

# Language Endangerment: A Critical Destiny of Indigenous Mother Tongues Decline in Nepal

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## Abstract

Language is the vehicle for people to communicate socio-cultural reality which transmits culture and knowledge from one generation to another. Language and culture are intimately related and dependent on each other. Endangerment is one of the stages of language loss which is a very critical issue in the 21st century because the extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique expression of the human experience and the culture of the world. A language is dying every time in the world which will create difficulty to understand the pattern, structure, and function of human languages, prehistory, and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystems in the future. Language is thus essential for the ability to express cultural knowledge and the preservation of one is paramount to the preservation and further development of the others. It is believed that half of the world's languages will disappear within this century. In Nepal, there are 92 indigenous or minority languages out of 123 are in endangered situation. This paper describes the context and stages of language endangerment in the global and Nepalese context and indigenous language situations of Nepal.

**Keywords:** Endangerment, extinction, preservation, vulnerable languages, intergenerational transmission.

## INTRODUCTION

A language is endangered when its speakers cease to use it, use it in rare domains, use fewer of its registers and speaking styles, and/or stop passing it on to the next generation (UNESCO, 2003). It is a language that is at risk of falling out of use and its speakers no longer pass it on to the next generation. A language is considered to be endangered when the population of its speakers is diminishing, and the last generation does not exercise the use of the language actively or not at all. Similarly, UNESCO's Ad-hoc expert group on endangered languages (2003) offers that, when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next, it is supposed to be declining. It means that there are no new speakers, adults, or children to speak that language. Similarly, Rogers & Campbell (2015) mentioned four criteria for language endangerment: the absolute number of speakers, lack of intergenerational transmission, decrease in the number of speakers over time, and decrease in domains of use. According to Woodbury (2012), an endangered language is likely to become extinct in the near future. Many languages are falling out of use and being replaced by others that are more widely used in the region or nation, such as English in the U.S. or Spanish in Mexico, or Nepali in Nepal. Unless current trends are reversed, these endangered languages will become extinct within the next century. Many other languages are no longer being learned by new generations of children or by new adult speakers;

these languages will become extinct when their last speakers die (Gyanwali, 2019).

Today, many languages or speech communities of a minority language are shrinking and their language will ultimately vanish if these developments are not reversed. Children may no longer acquire their mother languages even when they are still spoken by many thousands of elderly speakers. It means, that the sustainability of language is based on the number of speakers or the number of children who are using their mother language in daily activities, and that language will be in an endangered position. There is no definite rule/law to identifying a language as endangered. According to Krauss (1992), mainly there are three criteria for identifying endangered languages: (a) The number of speakers currently living (b) The mean age of native and/or fluent speakers, and (c) The percentage of the youngest generation acquiring fluency with the acquisition of the languages. He further described those languages as safe if children will probably be speaking them in 100 years, endangered if children will probably not be speaking them in 100 years, and moribund if children are not speaking them now. It indicates that the endangerment of language is based on the attitude, acquisition of the mother language, the number of young speakers, and the total ecology of the language.

The National Census (2011) had enlisted 123 languages spoken in Nepal. But in 2019 the National Language Commission added six more new languages in Nepal including Rana Tharu, Nar Phu, Chum (Syaar), Nubri (Larke), Poike, and

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Serake (Seke). With the new six languages, the number of languages spoken in Nepal has reached 129 (Khabarhub, 2019). According to the Language Commission (2019), as many as 37 languages are on the verge of extinction in Nepal. As many as 117 out of the 123 languages are spoken by indigenous communities in Nepal (Lama, 2020). Among the total languages, most of the indigenous languages are in an endangered situation. Due to the loss of population, increasing rate of migration, global domination of English and national domination of the Nepali language, lack of awareness of the importance of the mother tongue, illiteracy, mass media, multicultural influences, etc. are the major causes of indigenous language extinction in Nepal. Most of the languages spoken in Nepal exist in oral form and the government does not have the proper policy to protect endangered languages from becoming extinct.

### THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The overall objective of this paper is to discuss the context and stages of language endangerment and the language situation in the context of Nepal. The specific objective is to analyze the linguistic situation, stages of language endangerment, and the contemporary situations of the indigenous languages of Nepal.

### METHOD OF STUDY

Regarding the aforementioned objective, the descriptive research design is applied for this research. This research design focuses on the 'what' of the research subject than 'why' and helps to analyze the secondary data with the predetermined research topic. The data used in this research is quantitative which are collected from secondary sources like the Central Bureau of Statistics, Ethnologue, Central Department of Linguistics, University publications, reports of the National Language Commission, UNESCO, research articles, and other organization/individual research documents. This research has applied the comparative method in tabular form for the analysis of data. It compares the secondary sources of data across time, place, speech communities, and linguistic populations.

#### *The context of language decline in the world*

A lot has been written on language since the period of 1990s, especially since Krauss (1992). Recently the literature has been augmented by books such as Crystal (2000), and Nettle & Romaine (2000) as well as more regionally focused publications such as Brenzinger & Tjreed (2008), etc. According to Mufwene (2002), this literature has expressed apprehension, primarily deploring the fact that linguistic diversity is being lost at a dramatic speed and occasionally arguing that the native speakers of these languages are losing their cultural heritage. Similarly, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), mentioned that demographically less than 300 languages accounted in the early 1990s for a total of over 5 billion speakers or close to 95% of the world population. But this 95% of the world population speaks considerably under 5% of the world languages. This means that more than 95% of the world's languages have fewer than 1 million speakers each. Most of the figures about them are very unsure and estimates differ. Probably around 40% of the world's languages are spoken by 1 million and 10,000 speakers each (smallish, small, and very small languages). Somewhat over half of the world's oral languages and most of the sign languages are spoken by communities of fewer than 10,000 speakers. These languages are minimal-sized. And half of these, in turn, meaning around a quarter of the world's languages are

spoken by communities of 1,000 speakers or fewer (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). These minimal-sized languages are the most vulnerable oral languages in the world. All sign languages are threatened, except maybe around 200 one per country. At present, According to UNESCO (2003), about 6000 languages exist in the world. About 5760 of those languages are spoken by 3% of the world's population, mostly of indigenous or tribal descent. The remainder of the languages is spoken by 97% of the world's population. It is estimated that about 90% of the 5760 languages will be replaced by the dominant languages by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ethnologue (2011) indicates that about 30% of the languages of the Americas had extinct and most of the European languages are in a safe condition. But the number of world languages has not been confirmed and is various according to linguistics and other international organizations. Ethnologue is the largest present-day survey of language, attempting a worldwide review since 1974. In the first edition, it mentioned the existence of 5,687 languages in the world. Since the period of 1980s, the situation has changed dramatically, with the improvement of information gathering techniques to get the data of the existing languages of the world.

The thirteenth edition of Ethnologue (1996) contains 6,703 language headings and about 6,300 living languages are classified in the International Encyclopedia of Linguistics (1992). There are 6,796 names listed in the index of the Atlas of world languages. The off-the-cuff figure most often heard these days is 6,000, with the variance sometimes going below, sometimes above. The latest edition (22<sup>nd</sup>) of Ethnologue (2019) mentioned that there is a total of 7,111 living languages worldwide - a net increase of 14 living languages since the 21<sup>st</sup> edition was published one year ago. Similarly, Crystal (2000) mentioned that about 96% of the world's languages are spoken by just 4% of the population. Nearly 500 languages have less than 100 speakers; around 1,500 have less than 1,000, and 3,340 have less than 10,000. The data shows 51 languages with just a single speaker. Among them, 28 in Australia, 8 in the USA, 3 in South America, 3 in Africa, 6 in Asia, and 3 in the Pacific Islands. This figure indicates that small tongues get abandoned by their speakers, who stop using them in favor of a more dominant, more prestigious, or more widely known tongue. This process of language loss has no proper words and calls it 'language death', 'language shift', 'threatened languages', 'language extinction', 'last words', or 'vanishing voices'.

The statistical data related to language use may illustrate the extent of the problems of language endangerment. According to Ethnologue (2009), about 97% of the world people speak only about 4% of the world's languages; and conversely, about 96% of the world's languages are spoken by about 3% of the world's people and 90% of the world population speaks the 100 most-used languages. Approximately 85% of the almost 7000 languages of the world are spoken in only 22 countries of the world. This means that there are at least 6000 languages spoken by about 10% of the people on earth. These data and other information indicate that 90% of languages in the world are in an endangered situation and facing the problem of extinction. Globally, 95% of the 6,700 languages that exist are spoken by indigenous people. Of them, 2,267 languages are spoken in Asia. Nearly 40% of the indigenous languages are in danger across the world (Lama, 2020). This figure shows the very critical conditions of the minority languages which has been spoken by ethnic people, indigenous, marginal, and tribal communities of the world.

### **Language endangerment in the context of Nepal**

Nepal is a small and landlocked country but very rich in the diversity of languages, cultures, and ethnic groups. Out of ten high mountains in the world eight are located in Nepal. From one mountain to another mountain and from one valley to another, people speak different languages and different dialects. Just as the diversity of topography and vegetation ranges from tundra to tropical, the diversity of languages is another characteristic of the country. Due to the high mountain and remoteness, many places were isolated and cut off from the mainstream for centuries, keeping the mother tongue intact, or developing independently from other languages. In many areas, there used to be little contact even among the speakers of the same language, allowing different dialects to develop.

A global record of language, Nepal currently has as many as 126 living languages (Ethnologue, 2005) and according to CBS (2011), there are 123 languages. That is a huge figure for a country with a total area of only 147,181 sq. km. over 22 times smaller than India (which has 415 living languages), over 65 times smaller than China (236 living languages) or the USA (162 living languages) (Ethnologue 2005). Compare to the dead (extinct) languages in each of the above countries, at least 3 of Nepal's languages are extinct- Dura, Kusunda, and Waling. Ethnologue also lists 13 extinct languages for India, 1 for China, and 73 for the USA. The fear that other indigenous languages may become extinct is legitimate. Although Nepali is spoken by almost half of the entire population of 20.6 million people, and other major languages such as Maithali (12.1%), Bhojpuri (7.4%), Tharu (5.8%), Tamang (5.1%), and Newar (3.6%) may not be facing an immediate extinction, and more than 100 other less known languages are in the endangered situation. (Fyuba & Koirala, 2006).

According to CBS (2001), out of 92 identified languages 59 languages each has less than ten thousand speakers and the total population speaking these non-dominant languages is about 0.5%. Linguists classified the different types of language based on their number, intergenerational transmission, documentation practices, and other components. Similarly, there are different views on the number of endangered languages in Nepal. There are 77 (Noonan, 2008 & Regmi, 2012), 47 (Moseley, 2010), and 60 (Yadav & Turin, 2009) languages in endangered and extinct status in Nepal. Similarly, according to CBS (2011), out of 123, there are about 45 languages that have less than a thousand speakers. There are 16 languages that have less than 500 speakers like Kusunda - 28; Sam - 201; Koche- 280; Limkhim - 129; Khimchi (Raute) -461; Kaike - 50; Khariya - 238; Kagate - 99; Mizo-32; Kuki - 29; Baram - 155; Kurmali - 227; Khariya - 238; Dzongkha - 80; Assamese - 476 and Sadhani - 122. Some more languages which have less than a thousand populations are also included in the population census 2011, and these are Byansi (480), Surel (287), Bankariya (69), Gadhawali (38), Malpande (247), Dhuleli (347), Belhare

(599), Phangduwali (290), Jumli (851), Sonaha (579), Dadeldhuri (488) and Manange (392). Hence, according to this data, more than 40% of languages have less than a thousand populations and are severely in an endangered situation.

In the high Himalayas, Tibeto-Burman families of languages dominate, but other areas have a mixture of language families. In terms of diversity, the Terai is the richest due to the greatest settlement from other areas. Different ethnic groups speak all four families of languages, and in some recently settled villages, residents need to speak at least two languages to carry out daily tasks (Poudel, 2010). The official language of Nepal is Nepali, a member of the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family of the world. There are over 17 million Nepali speakers in the world, in countries including Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Brunei, and India (translater without boarder. org). It is a macrolanguage spoken by 12,300,000 in Nepal (78% of the total population) according to the 2011 census; 2,870,000 in India according to the 2001 census, and 156,000 in Bhutan. The language is also called Eastern Pahadi, Gorkhali, Gurkhali, Khaskura, Nepalese, and Parbate. Nepali is also the official language of Sikkim, an Indian state in the Himalayas, and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal (<https://www.mustgo.com/worldlanguages/nepali/>). Hence, the dominant language (lingua franca) of Nepal is Nepali but it is the home of more than 130 languages and more than 200 dialects.

### **Stages and number of endangered languages in Nepal**

According to UNESCO (2010), there are five categories of endangered languages: vulnerable (most children can speak the language, but it is restricted to certain realms); definitely endangered (children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue); severely endangered (older generations speak the language and younger generations understand, but cannot speak); critically endangered (the only surviving speakers are old and speak infrequently); and extinct (no speakers at all) (Singh & Chhetri, 2019). Based on this category, the languages of Nepal are also classified into different groups. According to Noonan (2008), there are five categories: Safe (10 lakh to 1 lakh); Endangered (1 lakh to 10 thousand); Most endangered (10 thousand to 1 thousand); Dead languages (less than 1 thousand), and Dead languages (no listed no.). Among these categories, Regmi's categorization is most comprehensive and more detailed than others. In the sense of endangerment, Regmi (2012) says that many spoken languages especially of indigenous nationalities have not yet been recorded in the 2011, census. Linguists from home and abroad as well as the speech communities have been concerned about the situation of the languages of Nepal. Many languages in Nepal are used in a few domains only by a few adult speakers. Such languages have been categorized as seriously endangered. He presents the categorization of the languages of Nepal in terms of language endangerment.

**Table no.1: Endangered languages of Nepal**

S.N.	Category	Characteristics	Number	Name of languages
1	Safe	Without no danger of being lost	17	Awadhi, Bantawa, Bhojpuri, Gurung, Khaling, Kham, Limbu, Magar, Maithali, Nepali, Nepali sign languages, Newari, Rajbanshi, Sherpa, Tamang, Tibetan, and Tharu.
2	Almost safe	With little danger of being lost	15	Angika, Bajjika, Chamling, Chepang, Danuwar, Darai, Dhimal, Dolpo, Jhangad, Kulung, Sangpang, Santhali, Thami, Thulung and Yakkha.

3	Potentially endangered	Heavy pressure from a large language and beginning to lose child speakers	8	Athpaharia, Belhare, Chantyal, Dumri, Jirel, Kumal, Mugali and Thakali
4	Endangered	Have few or no children chilling, learning languages	22	Bahing, Bhujel, Bote, Byansi, Dura, Ghale, Hayu, Kharia, Kou, Lepcha, Lorung, Majhi, Meche, Nachiring, Pahari, Puma, Raji, Sunuwar, Umbule, Yamphu and Yholmo
5	Seriously endangered	Have the youngest good speakers age 50 or older	12	Baragaunle, Baram, Chaurauti, Dungmali, Mewahang, Jerung, Kaike, Kisan, Mangwa, Narphu, Raute and Tilung.
6	Moribund	Have only a handful of good speakers left, mostly very old	7	Chingtant, Kagate, Koche, Kusunda, Lhomi, Limkhim, and Sam
7	Extinct	Have no speakers left	11	Baybansi, Bungla, Chonkha, Chukwa, Hedangpa, Khandung, Longaba, Mugali, Pongyong, Sambya and Waling

Source: Regmi, 2012

But there are multiple views about the number of languages in Nepal. According to American Linguist Michel Noonan (2008), there exist 140 living languages in Nepal, and among them, 91 mother languages are in an endangered phase. But due to the prioritization of the Nepali language and the discriminatory language policy of the government, more than 90 percent of ethnic and indigenous languages are in endangered situations in Nepal.

#### **Documentation of tradition of indigenous languages**

The documentation of language is the process by which endangered languages can be preserved for the next generation. It is the subfield of linguistics that deals with creating multipurpose records of languages through audio and video recording of speakers and signers and with annotation, translation, preservation, and distribution of the resulting materials (Austin, 2019). Language documentation aims the record the linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community and it may be characterized as radically expanded text collection processes (Himmelmänn, 1998). Himmelmänn (2006), further mentioned that it is a lasting, multipurpose record of a language, and the author defines language documentation as a field of linguistic inquiry and practice in its own right which is primarily concerned with the compilation and preservation of linguistic primary data and interfaces between primary data and various types of analyses based on these data. Similarly, Woodbury (2011) defined that, language documentation as the creation, annotation, preservation, and dissemination of transparent records of a language.

The documentation of language has initiated in the period of the 1950s in Nepal. The statistics on the mother tongues of Nepal were first made available after the 1952/54 census. A total of 52 mother tongues were reported, according to Gurung (2005), of which five were Terai dialects related to Awadhi, Bhojpuri, and Maithali, and two were duplications-Bhote-Sherpa and Tibetan, and Santhali and Satar. Thus, the actual number of mother tongues recorded was 45. Subsequent censuses (1961, 1971, and 1981) reported progressively fewer numbers of mother tongues. The number of languages reported in the Panchayat era declined from 36 in 1961 to 17 in 1971 and 18 in 1981. The number of languages was increased since the establishment of democracy in Nepal. This has meant a proliferation of reported languages from 31 in 1991, 92 in 2001, and 123 in 2011. Similarly,

Gurung (2003) mentioned that that are various ethnic groups for which mother tongue retention levels can be derived in all census reports. Besides the census, there are two other estimates. One is the Ethnologue (2005), which lists 126 languages, while American linguist Noonan (2008), approximates the presence of at least 140 languages, among them 16 languages are spoken by 97% of the total population while more than 75 languages are spoken by about 3%, of which half of the languages are spoken by the population under 1000 and another half by less than 10,000. Similar types of data are presented by Yadav (2009), in his article, Linguistic Diversity in Nepal. According to him, there are 16 of 92 languages (i.e., about 5%; all spoken by more than 100,000 speakers) are used by 97% of the population whereas more than 76 (i.e., about 95%; all spoken by less than 100,000 speakers) are confined to only 3% of the total population. Among these all-Nepalese languages only nine indigenous languages have a writing system or script. They are as follows:

1. Limbu is written in Sirijangnga script.
2. Tamang is written in Sambota or Tibetan script or Devnari script.
3. Newar is written in Ranjana or Devanagari script.
4. Lepcha is written in Rong script.
5. Santhal is written in Olchiki or Santhali script.
6. Gurung is written in Devanagari, Roman, and Khema.
7. Magar is written in Devanagari or Akkha script.
8. Nepali, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Hindi, Rajbanshi is written in Devanagari script
9. Maithali is written in Mithilakshar or Kaithi script

Most of the indigenous languages of Nepal are in endangered situations. Due to the awareness of the mother language and the efforts of indigenous peoples, there are some initiatives taken by various language communities to develop writing systems appropriate to the phonetics of their languages and practically acceptable to them. According to Yadav (2007), they are Tharu, Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rajbanshi, Kusunda and Rai group of languages such as Bantawa, Thulung, Chamling, Khaling, Kulung, and so on. But only a little number of indigenous languages have access to publish their documents in their mother script. Some major languages and their number of newspapers/journals are listed in the following table.

**Table no.2: Number of journals/newspapers**

S.N.	Languages	No. of journal/ newspapers	S. N	Languages	No. of Journal/ Newspapers
1	Newari	30	7	Tharu	8
2	Maithali	17	8	Limbu	2
3	Bhojpuri	5	9	Dotel	2
4	Sanskrit	2	10	Tamang	4
5	Urdu	3	11	Rai	1
6	Tibetan	1	Total	11	75

Source: Information Department of Nepal (2010, 2019)

According to CBS (2011), there are 123 languages in Nepal, among them, only 8 indigenous languages have their publishing documents. Currently, 93.07 percent of the newspapers published in Nepal are in non-indigenous languages. Among them, 68.42 percent are published in the official language Nepali and 24.65 percent in English, Hindi, and English-Nepali. The media in indigenous languages accounts for only 6.58 percent of the total while indigenous people make up 37.2 percent of the national population. Now there are 43 Newari, 13 Tharu, 10 Tamang, and two Rai language newspapers. Also, 294 supplements in other languages have been published (Rajbhandari - Amatya, 2016). It indicates that most other languages have an only oral traditions and have more chances of endangerment. The tradition of writing is a very important criterion of language endangerment and in Nepal, only a limited number of languages have written traditions.

## CONCLUSION

More than 90% of the languages of Nepal are in an endangered situation which is a serious issue because each language shares such an intricate bond with the culture, it is associated with that it alone can facilitate a somewhat thorough analysis of culture. It is believed that language is the vehicle of culture, belief, ideology, and history. Anthropologically, language is one of the major pillars of culture and both are mutually constitutive. That being said, different languages across the globe are continuously dying and causing the death of the premise and the backbone of entire civilizations forever losing their heritage and tradition. This stands as true for Nepal's endangered languages as it does for any other country's language. Most of the mother tongue of indigenous people of Nepal is in oral form and has been spoken by the 60+ years of age group. These languages have no script, are not documented, and are not transmitted to the new generation. Mostly, potentially endangered, endangered, seriously endangered, and moribund languages are on the verge of extinction. Hence the study, research, and documentation of endangered languages is a very urgent and essential issue in the world as well as in Nepal.

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