36,425 (23.08%) speakers is the largest subgroup in terms of number of mother tongues. However, in terms of number of speakers, Northern Indo-Aryan subgroup comprising 12 mother tongues including Nepali remains to be the largest subgroup with 142,291,119 (48.78%) speakers. There are 72 Sino-Tibetan mother tongues which are spoken by 16.59% of the total population. Genealogically, they are divided into different sections/subgroups. Eastern Kirati is the largest sections/subgroups with 19 mother tongues. However, Central Bodish remains to be the largest in terms of number of speakers with 18,762,900 (6.42%) speakers. Three Austro-Asiatic mother tongues have a total of 55,916 (0.19 %) speakers. Uranw/Urau, a Dravidian, has a total of 38,873 (0.13%) speakers. Kusunda has only 23 speakers. Only 16.9% mother tongues are lucky to have speakers more than 1,00,000. Of such mother tongues, 13 belong to Indo-European and 8 belong to Sino-Tibetan. Mother tongues belonging to different language families present an appalling view in terms of vitality and levels of language use. Only 47.6% of mother tongues are safe. Around 30.6% of mother tongues have been found vulnerable and 8.9% are shifting. Around 52.4% of mother tongues are facing different labels of endangerment. Around 43.46% of mother tongues have sustainable levels of language use. Anomalies in the counting of the mother tongues may be mitigated by conducting a separate language census. Based on such data, the government should immediately frame a comprehensive multilingual language policy based on plurality, socialism, and inclusion for the preservation, promotion, and development of the mother tongues in Nepal.

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