

# LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND SHIFT IN THE MAJHI COMMUNITY

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*This paper evaluates the knowledge of languages and domains of language use to investigate the factors and forces responsible for language shift (LS) in the Majhi community. The data used are solely based on Chalise (2014). The community became bilingual in Majhi and Nepali several generations ago. A small number of people have knowledge of English, Hindi, etc., but they do not use them in daily life conversations. The patterns of Majhi language competence and its use in different domains in different generations indicate that there was a stable bilingualism in the past, but a notable degree of language shift began around four decades before, and it has been accelerating since then. We do not find any vital changes in the essences of personal factors. But the essences of group factors have been changed because of modernization and globalization. In the last three decades, the nation has adopted a favorable policy for minority languages, but LS has accelerated in this community. It suggests that language policy was unable to withstand the forces of modernization and globalization. We cannot deny modernization and globalization therefore it is our challenge to find out the ways to strengthen language maintenance (LM) in the context of modernization and globalization.*

**Keywords:** bilingualism, language contact, language maintenance, language shift, domains of language use

## 1. Introduction

The study of language maintenance and shift began in the mid-twentieth century as a response to the context of language contact as a result of migration into North America, Australia and New Zealand (Pauwels, 2016:9). Fishman (1964) points out that the situation of language contact brings changes in the linguistic, psychological, social, and cultural behavior of the people. This change is the main concern of the study of language maintenance (hereafter LM) and language shift (hereafter LS). The situation of language contact results into the situation of multilingualism, which is the major reason for LS (Grenoble, 2011). In the process of LS, the speakers of a language gradually give up speaking their ancestral language and shift into another language of majority culture, population and having economic or social power. In the multilingual situation, the tendency of retention of one's ancestral language is LM. Thus, in a multilingual society, the tendencies of LS and LM oppose to each other. Language is political in nature and according to Joseph (2006), when two languages come in contact, they try to replace each other and obviously the more powerful one marginalizes the less powerful one.

There are available a handful of works that contribute to the knowledge of sociolinguistic situation of the Majhi language. The first detailed sociolinguistic study of Majhi was

*Gipan* 5(1). 2022. 17-26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/gipan.v5i1.49539>

Chalise (2014) which includes the different sociolinguistic aspects of the language like dialectal variations, languages used in the community, domains of language use, language vitality, language attitude, and language resources. Dhakal (2014) presents the dialectal variations of the Majhi language as a part in his grammatical description. Regmi (2021) presents a brief sociolinguistic situation of the Majhi language but this is a reworking of Chalise (2014). Both Chalise (2014) and Regmi (2021) reveal that there is a trend of LS in the Majhi community. In this context, this paper tries to evaluate the knowledge of languages and domains of language use in the community to find out the factors and forces influencing the process of LS in the community.

## 2. Majhi language and people

Majhi is one of the minority languages spoken in Nepal by the Majhi people. The people call themselves Majhi and their language Majhi Bhasa or Majhi Kura. Although, some scholars point out that the term Kushwaar used in the writings of Hodgson (1840) refers to Majhi (Dhakal 2014:2), we did not find the use of the term Kushwaar in the Majhi communities to refer neither to the people nor to their language. Similarly, the other communities also use the term Majhi to refer to the Majhi people and their language. van Driem (2007) states that it is an “endangered language at the throes of death” which presents the devastating state of its endangerment. But according to Eppele et al. (2012), it is a threatened language. It is an Indo-Aryan language under the Indo-Iranian branch of Indio-European language family. It belongs to the Eastern branch of Indo-Aryan. Eppele et al. (2012) has grouped it in the Bihari group of Eastern Zone branch of Indo-Aryan. Majhi have their unique language and culture. Bista (1997) says that Majhi, Darai, and Danuwar have physical similarities.

According to Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal (2014), the Majhi settlements are found on the banks of the Tamakoshi, Sunkoshi, and Dudhkoshi rivers and their tributaries in the Central and Eastern Development Region of Nepal. Their total population is 83,227 and the number of Majhi speakers is 24,422. During the fieldwork we found the Majhi settlements on the belts of Indrawati, Bhotekoshi, Sunkoshi, Tamakoshi, Dudhkoshi, and Likhu in the Central and Eastern Development Region of Nepal. Out of them, the major settlements are found in the areas along Tamakoshi, Sunkoshi, and Likhu rivers in Ramechhap district.

Eppele et al. (2012) finds that it is spoken in Bhatauli, Chisapani, Pakarbas, Bhaluwajor, and Rakathum VDCs in the Ramechhap district and has three dialects: Manthali, Rajagaun, and Sitkha. Chalise (2014) revealed that it is mainly spoken in the places along Tamakoshi and Sunkoshi rivers and there are two major dialects viz. Tamakoshi dialect and Sunkoshi dialect with 65% of lexical similarity. There are subdialects under the major dialects. Apart from the lexical items, the major dialects are different in terms agreement system, too. In some cases, there is difficulty in mutual intelligibility between the speakers of two major dialects. Manthali and Rajagaun dialects, mentioned in Eppele et al. (2012), belong to the Tamakoshi dialect and the Sitkha dialect belongs to the Sunkoshi dialect. It is reported that there are some Majhi speaking areas apart from Ramechhap.

### 3. Methodology

This study is based on the data from Chalise (2014). In that study, there were collected different types of data using different research tools. The data used in this study were collected using ‘Sociolinguistic Questionnaire A’ developed and used by the Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LinSuN). The questionnaire was administered to 60 Majhi speakers who were willingly ready to take part in the survey. An oral consent was taken from each of the respondents before the questionnaire was administered. Five major Majhi speaking areas were selected as the study points. Equal number of respondents were selected from each of the study points including equal number by gender and age. But varied number of respondents were included by the level of education at different study points. Table 1 presents the overview of the study points and sample population.

Table 1: Sample structure of the study

Study points	Gender		Age groups			Education		
	Male	Female	15-35	35-55	55+	Illiterate	Literate	Educated
Manthali	6	6	4	4	4	2	6	4
Kunauri	6	6	4	4	4	5	4	3
Rajagaun	6	6	4	4	4	6	4	2
Seleghat	6	6	4	4	4	6	4	2
Sitkha	6	6	4	4	4	8	4	0

The questions were administered in Nepali. For data analysis, the answers, along with the metadata, were entered into a Microsoft Excel database and analyzed for general patterns and trends that would contribute to fulfill the research goals. The study is based on the sociolinguistic approach to the study of LM and LS. The dynamics of LM and shift, viz. knowledge of languages (languages they speak), use of the languages in different domains, use of languages in interpersonal communication, and the languages used by the children have been used to access the patterns of LM and shift in the community.

### 4. The findings

#### 4.1 Knowledge of languages

All of the respondents are bilingual in Majhi and Nepali. In the Majhi areas where Majhi is not spoken, all the people speak Nepali. A few of them learnt Hindi during their stay in India and some learnt English from their formal education but these languages are not used in daily life conversations. Some of the females married from the Majhi non-speaking areas, some of the young generation (15-35) respondents, and several of the latest generation (below 15) children cannot speak Majhi at all in the Majhi speaking settlements. Nearly 87% of the Majhi speakers have higher degree of command in Majhi than in Nepali. The parents and spouses of all the respondents are/were bilingual in Majhi and Nepali. The children of nearly 80% of the respondents are bilingual in Majhi and Nepali and 20% are Nepali monolinguals. It shows that there was a stable bilingualism in the eldest (55+) generation, and LS was not remarkable in the 35-55 age generation. Remarkable degree of

LS began with the young generation (15-35), and it has accelerated with the latest generation (below 15). The intergenerational language transmission is less in the children living in the market or bazar areas. The intergenerational language transfer is also less in the children of the educated parents. In the market areas, there is an intensive contact with the other language speakers which hinders the language transfer. The educated parents want their children be more proficient in the languages of wider communication than in Majhi.

In total, almost one-third of the children are proficient in Nepali at home, and they do not have any problem with Nepali in their early school classes. But nearly two-third of the children get full proficiency in Nepali within 2-3 years after they have gone to the schools. But, the children of educated parents are likely to be more competent in Nepali at home than the children of other parents. So, the formal education has played an important role in making the Majhi children bilingual.

## 4.2 Use of languages

### 4.2.1 Domestic domains

Using ten domestic domains of language use, we assessed the use of the languages (Majhi, Nepali, and both) in the domestic domains. The result shows that Majhi is dominantly used in the domestic domains so it is the major vehicle of communication in the domestic domains of language use as presented in Figure 1. The use of Majhi is higher in the spontaneous use of language like quarreling, abusing, joking and family gathering which justifies that more than 80% of the community members have the highest proficiency in their mother tongue. Counting and storytelling are conscious jobs so the use of Majhi is relatively lower. There are a few Majhi native songs which are mainly used in the cultural occasions, so the use of Majhi in singing is lower than the use of Nepali. Nepali folk songs are much popular in all the Majhi settlements because of the mass media.

The use of Majhi in domestic domains is not equal in all the study locations. In average, it is higher, about more than 80%, in Kunaury, Rajagaun, and Sitkha which are relatively isolated Majhi settlements; and it is lower, around 65%, in Manthali and Selegat which are the mixed settlements of Majhi with other language communities.

The use of Majhi is not even in male and female members of the community. In average almost 80% of the males and 70% of females use Majhi in the domestic domains of language use. Generally, it is believed that the females retain or preserve their mother tongue more than the males, but it is just opposite in the Majhi community. But Labov (1990, 2001) pointed out that women are both sometimes conservative and sometimes innovative in terms of linguistic variation and change. Similarly, Kim and Min (2010) found that marital patterns are important to determine whether the females use the mother tongue at home or not. According to them, if a woman is married within the ethnicity, she is more likely to use the mother tongue at home than the one who is married out of the ethnicity. The case of Majhi is quite different because the females married within the ethnicity are also unlikely to use Majhi at home. A Majhi male in one settlement is likely to marry a woman from another Majhi settlements. Majhi language is not spoken (equally)

in all the settlements and in this situation, the newly married woman may not have good command in the Majhi language or she may not speak it at all. In this context, she acquires Majhi after her marriage as the second language. Similarly, intercommunity marriage is very high in this community as nearly 80% of the respondents assert it. Intercommunity marriage is higher in the urban (like Manthali) or market (like Seleghat) areas and it is more common among the educated members of the community. This is the reason why less number of female respondents use Majhi in the domestic domains in comparison with the male respondents.

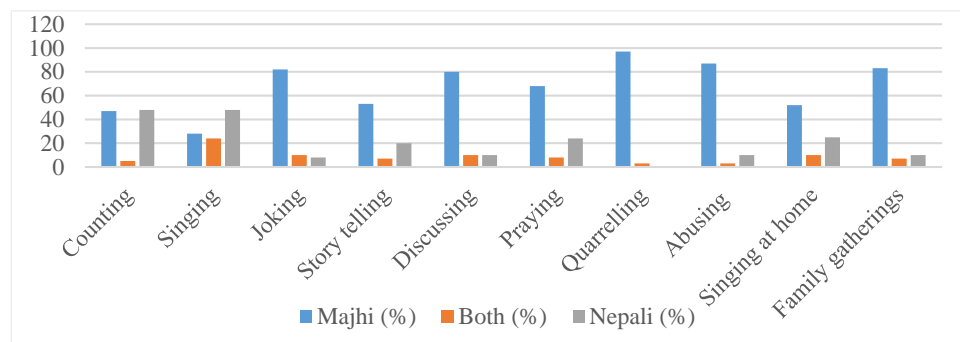


Figure 1: Use of languages in the domestic domains

Fairly smaller number (about 50%) of educated respondents use Majhi than the preliterate and literate ones (70%) in the domestic domains of language use.

#### 4.2.2 Outer domains

We assessed the use of the languages (Majhi, Nepali, and both) in the outer domains using three domains of language use. The result shows that Nepali is dominantly used in the outer domains as presented in Figure 2.

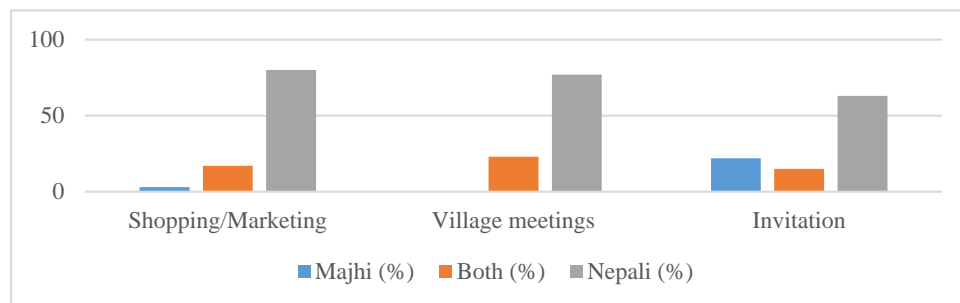


Figure 2: Use of languages in the outer domains

The use of Majhi in the outer domains is negligible. In shopping/marketing, they use Majhi if the shopkeeper speaks it, and in invitation, they use Majhi if the person to be invited is a Majhi speaker.

### 4.3 Languages in interpersonal communication

The questions were asked to the respondents about the use of languages with their different family members viz., grandparents, parents, spouse, and children. Some of the respondents didn't have grandparents and/or parents so we could not get answer from all the respondents. All the respondents who responded the questions use Majhi with their family members. But the use of Majhi with upper generations is higher than its use with the lower generations. It indicates the gradual LS in the Majhi language community from generation to generation.

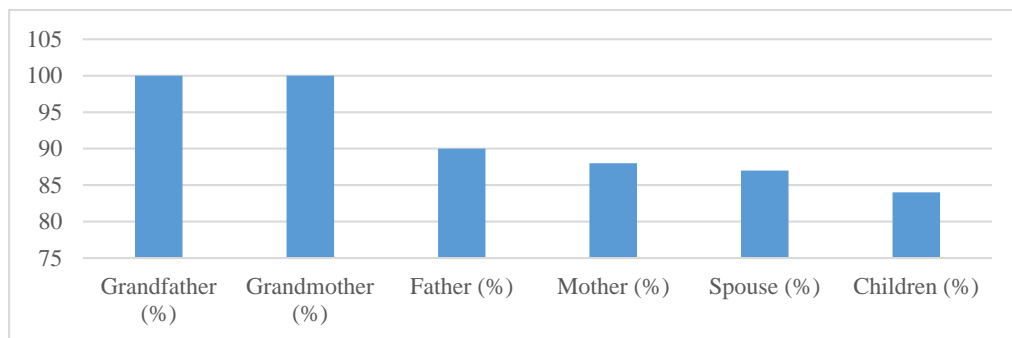


Figure 3: Use of languages in interpersonal communication

### 4.4 Language used by the children

The pattern of language use of the children is similar to that of their parents. They dominantly use Majhi in almost all of home domains and use Nepali in external domains like with the outsiders, with the teachers in the school, in the classroom, etc.

#### 4.4.1 Language used by children while playing with their friends

While playing with their friends within the community a vast majority of the children use Majhi in all the survey locations except Manthali, as presented in Figure 4.

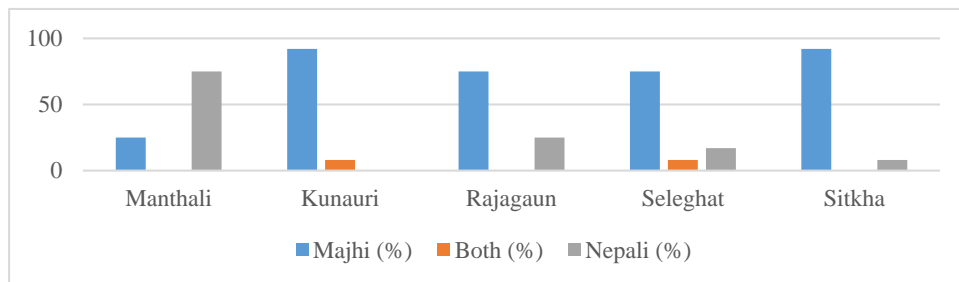


Figure 4: Use of languages by children with their friends while playing

In Manthali, two-thirds of the children use Nepali. The case indicates that gradually Nepali is going to replace Majhi in the common situations of conversation. It can be justified by the fact that the use of Nepali in the parents' generation is almost nil, but in the other survey

locations, also the number of children using Nepali with the friends while playing is increasing.

#### 4.4.2 Language used with the neighbours

The use of language with the neighbours depends on the situation. With the Majhi speaking neighbours, they usually use Majhi but with non-speaker of Majhi they have to use Nepali. In the areas of homogeneous Majhi settlement use of Majhi is automatically high, but in heterogeneous settlements, it is low. Nowadays, because of the expansion of transportation facilities and different types of businesses, people speaking other languages have migrated into in the traditional Majhi settlements and heterogeneous settlements are increasing day by day.

The use of Nepali is remarkably higher in Manthali and Seleghat, but it is lower in Kunauri and Sitkha. In Manthali, nearly two-third of them speak Nepali. It signals that the use of Nepali is increasing. The trend is higher in the market areas where there is availability of modern facilities of transportation, communication, entertainment, etc.

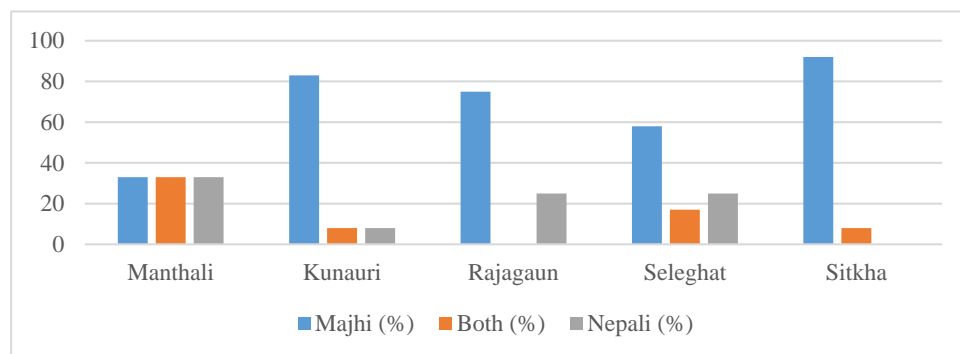


Figure 5: Use of languages with the neighbours

#### 4.4.3 Language used at school with friends and teachers

In the schools the children are completely bilingual and use both Majhi and Nepali according to the situations as presented in Figure 6.

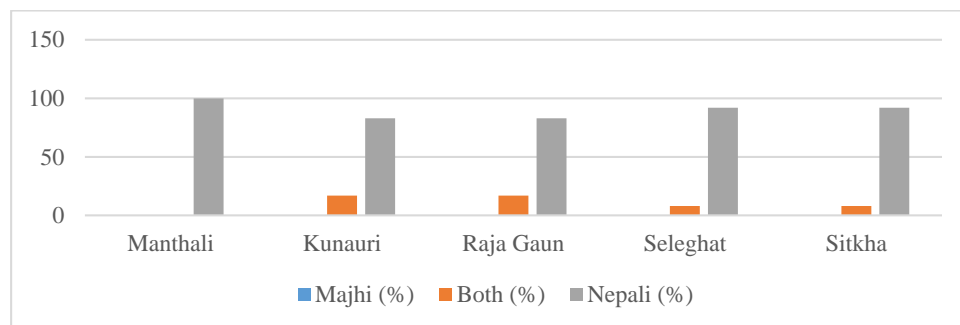


Figure 6: Use of languages with friends and teachers at school

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Nepali is the medium of instruction in the schools so the classroom language is automatically Nepali. Generally, the teachers and their friends are Nepali speakers so they have to speak Nepali. Even the Majhi teachers do not speak Majhi at school. So Nepali is the main language the children use at schools. In the lower classes, they use Majhi for some extent with their friends, but in the higher classes, the use decreases gradually. Most of the teachers in the schools are from other parts of the country and don't speak Majhi and the students should speak Nepali with them. Similarly, while talking with the Majhi speaking friends mostly they use Majhi. Sometimes they use Nepali based on the situation and the topic of discourse.

### 5. Discussion of the findings

Basically, Majhi is a bilingual community as all of the people, except some Nepali monolinguals, are bilingual in Majhi and Nepali. A negligible number of people have knowledge of English, Hindi, etc. but they do not use them in their daily life conversations. Pauwels (2016) points out that migrant setting and territorial minority setting are the key settings of the bi/multilingual societies. In this context, the setting of Majhi community is the territorial minority setting. The fact that the parents of the oldest generation people were bilingual suggests that the Majhi community have been bilingual since some or several generations. It points out that the Majhi community came in contact with Nepali language community long ago as Nepali had been a dominant language as well as lingua franca before or immediately after the unification movement of Nepal (Hamilton, 1819; Hodgson, 1828; Turnbull, 1887; Noonan, 2003; and Gautam 2021).

Since all of the oldest generation people are more proficient in Majhi and use Majhi in all domestic domains suggests that there was stable and additive bilingualism in the community for a long period of time (for several generations). There was a situation of stable bilingualism and O'Shannessy (2011:79) refers this situation as the state of LM. The gradual LS seems to have begun from the 35-55 age group of the people. According to Grenoble (2011:33) "gradual language shift is characterized by transitional bilingualism." In this situation, certain groups of speakers slowly develop higher proficiency in the language of wider communication (LWC) than in the mother tongue and the use of LWC enters into the domestic domains of language use. The rate of LS was rapid with the 15-35 age group of people and with the latest generation it has accelerated. In the latest generation, we find the situation of rapid LS and the language is going to be endangered.

Pauwels (2016) says that there are individual factors and forces and group factors and forces that influence LM and LS. The individual factors and forces include age, gender, educational background, social class, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation and marital status. In the Majhi community, age, educational background and marital status seem to play important role for LS. A smaller number of younger generation people speak the mother tongue and/or have lower degree of proficiency in mother tongue in comparison with the elder generation people. Likewise, a smaller number of educated people speak the mother tongue or have lower degree of mother tongue proficiency in comparison with the preliterate or only literate people. As Majhi is not spoken in all the Majhi settlements, the



women married from the Majhi non-speaking settlements do not speak Majhi or have lower proficiency in Majhi. This interlingual marriage has affected the smooth intergenerational transmission of the language.

The group factors and forces include numerical strength, settlement pattern, linguistic and cultural similarity and the perspective of majority group towards the minority group and language policy of the country. Greenble (2011:34-35) points out that urbanization, globalization, social dislocation and cultural dislocation are the major factors for LS. In fact, the factors weaken the numerical strength, disturb the settlement pattern, linguistic ecology and increase the cultural similarity. The numerical strength and settlement pattern seem to be important factors/forces for LS in the Majhi community. The areas like Manthali have been converted into urban areas and several of the Majhi settlements have been connected with the roads and converted into market places. Language vitality has decreased in such places. Higher level of LM is found in the homogeneous settlements like Rajagaun, Bhaluwajor, and Sitkha than in Manthali and Seleghat where the settlements are heterogeneous. Similarly, higher level of LM is found in the settlements like Bhaluwajor and Rajagaun which are distant from the other language speaking communities. The lexical and structural similarities between Majhi and Nepali can be a minor factor for LS.

We do not find any remarkable changes in the individual factors in the past and present but modernization and globalization have brought remarkable changes in the group factors. So they are the major factors for rapid LS in the community. It is believed that the favorable language policy of the nation towards the minority languages helps for their maintenance. The language policy of Nepal has been changed in favor of minority languages in the period of last three decades but it is a matter of surprise that LS has accelerated in the last three decades in the Majhi community. It means the favorable language policy for the minority languages could not resist the force of modernization and globalization. We cannot deny modernization and globalization therefore it is our challenge to find out the ways to strengthen LM in the context of these forces.

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