

LANGUAGES OF NEPAL: SOCIOLINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY, CENSUS OF THE LANGUAGES AND SUSTAINABLE LANGUAGE USE

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1. Introduction¹

This paper briefly attempts to provide a review of the state of affairs of the languages of Nepal from the perspective of sociolinguistic typology, census of the languages and sustainable language use. Nepal lacks an independent and scientific census of the languages spoken as mother tongues. Thus, till the date, the number of mother tongues and their speakers exclusively rely on the national censuses which are frequently criticized as providing unreliable/manipulated data. Around 123 languages officially recognized by 2011 census, genealogically, belong to five major language families, viz., Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic (Munda), Dravidian and Afro-Asiatic (Semitic) and Kusunda (i.e., a language isolate). These languages, spoken by more than 125 officially recognized caste and ethnic groups with their distinct social and cultural background, are endowed with typologically distinct lexical, phonological, morphological and syntactic features. However, neither the genealogical nor the structural typological classifications can differentiate languages in terms of the prominence they exercise in the sociolinguistic network in Nepal. Constitutionally, every language spoken as mother tongue is the language of the nation and every community is equally entitled to exercise language rights. However, no effective strategies have yet been framed and implemented to make the language communities feel proud of their language in terms of equitable language use. Thus, a number of strategic interventions have to be implemented for expanding the domains of language use for sustainable language use in Nepal. Based on the reliable data, the sociolinguistic typology necessitates being

identified for the sustainable language use in Nepal. Thus, sociolinguistic typology and census of the languages and sustainable language use have to be analyzed as interrelated components of the languages of Nepal.

Till the day, there are some admirable attempts, viz., Watters (2008), Epple et al. (2012) and Regmi (2021a & 2021b) to present the sociolinguistic typology of the languages of Nepal. However, no attempt has been made to review the situations of languages of from the perspectives of sociolinguistic typology, census of the languages and sustainable language use. The data are based on the Linguistic Survey Linguistic Survey of Nepal², national censuses and ethnologue of the languages of Nepal. This paper has employed an approach developed in Bell (1976), Vinogradov (1976), Mechkovskaya (2001) and Shoumarov and Iriskulov (2005) to analyze the sociolinguistic typology. Likewise, sustainable use model developed in Lewis and Simons (2010 & 2017) has been employed to discuss sustainable language use of the languages of Nepal.

This paper is organized into six sections. Section 2 deals with the demographic position of the languages of Nepal based on 2011 census and socio-linguistic situation of Nepal. In section 3, we sociolinguistically categorize the languages of Nepal. Section 4 assesses 2011 census data of languages and their speakers in Nepal. In section 5, we deal with different aspects of sustainable language use. Section 6 presents the conclusion of the paper.

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² It was conducted from 2009 to 2018 under the auspices of National Planning Commission, Nepal.

2. Demographic position and sociolinguistic state of affairs

2.1 Demographic position

The languages of Nepal enumerated in the national census of 2011 are disproportionately distributed into five language families: Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and Afro-Asiatic including a language isolate. Table 1 shows the demographic positions (viz., number of languages and their speakers) including genealogical classification of the languages of as per the national census of 2011.

Table 1: Demographic positions of the languages of Nepal as per the national census 2011

Language family	No. of lgs	No. of speakers	Per cent
Indo-European	48	2,17,55,292	82.11%
Sino-Tibetan	70	45, 86, 538	17.31%
Austro-Asiatic	2	50,096	0.19%
Dravidian	1	33,651	0.13%
Afro-Asiatic	1	8	0.00%
Language isolate	1	28	0.00%
Others		21,173	0.07%
Not reported		47,718	0.18%
Total	123	2,64,94,504	100%

Source: National census 2011

Table 1 shows that languages belonging to Sino-Tibetan family (Tibeto-Burman sub-family) numerically outnumber other language families. However, in terms of number of speakers, the languages belonging to Indo-European family (mainly Indo-Aryan) are spoken by 82.11% of the total population. This number is gradually increasing. In the census of 2011, the languages spoken by 0.07% (21,117) and 0.18% (47,718) of the total population have been injudiciously designated as 'others' and 'not reported', respectively.

2.2 Sociolinguistic state of affairs

The languages of Nepal exhibit a number of interrelated features in terms of domains of language use, bilingualism, mother tongue proficiency, language vitality, language maintenance, language attitudes, language resources, dialectal variation and language development. Definitely, the dominant languages like Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Newar,

Tamang, Gurung, Bantawa and Rajbanshi exhibit some sociolinguistic features which are virtually different from those exhibited by the minority languages like Thakali, Kaike, Bhujel, Lhowa, Lhomi and Chepang. Based on some common and language specific sociolinguistic features, a comprehensive picture of the sociolinguistic situation of the languages of Nepal may be briefly presented as follows:

a. Language and ethnicity

Apart from languages like Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Tamang, the names of most of the languages spoken especially by the ethnic groups/indigenous nationalities are drawn from the names of the ethnic groups. However, Lhowa spoken in Upper Mustang, Kaike spoken in Dolpa, Ghale/Gurung spoken in North Gorkha, Manange spoken in Upper Manang, Thakali spoken in Lower Mustang and Dolpali spoken in Upper Dolpa are not spoken by a particular ethnic group only. Lhowa is spoken as a first language by many people except Lhowa who professionally belong to blacksmiths and tailors. Kaike is also used by Thakulla as the first language. Similarly, Manange is also reported being spoken by Tamang. The Gurung community residing in BARPak speaks Ghale as mother tongue and the Ghale community in Lamjung speaks Gurung as mother tongue. Similarly, Ghales living in Tipling, northern region of Dhading, speak Tamang as mother tongue. Normally, Manange indicates the language spoken by the people of Manang, a district of Gandaki Province of Nepal. However, other languages like Gurung, Narphu, Galsumdo are also reported as being spoken as mother tongues in Manang. Sometimes such names may be found causing controversy over the issues of identity. Ethno-linguistic survey is required to specify the relation between the language and ethnicity. However, the government is reluctant to conduct such survey.

b. Endonyms (autonyms) and exonyms

Many languages of Nepal are named after places or ethnicities. Some of them have both endonyms (viz., internal names) and exonyms (viz., external names). In such languages, the exonyms have been used while conducting sociolinguistic survey as well as linguistic census. The exonyms like

Bhujel, Manange, Thakali, Lhowa, Dolpali, Kagate, Raute and Sunuwar have endonyms, viz., Pukhgyal Ngur, Ngisang Ke, Tamhang Kai, Lhoke, Bhuiin Ke, Syuba, Khamchi and Koich, respectively. Such endonyms are more meaningful to the speech communities than the exonyms. It has also been reported that the speech communities have a desire to identify their form of speech in terms of endonyms. However, it is not easy to address this desire of the speech communities in present administrative situation in Nepal.

c. Language attitude towards Nepali

Nepali, an Indo-Aryan language, is exercising the sole role as the official language. Besides, it is playing a great role of the language of mass communication and instruction in education. There is no such big disagreement among the speech communities as to the role of Nepali as the official language. However, some ethnic communities have been accusing the government of giving special priority to the development and protection to the Nepali language. Thus, some language activists do not have a positive attitude towards the Nepali language. The speech communities such as Bhujel, Tamang, Thakali, Gurung and Rai entitle the Nepali language as Khasante or Khas Nepali. Previously, Nepali used to be called as Khas or Gorkha Bhasa. The language activists who are against the naming of the official language as Nepali grumble that it is not fair to call only one Khas language as Nepali since all languages spoken in Nepal should be entitled as the Nepali languages.

d. Migration and minority languages

In Nepal, many people have migrated from their native places to other places for security, employment and fulfillment of basic needs. This trend is continuously accelerating. Indeed, migration has had a positive effect on the standard of living. However, it has a negative effect on the use of mother tongue.

e. Ethnicity and linguistic assimilation

In Nepal, migrated people, due to the fears of being in minority, have knowingly or unknowingly been assimilated to religion and culture of the people of the new place. After

having been assimilated to ethnicity, they deliberately identify the language/dialect they speak in the name of the dominant language of the ethnicity to which they are assimilated. Most of the speakers of Kaike, for instance, in the original palace, have reported the name of their language as Magar in 2011 census. Similarly, the Manange speakers of Upper Manang have identified themselves as Gurung as ethnonym as well as glotonym. Similarly, the Seke speakers of Upper Mustang have also recorded the ethnonym as glotonym (viz., Gurung). Indeed, Seke is fundamentally different from Gurung mainly spoken in Kaski, Tanahun, Syngja and Lamjung. Only Gauchan, Tulachan, Bhattachan and Sherchan consider themselves to be Thakali. Thus, the language spoken by them is only identified as Thakali and the form of the speech slightly different from Thakali, which is spoken in the vicinity, has been referred to as Marpha Thakali.

f. Distribution of speakers

The speakers of minority languages are also scattered in different parts of Nepal. The people speaking Bhujel as mother tongue are spread in 33 districts of Nepal. Similarly, the speakers of Newar are reported being distributed in 69 districts of Nepal. Likewise, the speakers of Tamang are scattered in 70 districts. Many ethnic communities have migrated to different urban areas. Majority of the Thakali speakers are residing in Kathmandu. Due to such patterns of distribution of the speakers, both mother tongue and traditional culture have been forced to be endangered in Nepal.

g. Attitude towards mother tongue education

Despite the established principle that cognition develops faster in the mother tongue, people from many linguistic communities prefer to provide basic education to children in Nepali and English medium rather than in the mother tongue. Only a few communities where mother tongue is constantly spoken in the family are reported as being enthusiastic to giving mother tongue education to the young children. In some communities, for instance Kaike in Dolpa, the local mother tongue is used to teach the children in the classroom even though textbooks have been

prepared in Nepali and English. In some areas, mother tongue programs initiated by the government without proper needs assessment have been found to be ineffective.

h. Language and age

In many linguistic communities in Nepal, young women of 15 to 29 years old have almost ceased speaking their mother tongue. Even if some speak, the mixing of words from Nepali is very high. Even if the people of 30 to 59 years old speak their mother tongue, they have been reported using Nepali except in some limited domains of language use. Such people are equally proficient in both Nepali and mother tongue. Only the people of 60 and above are reported as being highly loyal to their mother tongue. They are also forced to speak in Nepali while communicating with young children at home. In the mountains and rural areas of the Terai, especially women are found to be monolingual.

i. Sex, literacy and context

In Nepal, women from most of the speech communities are more loyal to their mother tongues than men. However, the women in the Thakali community living in urban areas have been reported as being less loyal than men towards using their mother tongue. In Nepal, the illiterate people use mother tongue more than the literate one. The educated people use Nepali, English and other languages according to the situation. Hindi is used by various native speakers in Terai to communicate with the speakers of other languages. In some communities, mother tongue is used in informal situations (viz., family, neighbors and markets) but in the formal events (viz., religious discourses, special gatherings, and political speeches), Hindi is exclusively used.

j. Use of lingua franca

Generally, Sherpa/Bhote, Nepali and Hindi are used as lingua franca in the three distinct ecological regions, viz., Mountains, Hills, and Terai (or plains). However, the reports of the survey show that in Terai the speakers of Awadhi consider Nepali as the first contact language and Hindi as the second. Nepali is used as the contact language in the Awadhi, Maithili and Bajjika speech communities as well. Similarly, Nepali is

also used as a lingua franca in the mountains. However, in Terai, Hindi is used as a lingua franca especially among the educated people.

k. Inter-marriage and mother tongue

Due to inter-marriage, Kirati languages are forced to be endangered or severely endangered. These languages are unintelligible to each other. The spouses are inclined to use Nepali when they do not understand each other's language. Such situation, for instance, may exist between the husband and wife speaking two different languages, say, Bantawa and Chamling. The children from such parents are naturally compelled to speak Nepali as their mother tongue.

l. Patterns of language use and language proficiency

Some of the major domains of language use include counting, singing, bargaining, joking, storytelling, discussing/debate, praying, quarrelling, abusing, telling stories to children, singing at home, family gatherings and village meetings. In most of the minority languages of Nepal, except in praying, quarrelling, abusing and family gatherings, Nepali is frequently used. In Nepal, most of the languages are used only for face-to-face communication by all the generations but only some of the children are learning them. Neither are they used predominantly while talking about educational matters and discussing social events and other family matters with the family members like grandparents, parents, spouses and children. Some of the speech communities are shifting to the dominant language like Nepali. Only some languages exhibit sustainable language use. Language proficiency in reading and writing in many languages is very appalling. Thus, language proficiency in mother tongues is gradually declining

m. Scripts and language resources

Only a few languages of Nepal have their own scripts. However, Devanagari script is being used with necessary adaptation in writing many languages of Nepal. Primary level textbooks are also written in Devanagari script. Only in some mother tongues, grammars have been written, dictionaries have been compiled and textbooks have been prepared. In some languages, literacy

materials, newspapers and magazines have been published. Grammars are available either in Nepali or English, not in mother tongues.

n. Language vitality and language development

The level of vitality of most of the languages of Nepal is not encouraging. Young children do not learn their mother tongue as their first language. Public awareness about mother tongue has not increased as expected. All linguistic communities consider mother tongue as a matter of pride. Indeed, language is considered as the backbone of identity. All the speech communities are reported having a desire to make plans to preserve, promote and use their mother tongue as a medium at the basic level.

o. Dialectal variations

Only some languages have somewhat diverged into geographical as well as social dialects which require intelligibility testing by employing RTT (Recorded Text Test) to confirm if such divergences/variations hinder the mutual intelligibility among the speakers residing in different places. In many communities, the speakers believe that such variations have not yet hindered the mutual intelligibility among the speakers of this language residing in different key points.

3. The sociolinguistic typology

The languages of Nepal display an interesting sociolinguistic typology. As language is used for communication in society, a number of extra-linguistic factors (viz., social, cultural, political, religious and historical) frequently interact in determining the role of a language to play in society (Shoumarov & Iriskulov, 2005, p. 38).³ We briefly discuss the sociolinguistic typology of the languages of Nepal from the point of view of a social typology as follows:

³ Shoumarov and Iriskulov (2005, p. 38) classified the languages using some basic criteria, viz., communicative rank, standardization, legal status, confessional or prophetic status, and educational status and communication spheres.

3.1 Typology in terms of communicative rank

3.1.1 Majority vs. minority languages

Out of 123 languages identified in the census of 2011, nineteen mother tongues are reported as being spoken by 96% of the population (Yadava, 2013:265; 2014). Such languages in terms of number of speakers may be stratified as majority languages. Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Bajjika, Dotyali, Urdu, Awadhi, Baitadeli, Achhami and Rajbansi belong to Indo-European language family whereas Tamang, Newar, Magar, Limbu, Gurung, Rai, Bantawa and Sherpa belong to Sino-Tibetan language family. In Nepal, such majority languages mostly belonging to Indo-European language family are largely spoken by the people following Hinduism (81.34%) and mostly by Chhetri (16.6%) followed by Hill Brahmin (12.2%). Likewise, 104 languages are being spoken by 4% of the people (CBS, 2014). They may follow different religions, viz., Buddhism (9.04%), Islam (4.38%), Kirat (3.04%), Prakriti and Bon and mostly belonging to different ethnic groups. Such languages, belonging to Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and Afro-Asiatic and Language Isolate may be classified as minority languages.

3.1.2 Official vs. non-official languages

The constitution of Nepal promulgated in 2015 has recognized all languages spoken as the mother tongues as the languages of the nation (Article 6) and the Nepali language in the Devanagari script as official language of Nepal (Article 7 (1)). In Article 7(2), a state has been granted the right, by framing a state law, to determine one or more than one languages of the nation spoken by a majority of people within the state as its official language(s) to be used in addition to the Nepali language. Language is also tool for maintaining and changing power relation (Fairclough, 1989:1). Thus, selection of particular language/s as official language/s (i.e., language/s having specific legal status and used within government (viz., in courts, parliament, and administration) in the whole country or specific areas/federal states) may contribute to unequal relation of power.

3.1.3 National vs. international languages

The languages which are used in education, work, mass media, and government at the nationwide level are categorized as national languages. Nepali which is spoken as mother tongue by 44.6% of the population is the only national language of Nepal from functional point of view. The languages, which are used internationally for a broad range of functions, are categorized as the international languages. From the point of view of language use, English is exclusively playing the role of international language. As Chinese, Spanish, French, Russian and Arabic (Modern Standard Arabic) are the official languages of the United Nations, they are logically referred to as international languages. Accordingly, there are six international languages spoken as mother tongue in Nepal. However, the number of mother tongue speakers of such languages is negligible (See Annex 1).

3.1.4 National vs. regional/provincial languages

The languages which are used for local and regional mass media and governmental services are referred to as a regional/provincial language. In Nepal, languages like Dotyali, Tibetan and Hindi are supposed to be used as regional language (Yadava, 2013). The languages like Limbu, Maithili, Bajjika, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Tharu, Newar, Tamang, Gurung, Magar and Dotyali recently recommended by Language Commission may be referred to as provincial languages.

3.1.5 Indigenous/ethnic vs. non-indigenous/non-ethnic languages

Of the 123 languages spoken in Nepal, 96 are indigenous and 27 are non-indigenous. Broadly, languages spoken by ethnic communities like Sherpa, Gurung, Magar, Bhujel, Chepang, etc. are called ethnic languages. Nepali, the official language of Nepal (including its dialects) and other languages such as Bhojpuri, Maithili, Bajjika and Awadhi may be referred to as non-ethnic languages.

3.2 Typology in terms of degree of language standardization

In Nepal, among the indigenous languages, only a few languages have been in the process of

standardization. Many languages are only limited to speaking at home and society. Such languages exhibit a number of variations in phonology, morphology and syntax. Thus, the languages of Nepal may be broadly categorized into standardized vs. partially standardized and standardization in process vs. non-standardized. They are briefly discussed as follows:

3.2.1 Standardized vs. partially standardized

Nepali has been standardized to a great extent. Major languages like Maithili and Newar and Tibetan have a long tradition of writing. They are standardized languages. Some languages like Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Bajjika, Dotyali, Rajbansi, Limbu and Bantawa are partially standardized languages.

3.2.2 Standardization in process vs. non-standardized

Some languages like Tharu (with its different dialects), Magar, Tamang, Thakali, Chhantyal, Sherpa, Bhujel and Chepang are in the process of standardization whereas many languages like Kumal, Dhuleli, Lhowa, etc. are non-standardized languages.

3.3 Typology in terms of legal status

In terms of legal status, the languages of Nepal may be broadly stratified into three categories, viz., Federal, Provincial and Local. They are briefly discussed as follows:

3.3.1 Federal vs. non-federal languages

Nepali in the Devanagari script is the federal language. The remaining of the languages are non-federal languages. However, English is gradually and almost straightforwardly being used in many domains of governmental functions.

3.3.2 Provincial vs. non-provincial languages

The eleven languages recommended by the Language Commission for the provinces of Nepal may be referred to as provincial languages. Such languages include Limbu, Maithili, Bajjika, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Tharu, Newar, Tamang, Gurung, Magar and Dotyali. The remaining languages may be termed as non-provincial languages.

3.3.3 Local vs. non-local languages

Except the federal language, viz., Nepali and the languages recommended as provincial languages may be categorized as local language to be used in the local level, especially in education, mass media and office.

3.4 Typology in terms of use of language for religious worship and rituals

In many speech communities, the local language is not used for religious worship and rituals. In the Hindu communities, Sanskrit is used by the Pandits/priests while chanting the *mantras* whereas the worshippers exclusively use Nepali. In the Buddhist monasteries, Pali as well as Tibetan has been used. In the Rai-Kirati communities, while performing religious worship and rituals, the language used in Mundhum is used. The language of Mundhum is linguistically different from the local languages. However, in the speech communities like Chepang, Bhujel and Magar, the local languages are exclusively used in such domains. In the Lhowa community, Tibetan is a religious language. In Nepal, prayers, chants, invocations, myths, fables and tales, statements about ethics, behavioral standards and morality have been reported being communicated either in ritual languages or in local languages.

3.5 Typology in terms of use of language in education

Nepali is being learnt by ethnic minorities along with their mother tongues. In education, basically Nepali is used as the medium of instruction from the basic to higher education. Except in community schools, English is the major language of instruction in Nepal. In some particular speech communities, mother tongues are being taught as a special subject in schools. Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education. Thus, in terms of educational status, the languages of Nepal may be broadly categorized as educational and non-educational languages. Maithili, Awadhi, Urdu, Bhojpuri, Dotyali, Tibetan, Bangali, Sanskrit, Newar, English and Santhali have been categorized as educational languages.

3.6 Typology in terms of use in different domains of communication

In Nepal, except in some specific domains of language use, Nepali and English are very frequently used in education. In classical/traditional education system, Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan have been used. However, in government bodies, legislation, secretarial work and legal proceedings, Nepali is exclusively used. Only a few minority languages are used in mass media in Nepal. Most of the personal documents including passports and certificates are issued in both English and Nepali whereas driving licenses are prepared only in English. Services such as trade, healthcare and communications are maintained both in Nepali and English. The visual information (geographic names, names of streets, traffic signs, advertisements and the like) have been maintained both in Nepali and English.

3.7 Typology in terms of language vitality

The languages of Nepal may be categorized into different vitality labels such as safe/vigorous (45.5%), vulnerable/threatened (39.02%), definitely endangered/shifting languages (9%), severely endangered/moribund (1.62%), critically endangered/nearly extinct (3.25%) and dormant/extinct (1.62%).

4. Census of the languages

The census is the official source of information on the number of languages, nomenclature, number of speakers and locations in Nepal. Some statistics on such languages in Nepal was, for the first time, made available by the Census of 1952-1954. At that time, 44 languages belonging to different language families were enumerated in Nepal. This number is supposed to be credible considering the ethno-linguistic composition of Nepal at that time. Each census, conducted in the interval of ten years, has recorded information about the numbers of mother tongues, speakers as well as the distribution of the speakers. However, in the subsequent censuses, there are a number of discrepancies. Such discrepancies may include counting heritage language as the mother tongue, lack of distinction between language and dialect, enumerating unreliable number of speakers, ignoring the place of origin of the language, enumerating the ethnic group as an independent

language, enumerating the same language under more than one name, counting international languages as mother tongues, counting speakers on the basis of ethnicity and counting as mother tongues bereft of speakers. These discrepancies were broadly triggered by the socio-political vested interests on behalf the government as well as the speech communities. Such discrepancies may include reducing the number of languages as much as possible, increasing the number of languages as much as possible, increasing the number of languages and speakers as much as possible and increasing the number of speakers in any way possible. They are briefly discussed as follows:

4.1 Reducing the number of languages

The census of 1952-1954 conducted immediately after the declaration of democracy enumerated 44 languages. However, in the censuses conducted during the Panchayat regime (1960-1990), the numbers of mother tongues decreased in consonance with language assimilation policy adopted by the rulers. As a result, the number of languages in the 1961 census was limited to 36. As the non-party system was on the rise in Nepal, the census of 1971 and 1981 limited the number of languages to be only 17 and 18, respectively.

4.2 Increasing the number of languages

After the restoration of multi-party system, the state adopted a policy of multilingualism. As a result, the number of languages increased significantly to 31 in the census of 1991. The identification of new languages also started from this census. However, the practice of counting some foreign languages as mother tongues started from this census. It was against the national interest and the national integrity. While the constitution of 1990 recognized Nepali as the language of nation and other mother tongues as national languages, the Interim Constitution of 2007 recognized all mother tongues spoken in Nepal as national languages. Thus, the 2001 census enumerated almost more than three times languages than those enumerated in 1991 census.

4.3 Increasing number of languages and speakers

In 2011 census, not only the number of languages but also the number of speakers has been severely

manipulated. The increasing trend of number of languages as began from 2001 census has further accelerated the number of languages to 123. Undeniably, since Panchayat regime, Nepali has been the official as well as language of instruction in Nepal. Many people speaking other indigenous languages have been gradually shifting to Nepali, the language of the wider communication. Indeed, the number of speakers of Nepali is increasing day by day. However, the 2011 census, unbelievably, records that Nepali as mother tongue is spoken by 44.6% of the total population (CBS, 2012). Due to the lack of distinction between language and dialect, many dialects of Nepali have been recorded as independent languages. There are many discrepancies as to the numbers of speakers and their distribution. Surprisingly, the same languages have been enumerated in different independent languages. More interestingly, English, French, Russian, Spanish and Arabic are also counted as mother tongues of Nepal. Independent language like Rana Tharu has been counted within Tharu.

4.4 Increasing the number of speakers

In 2011 census, there were only two questions: What is your mother tongue? What is your second language? With such limited questions in the census, many indigenous communities fully shifted to Nepali were compelled to record their ancestral languages as mother tongues, and Nepali, which they speak as mother tongue, as the second language. Thus, in terms of numbers of speakers, even seriously endangered languages were evaluated as endangered or shifting. In 2021 census, linguistic data has been collected with three questions: What is your ancestral/heritage language? What is your mother tongue? What is your second language? The first question was intended to addressing the increasing awareness about the linguistic identity of the speech communities. The ancestral language is the traditional or historical language which may/may not have been spoken in the ethno-linguistic community in the present time. The second and third questions are related to language skills of the speech community. As Language Commission recommended 11 languages as the official languages for the seven provinces, many language activists and organizations working for the

language rights appealed the ethnolinguistic communities through social networks and orientation programs to record the heritage languages as mother tongues against the good intention of the questionnaire. In no way, a heritage language which is not learned/ acquired by a child cannot be a mother tongue. Indeed, ‘Sanskrit’ suggests that it is a standardized/purified/ improved language. In the context of Nepal, Sanskrit is a classical language used in religious ceremonies in the Hindu communities. However, some people have been reported recording Sanskrit as the ancestral as well as mother tongue and Nepali as the second language. Some ethno-linguistic communities appealed the people to record Parwate Nepali or Khas Nepali as their second language. Interestingly, some ethno-linguistic communities appealed the people to record any language spoken in the nearby communities no matter whether they can speak it as the second language. This is indeed a ridiculous matter. It is to be noted that in a democratic country like Nepal, right to raise the voice of dissent should be respected. However, the responsibility of the ethno-linguistic communities to give accurate statistics and the responsibility of the government to create an environment for giving accurate statistics should never be forgotten. Manipulation made on behalf of any section of the nation can be counterproductive to the preservation of the endangered language of Nepal. It is not true that the linguistic community is unaware of the state of their language.

5. Sustainable language use

5.1 Vitality level and label

Nepal presents an appalling situation of language vitality. The 2011 Census presents an encouraging number of the languages in Nepal. At the same time, number of endangered languages has also increased. Table 2 presents an assessment of the vitality of languages of Nepal based on Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale model proposed by Lewis and Simons (2010).

Table 2 shows that less than 45.5% (56) languages are safe. More than 39.02% (48) languages are vulnerable, i.e., only child bearing generations are transmitting these languages to their children.

Likewise, 8.9% (11) languages are shifting whereas 1.62% (2) languages are moribund. Similarly, 3.25% (4) are nearly extinct, 0.8% (1) dormant and 0.80% (1) extinct. Generally, 55.5% of the languages are facing different labels of language endangerment.

Table 2: Vitality of the languages of Nepal

level	Label	N. lgs	100%	Remarks (UNESCO)
0	International	6	4.9%	Safe
1	National	1	0.8%	Safe
2	Regional	3	2.4%	Safe
3	Trade	2	1.62%	Safe
4	Educational	8	6.5%	Safe
5	Written	6	4.87%	Safe
6a	Vigorous	30	24.39%	Safe
6b	Threatened	48	39.02%	Vulnerable
7	Shifting	11	8.94%	Definitely endangered
8a	Moribund	2	1.62%	Severely endangered
8b	Nearly extinct	4	3.25%	Critically endangered
9	Dormant	1	0.80%	Extinct
10	Extinct	1	0.8%	Extinct
		123	100%	

Source: Regmi (2017)

5.2 Levels of language use

There are two levels of use, viz., sustainable and non-sustainable within the perspective of Sustainable Use Model (Lewis & Simons, 2017). Table 3 presents sustainable and non-sustainable levels of language use in Nepal.

Table 3: Sustainable and non-sustainable levels of language use in Nepal

Levels of use	Labels	Vitality levels	N. lgs	%
Sustainable language use	Sustainable literacy	4 (Educational)	8	7.5%
	Sustainable orality	6a (Vigorous)	30	28%
Non-sustainable language use	Transitory levels	5 (Developing)	6	5.6%
		6b (Threatened)	48	4.9%
		7 (Shifting)	11	10.3%
		8a (moribund)	4	3.7%
			107	100%

Source: Regmi (2021a & 2021b)

Table 3 shows that only two levels of language use, viz., 4 (Educational) and 6a (Vigorous) correspond to two sustainable labels of language use, viz., Sustainable literacy and sustainable orality, respectively. There are only 38 languages having the sustainable levels of language use. Around sixty-nine languages (64.48%) may be labeled as lacking sustainable language use. Such languages have been labeled as 5 (Developing), 6b (Threatened), 7 (Shifting) and 8a (Moribund). They may be labeled as transitory levels (Lewis & Simons, 2017). The languages belonging to such labels are likely to deteriorate to the next lower level of sustainable use unless some overt community-based language development interventions are made with respect to the current vitality levels. Such languages require special community-based activities/interventions to prevent them from deteriorating to the next lower level of sustainable use. The languages labeled as 5 (Developing) require uplifting from the incipient literacy to 4 (Educational), viz., the sustainable literacy. Similarly, 23 languages 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.

5.3 Strategies for achieving sustainable use

Some specific language development activities identified in Lewis & Simons (2017) and adapted in the context of Nepal have to be framed and implemented appropriate to their current vitality levels for helping the minority speech communities for achieving sustainable use. The desired sustainable use levels with specific activities are briefly discussed as follows:

5.3.1 Establishing mass literacy: Achieving sustainable literacy

Some languages like Sherpa, Tamang, Koyee, Thulung, Rajbansi/Tajpuriya, Tharu and Wambule may be labeled as 5 (Developing). These languages lack adequate and desired literature. Thus, in such languages, mass literacy has to be established for achieving sustainable literacy by employing effective language development activities. Some of them may be presented as follows:

a) Multilingual education (MLE), an effective measure, has to be implemented in speech communities. However, there are some issues and challenges as well (Regmi, 2021c).

b) Textbooks as well as supplementary materials have to be prepared with the full consent and the involvement of educated community members and local teachers, and local teachers have to be appropriately trained about the methods of teaching vernacular literacy in the schools.

c) Conferences for the community leaders/language activists, local teachers and the local government representatives may be periodically organized in collaboration with the local government to review the programs for the maintenance of minority languages.

d) In each speech community, an academy may be set up for language advocacy as well as for helping the community and the local government in framing policy for language development.

e) The local authors have to be trained in both writing and publishing skills. Besides, workshops have to be organized to produce educational materials by using the writings of the local authors.

f) The community members have to be encouraged to write in the local languages and a network for the local authors, publishers and illustrators have to be developed and local authors in writing have to be provided help with communication and information technology.

5.3.2 Introducing written functions: Achieving incipient literacy

In Nepal, some languages like Lhowa, Sherpa, Ghale and Magar Kaike, Chepang and Magar Kham, Wambule, Byansi, Dhuleli, Dhimal, Magahi, Koch/Gangai, Kisan, Kathariya Tharu, Bajhang, Bajureli, Jumli Nepali and Santhali have maintained sustainable orality. Almost all of the languages with such orality lack native orthography. Thus, such languages have to be uplifted to incipient literacy. In such languages written functions have to be introduced by employing some specific activities compatible with the socio-cultural settings of the speech community. Some of them are listed as follows:

a) Orthography and primers (viz., fundamental literacy) compatible with the phonological pattern have to be immediately developed by involving language experts and community representatives and local teachers have to be trained for such literacy and the choice of scripts.

b) Folk songs, folktales and proverbs have to be collected, verified and documented in written and digital forms involving local teachers, local representatives, linguists and anthropologists.

c) Employing the local expertise, reading materials have to be prepared and used in the classes to encourage young people to start writing local literature, and published materials should be made available for those people who are interested in reading them.

d) From time to time, consultation has to be made with community members in the presence of the authorities of the local government to review the current situation of language development programs and local governments have to be strongly motivated to enact policy for defining the domains of the local language in the local administration and education.

5.3.3 Cultivating the language: Achieving sustainable orality

In Nepal, languages like Bhujel, Magar (Magar Dhut) and Raji are gradually losing their sustainable orality due to strong language contact with Nepali. Similarly, Thakali, Bhujel, Chhulung, Nachhiting, Phangduwali, Dumi, Angika, Majhi, Bote, Darai, Khadiya, Uranw, Hayu, Lapcha, Danuwar, Sonaha and Kumal are gradually shifting to the dominant languages in Nepal. Such languages have to be uplifted to sustainable orality by implementing some specific interventions. They are as follows:

a) In such speech communities, language playgroups have to be formed and the local culture has to be taught by those people who better know about local culture to encourage both the children and parents to use their mother tongues at home and community as well.

b) Bilingual speech competition has to be organized by the local schools to encourage the children to maintain proficiency in both the mother tongue and the dominant language.

c) Local FM radios have to be encouraged to run bicultural programs and members of the community have to be convinced about the importance of using their mother tongues at their homes.

5.3.4 Revitalizing languages: Achieving orality

In Nepal, two languages, viz., Tilung and Dura have been labeled as 8a (Moribund). Such languages have to be revitalized by implementing some specific strategies. They are as follows:

a) Through language documentation, the speech communities have to be linked with their history.

b) Both outside (top-down) and minority speech communities (bottom up) have to be integrated in documentation, corpus development and teacher training in such languages and bilingual homes have to be created and parents meeting have to be held regularly by the schools to encourage the parents to use mother tongues in their homes.

c) Language revitalization has to be immediately started and radio programs have to be started in such languages to encourage the people to use their heritage language for face-to-face communication and transmit their knowledge to the younger generations.

d) The younger mothers have to be encouraged to learn vocabulary and traditions from the elder mothers and use local language while caring the children.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to review the state of affairs of the languages of Nepal in terms of three interrelated perspectives, viz., sociolinguistic typology, census of the languages and sustainable language use. In Nepal, comprehensive and reliable information on the number of languages, geo-linguistic situation, number of speakers and linguistic vitality is not yet available. The 2011 census presents a discouraging picture of the mother tongues spoken especially by the minority communities. The sociolinguistic survey of Nepal has clearly exposed the sociolinguistic situation of the languages of Nepal. However, concerned authorities are not paying any attention towards the suggestions to preserve, promote and develop the languages of Nepal. The sociolinguistic

typology has clearly shown that only a few languages are likely to play a prominent role in the sociolinguistic network in Nepal. National censuses, which are the only source of linguistic data, have failed to provide reliable statistics especially of languages due to the vested interests not only on behalf of the government but also on behalf of the speech communities. Undoubtedly, language vitality assessed on the basis of such contradictory and unreliable statistics made available on behalf of government never creates favorable and positive attitude for the development of endangered languages. Manipulation made on behalf of any section of the nation as to the number of speakers can never be productive to the preservation of the endangered languages of Nepal. No doubt, it is the responsibility of the ethno-linguistic communities to give accurate statistics. However, it is the responsibility of the government to create an environment for giving accurate statistics on languages of Nepal. To sum up, levels of language uses, viz., sustainable and non-sustainable use have to be identified on the basis of reliable data in conformity to the sociolinguistic typology in order to frame and implement the effective strategies to uplift the levels of the languages of Nepal.

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