ANCESTRAL LANGUAGES OF NEPAL IN THE 2021 CENSUS

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This paper classifies 124 ancestral languages focusing on language maintenance and shift; and sheds lights on outcome of enumeration of such languages and its implications to language policy implementation in Nepal. In 2021 census, 47 Indo-Aryan and 72 Sino-Tibetan languages were recorded by 78.3% and 21.4% people as ancestral languages, respectively. Such languages, including major languages, belonging to different family groups and sub-groups, demonstrate pitiable language maintenance. This census highly valued language identity. However, it could not mitigate trend of recording unreliable numbers of mother tongue speakers. Obviously, such results imply that official language policy cannot be executed effectively unless such languages are maintained properly.

Keywords: Language family, language identity, language maintenance, linguistic census, language policy

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to genetically classify 124 ancestral languages focusing on the level of language maintenance and shift. It also sheds lights on the rationale of the enumeration of such languages and outcome of enumeration and its implications to the official language policy implementation in Nepal. In the 2021 census, ancestral languages were enumerated along with the mother tongues and second languages. In the context of Nepal, an ancestral language may refer to a traditional or historical language which is strongly associated with the identity of the community. Such language may also be defined as a heritage language which may be in use or may not be in use.

The data on such languages were collected for two purposes. The first one was to address the voice of language identity of the communities in Nepal. The second was to gauge the trends of language shift in each language in Nepal. In this census, 2,91,64,578 informants have registered a total of 124 languages as ancestral languages belonging to different language family. These languages, as mother tongues, genetically, belong to the four major language families, viz., Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian and language Isolate (i.e., Kusunda). Like mother tongues, they are also disproportionately distributed into language families. However, till the date, no attempt has been made to classify those languages into the groups and subgroups and shed light on the long term impact of the enumeration of such languages in Nepal.

This paper is structured into eight sections. Section 2 discusses the research methodology used in the study. Section 3 presents the demographic positions of ancestral languages. Section 4 deals with the classification of ancestral languages focusing on the level of language maintenance and shift in Nepal. Section 5 explains the rationale of the census of ancestral languages in Nepal whereas in Section 6 we discuss the outcomes of the enumeration of ancestral languages. Section 7 presents the implications of the census of such languages. Section 8 presents a conclusion of the paper.

2. Research methodology

This paper has used mixed method approach (both quantitative and qualitative methods) of research to collect data and describe the situation of the ancestral languages and its implications to language policy implementation in Nepal. The quantitative data on ancestral languages have been made available by the 2021 census. Language identity has been touched upon with some insights from Fairclough (1989). Similarly, language shift due to language contact refers to Hickey (2010). Language maintenance is informed by Sustainable Use Model (Lewis and Simons, 2017). Language choice is based on Decker and Grummitt (2012). Genetic

classification of ancestral languages relies on Regmi (2021a &b), Yadava (2003), Eppele et al. (2012) and Bradley (1997; 2002). Qualitative data are drawn from previous works on the languages of Nepal.

3. Demographic positions of ancestral languages

Ancestral languages of Nepal are disproportionately distributed into language families. Table 1 shows the demographic positions (viz., number of languages (lgs) and number of their informants (infs..) including genetic classification of the ancestral languages in the census of 2021.

Table 1: *Demographic positions of ancestral languages of Nepal in the 2021 census*

	Language family	No. of lgs	No. of infs.	%
1.	Indo-European	47	22807534	78.3%
2.	Sino-Tibetan	72	6249472	21.4%
3.	Austro-Asiatic	3	59174	0.2%
4.	Dravidian	1	40637	0.1%
5.	Language isolate	1	87	0.0%
	Others		5200	0.0
	Not stated		2474	0.0%
	Total	124	2,91,64,578	100%

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 1 shows that 78.3% of the informants have recorded 47 languages belonging to different groups under Indo-European language family. In terms of number of languages, Sino-Tibetan languages outnumber the Indo-European languages. However, in terms of number of informants, the Indo-European languages outnumber the Sino-Tibetan languages.

The languages belonging to the Sino-Tibetan family are recorded by 21.4% of the total population. It implies that a large number of people speaking to different Tibeto-Burman languages have shifted to other dominant languages of Nepal. In this census, 0.2% and 0.1% of the total population have registered languages belonging to Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian language families as ancestral languages, respectively. In other words, 78.3% of

the total population has associated their ancestral language identity with the Indo-Aryan languages. It may imply that 78.3% of the total population does not speak the languages which their forefathers spoke. In Nepal, in a given context, the speakers of a language have been inclined to shift to speaking another language. It is called language shift. It is a major reason for language endangerment. In general, majority of the languages show poor language maintenance.

4. Genetic classification of ancestral languages

The languages recorded as ancestral languages may be classified into major language family and their groups and sub-groups as follows:

4.1 Indo-European

As mentioned already, there are 47 ancestral languages belonging to Indo-European language family. All these languages, except English and Sanskrit, may be subsumed into a broad sub-family referred to as Indo-Aryan. They are further sub-divided into different sub-family.

4.1.1 Eastern Indo-Aryan

There are nineteen languages belonging to Eastern Indo-Aryan group. They include Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bajjika, Magahi, Rajbanshi, Majhi, Danuwar, Angika, Bangla, Ganagai, Tajpuriya, Done, Kewarat, Koche, Kisan, Sadri, Kurmali, Malpande and Sadhani. These languages as mother tongues are basically spoken in the eastern and mid-eastern Terai of Nepal.

The sociolinguistic survey conducted by Linguistic Survey of Nepal (2009-2017) with the approval of National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal in Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bajjika, Angika, Magahi and Rajbanshi has shown that these languages are vigorously spoken as mother tongues (Regmi, 2021b). It means that all the people (viz., children, adults and old) of the community speak these languages for communication. Besides, Maithili, Bhojpuri and Bajjika have a long tradition of writing. Maithili is taught in the higher level. Table 2 presents the ancestral languages belonging to Eastern Indo-Aryan group with the number of informants and their percentage.

Table 2: *Eastern Indo-Aryan ancestral languages with number of informants and their percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Maithili	2959876	10.15
2.	Bhojpuri	1768618	6.06
3.	Bajjika	1145924	3.93
4.	Magahi	423568	1.45
5.	Rajbanshi	134198	0.46
6.	Majhi	63069	0.22
7.	Danuwar	61224	0.21
8.	Angika	29285	0.10
9.	Bangla	26535	0.09
10.	Ganagai	25680	0.09
11.	Tajpuriya	20787	0.07
12.	Done	3519	0.01
13.	Kewarat	3508	0.01
14.	Koche	1180	0.00
15.	Kisan	1161	0.00
16.	Sadri	1114	0.00
17.	Kurmali	526	0.00
18.	Malpande	207	0.00
19.	Sadhani	130	0.00
		66,70,109	22.85%

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 2 shows that 66,70,109 (22.85%) people have recorded 19 languages belonging to Eastern Indo-Aryan group as ancestral languages. Maithili is the largest ancestral language in this group. It has been recorded as ancestral language by 10.15% of the total population. The second and the third largest languages include Bhojpuri and Bajjika, respectively. Sadhani is a smallest language which has been recorded as ancestral language by only 130 people.

4.1.2 Central Indo-Aryan

There are eight languages recorded as ancestral languages belonging to the Central Indo-Aryan group. They include Tharu, Urdu, Hindi, Ranatharu, Musalman, Marwadi, Sonaha and Hariyanwi. Table 3 presents the Central Indo-Aryan ancestral languages with their speakers and percentage.

Table 3: *Central Indo-Aryan ancestral languages with number of informants and their percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Tharu	1764709	6.05
2.	Urdu	569626	1.95
3.	Hindi	92295	0.32
4.	Ranatharu	78049	0.27
5.	Musalman	41587	0.14
6.	Marwadi	25131	0.09
7.	Sonaha	1223	0.00
8.	Hariyanwi	171	0.00
		25,72,791	8.82%

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 3 shows that 25,72,791(8.82%) people have recorded eight languages belonging to Central Indo-Aryan group as ancestral languages. Tharu is the largest as ancestral language among Central Indo-Aryan. It implies that a large number of people have shifted to other dominant languages like Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi. It has been recorded as ancestral language by 6.05% of the total population. In other words, language maintenance in the Tharu community is not satisfactory. It is to be informed that Tharu as mother tongue has been recommended for official language for Lumbini and Far-Western Provinces of Nepal.

4.1.3 East Central Indo-Aryan

There are four languages recorded as ancestral languages belonging to the East Central Indo-Aryan group. They include Awadhi, Kumal, Darai and Bote. Table 4 presents the Central Indo-Aryan ancestral languages with their speakers and percentage.

Table 4: *East Central Indo-Aryan ancestral languages: Informants and percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Awadhi	911800	3.13
2.	Kumal	50403	0.17
3.	Darai	15938	0.05
4.	Bote	9784	0.03
		9,87,925	3.38

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 4 shows that 9,87,925(3.38%) people have recorded four languages belonging to East Central

Indo-Aryan group as ancestral languages. Awadhi is the largest ancestral language. It has been recorded as ancestral language by 3.13% of the total population. As mother tongue, this language has been recommended as the official language for Lumbini Province of Nepal.

4.1.4 Northern Indo-Aryan

There are twelve languages recorded as ancestral languages belonging to the Norhern Indo-Aryan group. They include Nepali, Doteli, Baitadeli, Achhami, Khash, Bajhangi, Darchuleli, Bajureli, Dadeldhuri, Jumli, Dailekhi and Sign language. Except Sign language, other languages prior to 2011 census were not recorded as independent mother tongues. They used to be considered as the dialects of the Nepali language. Table 5 presents the Northern Indo-Aryan ancestral languages with their speakers and percentage.

Table 5: *Northern Indo-Aryan ancestral languages with number of informants and percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Nepali	10137006	34.76
2.	Doteli	526910	1.81
3.	Baitadeli	410602	1.41
4.	Achhami	396503	1.36
5.	Khash	326512	1.12
6.	Bajhangi	212108	0.73
7.	Darchuleli	154156	0.53
8.	Bajureli	120224	0.41
9.	Dadeldhuri	75044	0.26
10.	Jumli	48400	0.17
11.	Dailekhi	30377	0.10
12.	Sign language	647	0.00
		1,24,38,489	42.66

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 5 shows that 1,24,38,489 (42.66%) people have recorded 12 languages belonging to Northern Indo-Aryan group as ancestral languages. Nepali is the largest as ancestral language. It has been recorded as ancestral language by 10137006 (34.76%) of the total population. It means that a large number of people have shifted to other languages. Nepali is the official language of Nepal. It is used in education

and mass media. It is quite natural to raise a question about the realism of this data. Despite the fact that some basic education about the census was given to the people as well as the enumerators, a very large number of mother tongue speakers of the Nepali language knowingly or unknowingly have recorded Nepali as their ancestral language. The second largest ancestral language is Doteli which has been recorded as ancestral language by 1.81 % of the total population of Nepal. In other languages like Baitadeli, Achhami, Khash, Bajhangi, Darchuleli, Bajureli and Dadeldhuri, the number of informants is really significant. It implies that language maintenance in such languages is considerably poor. Nevertheless, Doteli and Khas as mother tongues have been recommended as official languages for Far-Western and Karnali Provinces, respectively.

4.1.5 North Eastern

There are two languages recorded as ancestral languages belonging to the North Eastern Indo-Aryan group. They include Punjabi and Sindhi. Table 6 presents the Northern Indo-Aryan ancestral languages with their speakers and percentage.

Table 6: *North Eastern Indo-Aryan ancestral languages with number of informants and their percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Punjabi	1152	0.00
2.	Sindhi	398	0.00
		1550	

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

NPO (2023) shows that English, a West Germanic language, is recorded as ancestral language with 1208 informants in Nepal. Similarly, Sanskrit, Indo-European language with 135462 (0.46%) informants is also recorded as ancestral language. It implies that people following the Hindu Sanatan religion may have wanted to be identified with Sanskrit as their ancestral language. Such awareness is gradually increasing in Nepal.

4.2 Sino-Tibetan

As mentioned in Section 2, seventy-two languages belonging to Sino-Tibetan language family are recorded as ancestral languages in Nepal. These languages may be broadly divided into different groups and sub-groups.

4.2.1 Central Bodish

There are thirteen languages belonging to Central Bodish group. They include Sherpa, Hyolmo/Yholmo, Jirel, Tibetan, Dolpali, Chum/Nubri, Mugali, Karmarong, Lhopa, Lowa, Kagate, Lhomi and Tichhurong Poike. Table 7 presents the Central Bodish ancestral languages with their number of speakers and their percentage.

Table 7: *Central Bodish ancestral languages with number of informants and their percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Sherpa	128494	0.44
2.	Hyolmo /Yholmo	10440	0.04
3.	Jirel	5849	0.02
4.	Tibetan	5077	0.02
5.	Dolpali	4875	0.02
6.	Chum/Nubri	4348	0.01
7.	Mugali	2914	0.01
8.	Karmarong	2675	0.01
9.	Lhopa	2384	0.01
10.	Lowa	648	0.00
11.	Kagate	543	0.00
12.	Lhomi	435	0.00
13.	Tichhurong Poike	411	0.00
		169093	0.58

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 7 shows that 169093 (0.58%) people have recorded 13 languages belonging to Central Bodish languages. Sherpa is the largest ancestral language. It has been recorded as ancestral language by 0.44% of the total population. It is to be noted that Lhopa and Lowa are not different languages. Mistakenly, they have been recorded as two different languages.

4.2.2 West Bodish

There are eleven languages belonging to West Bodish group. They include Tamang, Gurung, Ghale, Bhote, Chhantyal, Thakali, Dura, Manange, Magar Kaike, Baragunwa and Nar-Phu, Table 8 presents the West Bodish ancestral languages with their number of speakers and percentage.

Table 8: *West Bodish ancestral languages with number of informants and percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Tamang	1602875	5.50
2.	Gurung	467697	1.60
3.	Ghale	28942	0.10
4.	Bhote	11904	0.04
5.	Chhantyal	7528	0.03
6.	Thakali	8758	0.03
7.	Dura	4146	0.01
8.	Manange	2130	0.01
9.	Magar Kaike	2030	0.01
10.	Baragunwa	1522	0.01
11.	Nar-Phu	463	0.00
		2137995	7.34

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 8 shows that 2137995 (7.34%) people have recorded 11 languages belonging to West Bodish languages. Tamang is the largest ancestral language. It has been recorded as ancestral language by 5.50% of the total population. This language as mother tongue has been recommended for official language for Bagmati Province.

4.2.3 Central Himalayish

There are eleven languages belonging to Central Himalayish group. They include Magar Dhut, Nepalbhasha (Newari), Magar Kham, Chepang, Bhujel, Thami, Pahari, Balkura/Baram, Raji, Khamchi(Raute) and Banakariya. Of these languages, Nepalbhasha (Newari), has a long history of writing. Of these languages as mother tongues Magar Dhut have been recommended for official language for Gandaki and Karnali Provinces whereas Nepalbhasha (Newari) has been recommended for official language for

Bagmati Province. Table 9 presents the Central Himalayish ancestral languages with their number of speakers and percentage.

Table 9: *Central Himalayish ancestral languages with number of informants and percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Magar Dhut	1248003	4.28
2.	Nepalbhasha (Newari)	1179946	4.05
3.	Magar Kham	129021	0.44
4.	Chepang	77958	0.27
5.	Bhujel	38257	0.13
6.	Thami	31446	0.11
7.	Pahari	10619	0.04
8.	Balkura/Baram	5230	0.02
9.	Raji	4696	0.02
10.	Khamchi(Raute)	827	0.00
11.	Banakariya	82	0.00
		2726085	9.36

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 9 shows that 2726085 (9.36%) people have recorded 11 languages belonging to Central Himalayish languages. Magar Dhut is the largest ancestral language. It implies that many people have lost their instrumental positive attitude towards their ethnic language. It is a matter of great concern. It has been recorded as ancestral language by 4.28% of the total population. Nepalbhasa is the second largest language with 4.05% of the total population recording it as ancestral language. It is indeed true that except in Kathmandu Valley, the trend of language shift in the Newar community is highly significant.

4.2.4 Eastern Kirati

There are 19 languages belonging to Eastern Kirati sub-group. They include Yakthung/Limbu, Rai, Bantawa, Chamling, Yakkha, Yamphu/Yamphe, Nachhiring, Mewahang, Puma, Athpahariya, Dungmali, Lohorung, Chhintang, Chhiling, Waling/Walung, Lungkhim, Phangduwali, Belhare and Sam. Most of these languages as mother tongues are not spoken vigorously. Of these languages, Rai as such is not a single language. Knowingly or unknowingly, some people the Rai community, though speaking different languages/dialects, have recorded as a separate language. In other words, some people would like to associate their languages exclusively with the broader ethnic identity. However, such trend should not be encouraged. Table 10 presents the Eastern Kirati ancestral languages with their number of speakers and percentage.

Table 10: *Eastern Kirati ancestral languages with number of informants and percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Yakthung/ Limbu	408577	1.40
2.	Rai	228502	0.78
3.	Bantawa	151346	0.52
4.	Chamling	100754	0.35
5.	Yakkha	18125	0.06
6.	Yamphu/ Yamphe	12024	0.04
7.	Nachhiring	10957	0.04
8.	Mewahang	8214	0.03
9.	Puma	7408	0.03
10.	Athpahariya	7408	0.03
11.	Dungmali	6067	0.02
12.	Lohorung	4925	0.02
13.	Chhintang	2811	0.01
14.	Chhiling	2679	0.01
15.	Waling/ Walung	753	0.00
16.	Lungkhim	738	0.00
17.	Phangduwali	241	0.00
18.	Belhare	173	0.00
19.	Sam	164	0.00
		971866	3.34

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 10 shows that 971866 (3.34%) people have recorded 19 languages belonging to Eastern Kirati group. Yakthung/Limbu is the largest ancestral language. It has been recorded as ancestral language by 1.40% of the total population. As mother tongue, it has been recommended as official language for Koshi Province of Nepal.

4.2.5 Western Kirati

There are thirteen languages belonging to Western Kirati sub-group. They include Sunuwar, Kulung, Thulung, Sampang, Khaling, Wambule, Bahing/Bayung, Dumi, Koyee, Jero/Jerung Hayu/Vayu, Tilung and Surel. Table 11 presents

the Western Kirati ancestral languages with their number of speakers and their percentage.

Table 11: *Western Kirati ancestral languages with number of informants and their percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Sunuwar	44276	0.15
2.	Kulung	40479	0.14
3.	Thulung	27246	0.09
4.	Sampang	26108	0.09
5.	Khaling	18173	0.06
6.	Wambule	15932	0.05
7.	Bahing/ Bayung	15290	0.05
8.	Dumi	10009	0.03
9.	Koyee	4455	0.02
10.	Jero/Jerung	3007	0.01
11.	Hayu/Vayu	2492	0.01
12.	Tilung	2123	0.01
13.	Surel	201	0.00
		209791	0.71

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 11 shows that 209791 (0.71%) people have recorded 13 languages belonging to Western Kirati group. Sunuwar is the largest ancestral language. It has been recorded as ancestral language by 1.40% of the total population.

4.2.6 West Himalayish

There are only two languages belonging to West Himalayish group. They include Byansi and Dhuleli. Table 12 presents the West Himalayish ancestral languages with their number of speakers and their percentage.

Table 12: *West Himalayish ancestral languages with number of informants and their percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Byansi	2190	0.01
2.	Dhuleli	745	0.00
		2935	0.01

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

4.2.7 Sal

There are two languages belonging to Sal group. They include Dhimal and Meche. Table 13

presents the SAL ancestral languages with their number of speakers and their percentage.

Table 13: *SAL ancestral languages with number of informants and their percentage*

	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Dhimal	24722	0.08
2.	Meche	4747	0.02
		29469	0.1

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

4.2.8 Central Tibeto-Burman

Lapcha with 3410 (0.01) informants recording as ancestral language belongs to Central Tibeto-Burman.

4.3 Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Kusunda, Others and Not-stated

In Nepal, there are three Austro-Asiatic languages, viz., Santhali, Munda and Khariya. There is a single Dravidian language, viz., Uranw. Kusunda is an Isolate language of Nepal. These languages have been recorded as ancestral languages in Nepal. Table 14 presents the Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Kusunda, Others and Not-stated ancestral languages with their number of speakers and with their percentage.

Table 14: *Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, Kusunda, Others and Not-stated ancestral languages with number of informants and their percentage*

	Austro-Asiatic		
1.	Santhali	56620	0.19
2.	Munda/ Mudiyari	2334	0.01
3.	Khariya	220	0.00
		59174	0.2
	Dravidian		
1.	Uranw/Urau	40637	0.14
	Language isolate		
1.	Kusunda	87	0.00
	Others	5200	0.02
	Not stated	2474	0.01

Source: National report on ancestral languages (NPO, 2023)

Table 14 shows that Santhali is the largest Austro-Asiatic ancestral language.

5. Rationale for counting ancestral languages

In Nepal, linguistic data taken on the basis of a limited questionnaire during the national census is being used in teaching, research and government recommendations. Linguists had pointed out a number of errors about the data on the languages in the 2011 census (Regmi, 2021c). In this census, many indigenous ancestral languages were recorded as mother tongues. Thus, the number of speakers in many languages was unbelievable. Besides, many non-indigenous languages were also recorded as mother tongues. However, many indigenous languages like Rantharu and Mugali were not counted in the 2011 census. The issue of language identity was not considered seriously. Thus, people who fully or partially shifted to the dominant languages deliberately recorded their ancestral languages as mother tongues. As mentioned already, with a view to mitigating the increasing trend of recording ancestral languages as mother tongues the 2021 census employed three questions, viz., What is your mother tongues? What is your ancestor's language? What is your second language? and collected data on mother tongues, ancestral languages and second languages at a time. This census has presented a slightly different picture of the sociolinguistic situation of the language of Nepal with 124 mother tongues, 124 ancestral languages and 117 second languages.

6. Outcomes of census of ancestral languages

The data on ancestral languages analyzed in terms of genetic classification and number of the informants provide a sufficient room for raising mainly three questions:

a. Has enumeration of ancestral languages really mitigated the increasing trend of counting ancestral languages as mother tongues?
b. Has this enumeration really addressed the voice of language identity of the people who speak languages other than their ancestors spoke?
c. Do the data of ancestral languages really help to understand the language maintenance and shift trend in Nepal?

These questions are not easy to answer only with reference to the data available as ancestral languages. However, the crucial part of the answers may be sought in the data on the ancestral languages. We present the answer as follows:

a. Trend of counting ancestral languages as mother tongues

This census also presents unbelievable number of speakers in many mother tongues of Nepal. Fairclough (1989) notes the social structure of power is overlapped with language. He suggests that language plays a vital role to maintain power relation in the society. With this view in mind, the language activists and ethnic organizations working for language and culture unjustifiably encouraged people to record ancestral languages as their mother tongues. Indeed, Sanskrit is a stable language. It is not learnt as mother tongue as Nepali and other languages in Nepal. In other words, Sanskrit does not satisfy the definition of mother tongue. However, this census has enumerated 13,906 mother tongue speakers of Sanskrit. Undoubtedly, Sanskrit is a classical language. It is learnt in Veda Vidyashrams, Sanskrit schools and higher educational institutions. Similarly, Bhujel is a shifting language. In reality, around three thousand Bhujels speak this language as mother tongue. However, this census has enumerated 13086 mother tongue speakers. This figure is unreliable. The 2011 census had enumerated 21715 mother tongue 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. This trend is common in other mother tongues like Gurung, Dhut Magar, Tilung, Baram, Sam and Kumal. With these data in mind, we can say that the enumeration of ancestral languages has only slightly mitigated the increasing trend of counting ancestral languages as mother tongues in Nepal.

b. Addressing the voice of language identity

Lewis and Simons (2017) advocates that ancestral languages can be uplifted to the level of sustainable use through language awakening program and suggests that life-crucial knowledge

is best transmitted to the younger generations through local language. Taking this fact in mind, people especially from the indigenous community were raising their voices for the census of ancestral languages. Another main reason for demanding for counting ancestral languages was linked with the view of Fairclough (1989) that language identity is the way of getting empowered. It is true that language is a crucial means of preserving and communicating shared cultural values. Thus, people want to link their identity with a language they speak now or their ancestors used to speak. In this census, twelve new languages have been recorded as mother tongues as well as ancestral languages. They include Rana Tharu, Bhote, Chum/Nubri, Kewarat, Done, Mugali, Karmarong, Baragunwa, Lowa, Nar-Phu, Tichhurong Poike and Munda/Mundari. While adding such new languages, the National Statistics Office has claimed that a thorough review was accomplished involving subject experts and stakeholders. However, this census does report Oriya, Assamese, Garhwali, French, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Dzongkha, Mizo, Kuki and Nagami neither as mother tongues nor as ancestral language. Besides, in this census, the names of languages such as Newar, Limbu, Rajasthani, Magar, Kham, Kaike and Baram have been revised as Nepalbhasa/Newari, Yakthung/Limbu, Marwari, Magar Dhut, Magar Kham, Magar Kaike and Balkura/Baram as mother tongues as well as ancestral languages. Linguistically, Madhyapurbiya Tharu, Chitwaniya Tharu, Nawalpuriya Tharu, Kathariya Tharu and Dagaura Tharu are different from each other. However, only Tharu has been counted as an ancestral as well as mother tongue. Previously, Rana Tharu which was also counted within Tharu in the 2011 census has been counted as an independent mother tongue and ancestral language in this census. Linguistically, Dailekhi, Achhami, Baitadeli, Darchuleli, Dadeldhuri and Bajhangi are the major dialects of Nepali. As in 2011 census, they were recorded as separate ancestral languages in the 2021 census. Similarly, Gangai, Tajpuriya and Koche, the dialects of Rajbanshi have been recorded as independent

ancestral languages in 2021 census. This situation motivates us to conclude that this enumeration has to a great extent addressed the voice of language identity of the people who speak languages other than of their ancestors.

c. Understanding the language maintenance and shift trend

Hickey (2010, pp. 166-167) notes that due to the language contact even syntactic features can be borrowed from a dominant language. In due course of time even language typology may change. In Nepal, mainly, the speakers of the indigenous languages are gradually and heavily shifting to the dominant language like Nepali. Around 11 (8.93%) mother tongues enumerated in the 2011 census were labeled as shifting (Regmi, 2023, p.68). The same number of mother tongues, viz., 11 (8.9%), enumerated in the 2011 census have been labeled as shifting (Regmi, 2024, p.34). They are known as definitely endangered. They include Bhujel, Chhiling, Danuwar, Dumi, Hayu, Kumal, Lapcha, Nachhering, Phangduwali, Sonaha and Thakali. In such languages, the child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves but none are transmitting it to their children (Lewis and Simons, 2017, p.117). The children are speaking the dominant language like Nepali. These languages are also recorded as ancestral languages. The vitality level of a language is assessed by using Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) model proposed by Lewis and Simons (2010). General trend of language shift is reflected by a simple comparison of the number of people recording a language as mother tongue and ancestral language. However, an ancestral language as indicated already may be in use. The total population of Rana Tharu as ethnicity amounts to 83308 of which 77766 has recorded Rana Tharu as their mother tongue and 78049 has recorded this language as ancestral language. These data clearly indicate that the people speaking Rana Tharu as mother tongue have also recorded this language as ancestral language. This implies that some people speaking this language have shifted to other dominant language.

Decker and Grummitt (2012) suggests that the people abandon their original vernacular language in favor of a language suitable for occupation, social status and education. The total population of Thakali is 11721 of which 4220 have recorded Thakali as mother tongue and 8758 enumerated this language as ancestral language. Similarly, the total population of Bhujel is 120245 of which 13086 records Bhujel as mother tongue whereas 38257 designate it as ancestral language. Generally, the number of people recoding languages as ancestral languages exceeds the number of mother tongue speakers especially in the languages spoken in the indigenous communities. Tamang and Nepalbhasa have a bigger number of people recording them as ancestral languages. However, the number of informants recording ancestral languages does not reflect the real trend of language shift.

7. Implications of the results

Language Commission, on the basis of the number of speakers, has recommended seven Indo-Aryan languages; namely, Maithili, Bajjika, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Tharu, Doteli and Khas and five Tibeto-Burman languages, viz., Yakthung/Limbu, Tamang, Nepalbhasa (Newari), Gurung and Magar Dhut as the official languages. However, a large number of informants have recorded these languages as ancestral languages. It means that there is no adequate level of maintenance for different reasons. In other words, people are shifting to the dominant languages. For global job, people are attracted towards English and other foreign languages. As Nepali is the official language, it is required to be learned by the people speaking languages other than Nepali. In Nepal, people regard English and Nepali as prestigious languages. These languages are used as medium of instructions. Till day, except Bagmati Province, other provinces are delaying in following legal procedure for implementing the official language policy. In languages like Gurung and Magar (Dhut) language maintenance is pitiable. In Nepal, no language is safe in real sense. Unless language awareness activities for linking language identity to ancestral languages are executed in the communities, the official language policy cannot

be implemented in Nepal. The results of the ancestral languages have bearing on the present educational policy of Nepal as well. People may question on the provision of teaching Nepali as compulsory subject in school levels as people are shifting to other languages.

8. Conclusion

Nepal lacks a formal language policy and separate linguistic census. Enumeration of languages (viz., mother tongues, ancestral and second languages) with a limited number of questions and insufficient preparation has produced a number of discrepancies about data on languages. With a view to mitigating the increasing trend of counting ancestral languages as mother tongues, addressing the voice of language identity of the people and helping to understand the language maintenance and shift in Nepal, 124 ancestral languages were, for the first time in the history of census, enumerated in 2021 census. In this census, 47 Indo-Aryan and 72 Sino-Tibetan languages were recorded by 78.3% and 21.4% people as ancestral languages, respectively. Such languages belong to different language family and their groups and sub-groups demonstrate pitiable language maintenance. Such situation is prevalent in the major languages recommended for provincial official languages of Nepal. In other words, a large number of people have ceased to speak the languages which their ancestors used to speak; and they simply now want to associate their identity with such languages. It is true that counting of data on the ancestral languages, to a small extent, has fulfilled the purpose of mitigating the increasing trends of counting ancestral languages as mother tongues. But it has addressed the voice of language identity to a large extent. Nonetheless, such data collected in course of general census may be insufficient and sometimes misleading to measure the extent of language maintenance and shift in Nepal. Anyway, such data on ancestral languages may be used to wake up the communities to devise community-based activities to encourage people to re-start using their ancestral languages in which life-crucial knowledge is embodied. No matters how reliable the data on ancestral languages are, it is very clear that languages spoken by

indigenous communities are gradually shifting to Nepali or other dominant languages. Such situation is directly or indirectly contributing to the delay of implementation of official languages for the provinces in Nepal. Obviously, such results imply that official language policy cannot be executed effectively unless languages are maintained properly. In other words, the vitality level of all the languages has to be assessed based on the reliable data. In order to maintain reliability in the data about ancestral languages, the concerned bodies including local governments have to make a full preparation with the advocacy of the importance of enumeration of ancestral languages as a way to link up the people with their ethnoliguistic history in the next census. Such census requires being guided by a formal language policy framed by the federal government.

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Appendix : Ancestral languages in 2021 census

A.	INDO-ARYAN		
	Languages	No. of infs.	%
1.	Nepali	10137006	34.76
2.	Maithili	2959876	10.15
3.	Bhojpuri	1768618	6.06
4.	Tharu	1764709	6.05
5.	Bajjika	1145924	3.93
6.	Avadhi	911800	3.13
7.	Urdu	569626	1.95
8.	Doteli	526910	1.81
9.	Magahi	423568	1.45
10.	Baitadeli	410602	1.41
11.	Achhami	396503	1.36
12.	Khash	326512	1.12
13.	Bajhangi	212108	0.73
14.	Darchuleli	154156	0.53
15.	Sanskrit	135462	0.46
16.	Rahbanshi	134198	0.46
17.	Bajureli	120224	0.41
18.	Hindi	92295	0.32
19.	Ranatharu	78049	0.27
20.	Dadeldhuri	75044	0.26

No.	Language	Population	%
21.	Majhi	63069	0.22
22.	Danuwar	61224	0.21
23.	Kumal	50403	0.17
24.	Jumli	48400	0.17
25.	Musalman	41587	0.14
26.	Dailekhi	30377	0.10
27.	Angika	29285	0.10
28.	Bangla	26535	0.09
29.	Ganagai	25680	0.09
30.	Marwadi	25131	0.09
31.	Tajpuriya	20787	0.07
32.	Darai	15938	0.05
33.	Bote	9784	0.03
34.	Done	3519	0.01
35.	Kewarat	3508	0.01
36.	Sonaha	1223	0.00
37.	English	1208	0.00
38.	Koche	1180	0.00
39.	Kisan	1161	0.00
40.	Punjabi	1152	0.00
41.	Sadri	1114	0.00
42.	Sign Language	647	0.00
43.	Kurmali	526	0.00
44.	Sindhi	398	0.00
45.	Malpande	207	0.00
46.	Hariyanwi	171	0.00
47.	Sadhani	130	0.00
B.	TIBETO-BURMAN		
48.	Tamang	1602875	5.50
49.	Magar Dhut	1248003	4.28
50.	Nepalbhasha	1179946	4.05
51.	Gurung	467697	1.60
52.	Yakthung/Limbu	408577	1.40
53.	Rai	228502	0.78
54.	Bantawa	151346	0.52
55.	Magar Kham	129021	0.44
56.	Sherpa	128494	0.44
57.	Chamling	100754	0.35
58.	Chepang	77958	0.27
59.	Sunuwar	44276	0.15
60.	Kulung	40479	0.14
61.	Bhujel	38257	0.13
62.	Thami	31446	0.11
63.	Ghale	28942	0.10
64.	Thulung	27246	0.09
65.	Sampang	26108	0.09
66.	Dhimal	24722	0.08
67.	Khaling	18173	0.06
68.	Yakkha	18125	0.06
69.	Wambule	15932	0.05
70.	Bahing/Bayung	15290	0.05
71.	Yamphu/Yamphe	12024	0.04
72	Bhote	11904	0.04
73.	Nachhiring	10957	0.04
74.	Pahari	10619	0.04
75.	Hyolmo/Yholmo	10440	0.04
76.	Dumi	10009	0.03
77.	Thakali	8758	0.03
78.	Mewahang	8214	0.03
79.	Chhantyal	7528	0.03
80.	Puma	7408	0.03
81.	Athpahariya	6236	0.02
82.	Dungmali	6067	0.02
83.	Jirel	5849	0.02
84.	Balkura/Baram	5230	0.02
85.	Tibetan	5077	0.02
86.	Lohorung	4925	0.02
87.	Dolpali	4875	0.02
88.	Meche	4747	0.02
89.	Raji	4696	0.02
90.	Koyee	4455	0.02
91.	Chum/Nubri	4348	0.01
92.	Dura	4146	0.01
93.	Lapcha	3410	0.01
94.	Jero/Jerung	3007	0.01
95.	Mugali	2914	0.01
96.	Chhintang	2811	0.01
97.	Chhiling	2679	0.01
98.	Karmarong	2675	0.01
99.	Hayu/Vayu	2492	0.01
100.	Lhopa	2384	0.01
101.	Byansi	2190	0.01
102.	Manange	2130	0.01
103.	Tilung	2123	0.01
104.	Magar Kaike	2030	0.01
105.	Baragunwa	1522	0.01
106.	Khamchi(Raute)	827	0.00
107.	Waling/Walung	753	0.00
108.	Dhuleli	745	0.00
109.	Lungkhim	738	0.00
110.	Lowa	648	0.00
111.	Kagate	543	0.00
112.	Nar-Phu	463	0.00
113.	Lhomi	435	0.00
114.	Tichhurong Poike	411	0.00
115.	Phang-duwali	241	0.00
116.	Surel	201	0.00
117.	Belhare	173	0.00
118.	Sam	164	0.00
119.	Bankariya	82	0.00
C.	AUSTRO-ASIATIC		
120.	Santhali	56620	0.19
121.	Munda/Mudiyari	2334	0.01
122.	Khariya	220	0.00
D.	DRAVIDIAN		
123.	Uranw/Urau	40637	0.14
E.	LANGUAGE ISOLATE		
124.	Kusunda	87	0.00
F.	OTHERS	5200	0.02
G.	NOT STATED	2474	0.01