

Interrelationship Between Ethnicity and Mother Tongues in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intensity of the interrelationship between ethnicity and mother tongues in Nepal with reference to language vitality, ethnic identity, mother tongue education, and power dynamics. Based on the published and available data this study is based on descriptive and analytic approach within the perspective of transformative worldview. It has identified varying levels of complexity in the relationship between ethnicity and mother tongues in Nepal. Except for the major mother tongues associated with caste groups, most of the mother tongues spoken by the ethnic communities categorized into different tiers of marginalization are endangered. There appears a weakened ethnic identity, a lack of mother tongue education, and a loss of power dynamics in the ethnic groups in Nepal which helps to reduce the perplexing societal pressure for learning English and Nepali at the cost of mother tongues. More importantly, stakeholders like local governments, local communities as well as experts have to work together to implement community-based activities or strategies to build a stronger relationship between ethnicity and mother tongues in Nepal.

Keywords: language vitality, ethnic identity, mother tongue education, power dynamics, language policy

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Introduction

There is a vast intensity of relationship between mother tongue and ethnicity in the context of Nepal. The paper proposes some strategies to build a stronger relationship between these two variables (viz., ethnicity and mother tongues). Generally, ethnographers and sociolinguists hold a view that no direct interrelationship exists between ethnicity and mother tongues. However, in Nepal, to a great extent, the interrelationship has been found to be direct. The 2021 census has recorded 142 caste/ethnic groups and 124 languages (NSO, 2023). However, it has omitted cross-tabulations of mother tongues by caste and ethnicity. Some methodological issues, such as data consistencies, are cited as the reason for the lack of detailed, linked data between ethnicity and language. Relying on this data, it is not practically possible to have a complete understanding of the relationship between linguistic and social identities in Nepal. Indeed, caste (viz., ‘vertically stratified Hindu caste groups’) and ethnicity (viz., ‘horizontally distributed ethnic/*Janajati* groups’) are not synonymous at all. They are distinct

concepts. However, they are combined with a slash as a single category with a view to cover a broad range of identity defined by both caste and ethnicity in the census. Thus, the data on mother tongues do not help to analyze complex socio-linguistic issues like language shift, ethnic identity, and the quality education in mother-tongue in Nepal. Moreover, Nepal features a tension between the intense linguistic and ethnic diversity and historical and state-mandated hegemony of Nepali and irresistible intrusion of English in the diverse spheres of life (Gautam, 2025a). The results are ubiquitous in marginalization, educational inequality, and identity politics. The ethnic struggle for linguistic rights is ongoing; however, its dimensions have changed after the Language Commission recommended official languages for the provinces. Nepal lacks a formal language policy framed based on the sociolinguistic and geopolitical context of Nepal are not highly positive towards the mother tongues other than Nepali. The language vitality of the languages spoken by the ethnic communities is, to a large extent, in proportion with the marginalization and exclusion of those communities. In other words, generally, the decline of the ethnic mother tongues is, to a large extent, linked with marginalization of the ethnic communities. In Nepal, 52.4% of the total mother tongues as enumerated by 2021 census are endangered (Regmi, 2024, p.35). It has created a perpetuating tension in the ethnic communities between preserving mother tongues and irresistible societal pressure for instant proficiency in English and Nepali for a better employment and a better life. As a result, the efforts made by governmental and non-governmental agencies have fallen far short of bridging this gap.

Until recently, these issues have received little scholarly attention from either native or foreign researchers. They include Turin (2005), Yadava (2007), Pradhan (2016; 2019), Gautam (2017), Pun and Gurung (2020), Regmi (2021a), Kosonen and Benson (2021), Hachhethu et al. (2025), Regmi (2025), Gautam (2022; 2025a; 2025b), Rai (2025) and Rai (2026). Nevertheless, a thorough

investigation of these matters by employing current data on mother tongues through the lenses of language vitality, ethnic identity, pedagogical policy, and power dynamics is still missing. In order to investigate the intensity of interrelationship, this paper attempts to address the following questions:

- o What is the present state of affairs of the interrelationship between ethnicity and mother tongues in Nepal?
- o Why is the interrelationship between ethnicity and mother tongues not as strong as expected in Nepal?
- o How can such interrelationship be strengthened to preserve the ethnic languages of Nepal?

Methodology

This study has been based on secondary data that were drawn from the published works and reports on the languages of Nepal. The interpretation is based on various theoretical underpinnings, viz., Fairclough (2013; 2015), Fishman (1999), intrinsic value of mother tongue education for cognitive development and cultural preservation and implementation of ethnic mother tongues to advance social equity and inclusion as envisioned in the constitution of Nepal, 2015.

Interrelationship Between Ethnicity and Mother Tongues

Ethnic Endangerment and Mother Tongues

There appears a strong and direct correlation between ethnic endangerment and language endangerment in Nepal. Turin (2005) strongly argues that in the Himalayan context, language endangerment is intrinsically linked with the marginalization of ethnicity. As ethnic identity is strongly believed to be marked by speech, the more endangered the ethnolinguistic communities become, the more rapidly and simultaneously the form of speech is abandoned. Such correlation is beautifully exemplified by the Bhujel ethnolinguistic community, which is categorized

as marginalized, and the Bhujel language, which is categorized as a shifting language (Eppel et al., 2012; Regmi, 2012).

As mentioned already, the 2021 census has recognized a total of 142 distinct caste/ethnic groups.¹ However, the NFDIN Act has officially recognized a specific list of 59 indigenous nationalities/ethnic groups. Ranatharu has been recently recognized as indigenous nationality. In terms of socio-economic and demographic marginalization, the ethnic

communities have been categorized into five tiers (Hachhethu et al., 2025). They include Endangered (10), Highly Marginalized (12), Marginalized (20) Disadvantaged (15) and Advanced (2). Not all the ethnic groups maintain their mother tongues well. Table 1 presents the retention of mother tongues, based on the 2021 census, across 14 ethnic groups that span different categories of marginalization.

Table 1

Retention of Mother Tongues Across 14 Ethnic Groups That Represent Various Levels of Marginalization

S.N.	Levels of Endangerment	Ethnicity	Population	Mother Tongue (MT)	Speakers	Retention (%)
1	Endangered Group	Surel	318	Surel	174	54.71
		Hayu	3,069	Hayu/Vayu	1,133	36.91
2	Highly Marginalized Group	Chebang	84,364	Chebang	58,392	69.21
		Majhi	111,352	Majhi	32,917	29.56
3	Marginalized Group	Tharu	1,807,124	Tharu	1,714,091	94.85
		Tamang	1,639,866	Tamang	1,423,075	86.77
		Kumal	129,702	Kumal	18,435	14.21
		Rajbanshi	132,564	Rajbanshi	130,163	98.18
4	Disadvantaged Group	Gurung	543,790	Gurung	328,074	60.33
		Magar	2,013,498	Magar Dhut, Kham and Kaiké	903,293	44.86
		Limbu	414,704	Limbu	350,436	84.50
		Sherpa	130,637	Sherpa	117,896	90.24
5	Advanced Group	Newar	1,341,363	Nepalbhasha	863,380	64.36
		Thakali	11,741	Thakali	4,220	35.94
		Sherpa	130,637	Sherpa	117,896	90.24%
		Newar	1,341,363	Nepalbhasha	863,380	64.36%
		Thakali	11,741	Thakali	4,220	35.94%

Note. NSO (2023)

Table 1 presents different retention rates of mother tongues across 14 ethnic groups with each representing a specific category of marginalization. Surel and Hayu, categorized as members of endangered group, exhibit 54.71% and 36.91% mother tongue retention rates, respectively. It

indicates that there is a significant language shift in both communities because of weakened intergenerational transmission. It is leading to critical risk of extinction. The children are not acquiring the languages from their parents and the younger generations are not using languages daily

(Regmi, 2021b). Categorized as highly marginalized group, the Chepang and Majhi exhibit the retention rates of 69.21% and 29.56%, respectively. The retention rate in Majhi indicates that it is rapidly transitioning toward severely endangered language lower than that of the level of endangerment of the community.

Of the marginalized category, the retention rates backed by Tharu, Tamang and Rajbanshi are highly satisfactory, significantly correlating with the category level. However, the retention rate (viz., 14.21%) in the Kumal speech community is really appalling. With language retention rates of 44.46 % for Magar and 60.33% for Gurung, these disadvantaged speech communities are experiencing a significant shift towards the dominant language like Nepali. Only of 35.94 % of the total population in the Thakali community speaks the Thakali language. It also indicates that the community is shifting towards the dominant languages like Nepali. Even though, these data are not fully sufficient to justify a direct correlation between ethnic endangerment and language endangerment in Nepal, they arguably indicate that such trends are widespread in most of the ethnic groups and languages. The mother tongues like Kusunda, Raute, Kisan, Meche, Bankariya, Surel, Raji, and Hayu are considered both culturally and linguistically vulnerable.

Geography, Ethnicity and Mother Tongues

Turin (2005, pp. 4-9) presents how deeply geography interplays with language endangerment and linguistic rights in the Himalayas with special reference to Nepal. His findings, in

general, hold true for the correlation between the geographical distribution of ethnic groups and the endangerment of mother tongues as enumerated by the 2021 census. Turin (2005) notes that linguistic endangerment is also caused by geography of the ethnicity. This is exemplified by the languages like Kaike, Dolpali and Lhomi spoken in the mountain region. Such languages are often limited by small and isolated populations.

The ethnic groups have been broadly classified into four categories based on geography (Hachhethu et al., 2025). They include Mountain (18), Hill (23), Inner Tarai (7) and Tarai (12). Ethnic groups distributed in different geographical regions of Nepal present different mother tongues retention rates. Chalise (2024, p. 16) notes that mother tongue retention reported by the 2021 census in Baram, Banakariya, Dura, Kumal, Bhujel, Lapcha, Hayu and Surel is not convincing. These ethnic groups present an interesting intersection with mother tongues distributed in different geographical regions of Nepal. This is briefly discussed as follows:

Ethnicity and Mother Tongues in the Mountain Region. There are eighteen ethnic communities categorized as mountain region ethnic groups. Of them, Chhairrotan and Tin Gaule Thakali do not record any specific mother tongues. However, they have been reported as speaking some forms of speech belonging to the Tibetan language. Table 2 presents the different mother tongue retention rates exhibited by the ethnic groups living in the mountain region of Nepal (* indicates informal information).

Table 2

Different Mother Tongue Retention Rates Exhibited by the Ethnic Groups Living in the Mountain Region

S.N.	Ethnicity	Population	Mother Tongue (MT)	Speakers	Retention (%)
1	Barha Gaunle	3,965	Baragunwa	1,536	38.73
2	Bhote	15,815	Bhote	12,895	81.50
3	Byansi	5,718	Byansi	1,706	29.83
4	Chhairrotan	—	—	—	—
5	Dolpo	5,818	Dolpali	3,244	55.80

S.N.	Ethnicity	Population	Mother Tongue (MT)	Speakers	Retention (%)
6	Tin Gaule Thakali	—	—	—	—
7	Larke/Chum/Nubri	4,414	Chum/Nubri	4,284	97.10
8	Lhopa	1,390	Lhopa	2,348	168.92
9	Lhomi	355	Lhomi	413	116.34
10	Marphali	—	Marphali*	—	—
11	Mugali/Mugam	2,124	Mugali	2,834	133.42
12	Siyar	—	Chum*	—	—
13	Sherpa	130,637	Sherpa	117,896	90.24
14	Tangbe	—	Serke*	—	—
15	Thakali	11,741	Thakali	4,220	35.94
16	Thudam	—	Thudam*	—	—
17	Topkegola	642	Dhokpya*	—	—
18	Walung	481	Waling/Walung	545	113.30
Total		179,135		151,921	84.80

Note. NSO (2023)

Table 2 reveals that outside of the Bhote and Sherpa groups, population size of other ethnic groups are significantly low. It is true that linguistic diversity is often expected to have been preserved in such remote and inaccessible areas. However, in such areas, the education is not accessible to the children in their respective mother tongues. They are forced to be taught in Nepali or English. Besides, these ethnic groups have a higher migration to the urban areas for employment, health and education.

Ethnicity and Mother Tongues in the Hill Region. Twenty-four ethnic groups are categorized as hill region ethnic groups. Of them, mother tongue of the ethnic group referred to as Fri is not identified. However, most of the Fri people are reported speaking Nepali and other local languages. The other communities speak different mother tongues belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family. Table 3 presents the different mother tongue retention rates exhibited by the ethnic groups living in the hill region of Nepal.

Table 3

Different Mother Tongue Retention Rates Exhibited by the Ethnic Groups Living in the Hill Region

S.N.	Ethnicity	Population	Mother Tongue (MT)	Speakers	Retention (%)
1	Banakariya	180	Bankariya	86	47.77
2	Baram	7,859	Balkura/Baram	1,539	19.58
3	Bhujel	120,245	Bhujel	13,086	10.88
4	Chhantyal	11,963	Chhantyal	4,282	35.79
5	Chepang	84,364	Chepang	58,392	69.21
6	Dura	5,581	Dura	1,991	35.67
7	Fri	921	—	—	—
8	Gurung	543,790	Gurung	328,074	60.33

S.N.	Ethnicity	Population	Mother Tongue (MT)	Speakers	Retention (%)
9	Hayu	3,069	Hayu/Vayu	1,133	36.91
10	H Yolmo	9,819	H Yolmo/Yholmo	9,658	98.36
11	Jirel	6,031	Jirel	5,167	85.67
12	Kusunda	253	Kusunda	23	9.09
13	Limbu	414,704	Yakthung/Limbu	350,436	84.50
14	Lepcha	3,578	Lapcha	2,240	62.60
15	Magar	2,013,498	Magar (Magar Dhut, Kham, Kaike)	903,293	44.86
16	Newar	1,341,363	Nepalbhasha (Newari)	863,380	64.36
17	Pahari	15,015	Pahari	5,946	39.60
18	Rai	640,674	Rai	144,512	22.55
19	Raute	566	Khamchi (Raute)	741	130.91
20	Sunuwar	78,910	Sunuwar	32,708	41.44
21	Surel	318	Surel	174	54.71
22	Tamang	1,639,866	Tamang	1,423,075	86.77
23	Thami	32,743	Thami	26,805	81.86
24	Yakha	17,460	Yakkha	14,241	81.56
Total		6,991,489		4,190,982	59.94

Note. NSO (2023)

Table 3 shows that, on average, around 60% of the total population within the ethnic communities speak their mother tongues in this region. It indicates a moderate level of intergenerational language transmission. It specifically means that the transmission of mother tongues is not absolute. Older generations (viz., parents and grandparents) may still speak the mother tongues; however, 40% of ethnic groups are gradually shifting to the dominant languages like Nepali. Kusunda and Bhujel present the most serious situation with only 9.09% and 10.88% retention, respectively. However, some languages like Hyolmo, Jirel, Limbu, Tamang,

Thami and Yakkha present more than 80% retention indicating high linguistic vitality.

Ethnicity and Mother Tongues in the (inner) Tarai Region. The terai region features Indo-Aryan languages like Bote, Danuwar, Darai, Kumal, and Majhi, alongside a Tibeto-Burman language referred to as Raji. They present different mother tongues retention rates, indicating varying levels of intergenerational transmission and resistance to assimilation to dominant languages. Table 4 presents the different mother tongue retention rates exhibited by the ethnic groups living in the Inner Tarai region of Nepal.

Table 4

Different Mother Tongue Retention Rates Exhibited by the Ethnic Groups Living in the Inner Tarai Region

S.N.	Ethnicity	Popn	MT	Speakers	Retention %
1.	Bote	11258	Bote	7687	68.28%
2.	Danuwar	82784	Danuwar	49992	60.38%
3.	Darai	18695	Darai	12156	65.02%

	Ethnicity	Popn	MT	Speakers	Retention %
5.	Majhi	111352	Majhi	32917	29.56%
6.	Raji	5125	Raji	4247	82.86%
Total		359816		125434	34.86%

Note. NSO (2023)

Table 4 shows that, on average, around 35% of the total population within ethnic communities speak their mother tongues in this region. It indicates a weakening or shifting relationship between language and identity. Generally, such retention rate signifies that such mother tongues are not used by younger generations. Such languages are restricted to only older generations or specific traditional settings (rituals/home). They are gradually losing cultural, historical, and environmental knowledge embedded in the language. Kumal presents by far the most serious situation, with a retention rate of only 14.21%.

Similarly, the Tarai region embodies twelve ethnic groups speaking a variety of languages belonging to Indo-Aryan, Austro-Asiatic (i.e., Santhal) and Dravidian (i.e., Uranw). On average, approximately 94% of the populations within ethnic communities in this region speak their mother tongues. It indicates an exceptionally high level of linguistic vitality and cultural maintenance. In other words, the parents are successfully passing their native languages down to their children, preventing the language being assimilated to the dominant language. It also suggests that language is closely linked to identity. Table 5 presents the different mother tongue retention rates exhibited by the ethnic groups living in the Tarai region.

Table 5

Different Mother Tongue Retention Rates Exhibited by the Ethnic Groups Living in the Tarai Region

S.N.	Ethnicity	Popn	MT	Speakers	Retention %
1.	Dhanuk	252105	Magahi ²	-	-
2.	Dhimal	25643	Dhimal	20583	80.26%
3.	Gangai	41446	Ganagai	26281	63.41%
4.	Jhangad	46840	Uranw/Urau	38873	82.99%
5.	Kisan	1479	Kisan	1004	67.88%
6.	Kushbadiya	3343	Pashi ³	-	-
7.	Meche	5193	Meche	4203	80.93%
8.	Rajbanshi	132564	Rajbanshi	130163	98.18%
9.	Santhal	57310	Santhali	53677	93.66%
10.	Tajpuria	20989	Tajpuriya	20349	96.95%
11.	Tharu	1807124	Tharu	1714091	94.85%
12.	Rana Tharu	83308	Rana Tharu	77766	93.34%
	Total	2221896		2086990	93.92%

Note. NSO (2023)

Table 5 shows that, unlike other ethnic groups, the Gangai and Kisan ethnic groups do not maintain a strong intergenerational transmission, cultural identity, or resistance to assimilation. In the Gangai community, less than two-third of the population speaks the Gangai as mother tongue. However, in the Tajpuriya community, around 97% of the total population is using Tajpuriya in different domains of language use, exhibiting a very high level of intergenerational transmission and cultural identity.

Ethnic Identity and Mother Tongues

In Nepal, mother tongues and ethnic identities vary significantly among groups categorized in terms of marginalization. Notably, a particular language a group speaks does not always correspond to the expected strength of their social interrelationship. For instance, advanced ethnic groups do not necessarily exhibit a more robust or 'advanced' interrelationship simply due to their language use. Not all the ethnic groups maintain their identity by using their mother tongues during cultural practices. We analyze the intensity of interrelationships shown by each ethnic groups based on the degree to which mother tongues are used during cultural activities.

Advanced Group. Categorized as an advanced group, Newar and Thakali people exhibit differing language vitality. While Nepalbhasa (Newar) is currently in the process of being implemented as an official language in Bagmati Province, the Thakali language is classified an endangered, having largely shifted to the dominant language like Nepali. More importantly, the identity of Newar is deeply reflected in the cultural activities periodically observed with the use of the mother tongue in the community. In praying, 60% of Newar population makes use of the Newar language (Kansakar, 2011). In this community, there are a number of rituals like Chaithi (Six Day Birth Ritual), Janku (Old Age Ceremony) and Gai Jatra in which the mother tongue is specifically used in songs and blessings. In this community, language is considered as a social badge that signals both

individual and group identity. Besides, the mother tongue is considered as storehouse of ethnicity. The cultural activities are passed down to the new generations. In the Thakali community, Lha Phewa (12-year clan deity festival), Toranlha (New Year/ancestor worship), and Phala (agricultural rituals) are celebrated by using the mother tongue. In such rituals, ancestral offerings, shamanistic practices and the recitation of oral history (cyogi rhab) are accomplished in the mother tongue (Regmi, 2017). This indicates that there is a profound, inextricable link between language and identity. The language they speak acts as the primary vehicle for cultural continuity and social cohesion.

Disadvantaged Group. There are fifteen ethnic groups categorized as disadvantaged group. They include Byansi, Chhantyal, Gurung, Jirel, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Sherpa, Yakkha, Hyolmo, Chhaintan, Tangbe, Tin Gaunle Thakali, Bahra Gaunle and Marphali Thakali. The Gurung and Magar Dhut languages are in the process of implementation as official languages in the Gandaki Province whereas Limbu is recommended for the Koshi Province (Language Commission, 2078BS). The ethnic communities which have the recognized mother tongues show different levels of strength of interrelationship with ethnic identity. The Byansi community celebrates Thumo (Worship of Benevolent Deities) with specific invocations and songs in the Rang language. However, a minority of participants (14.7%) reported that they followed Hinduism (Rai & Thokar, 2013, p.5). In the Chhantyal community, birth celebrations, marriage rituals, death purification rituals and shamanistic rituals are performed with the use of mother tongue even though the language is shifting to Nepali. In this community, 60% of population makes use of mother tongue while praying (Yadav & Sapkota, 2014, p.31). Major rituals and life-cycle ceremonies in the native settings are observed with chanting, incantations and social communications in the mother tongue in the Gurung community. In this community, 26% of population makes use of mother tongue while praying (Chalise &

Rai, 2014, p.21). Life-cycle rituals and shamanic and healing rituals are observed with a limited use of the mother tongue in the Jirel community. Kansakar et al. (2013, p.28) informs that 59.25% of Jirel population makes use of mother tongue while praying. The rich culture continued by the Limbu community is reflected in the rituals heavily based on the Mundhum. The naming ceremony, Yandang Phongma, for instance, is observed with recitation of ancestral genealogies in the Limbu language. The major rituals associated with nature worship, shamanism and ancestral respects are celebrated in the native places with chanting in the native language. However, there is an increasing use of Nepali in such rituals in the localities where people do not speak their mother tongue. In this community, 53% of population makes use of mother tongue while praying (Gautam & Thakur, 2017, p. 24). The Sherpa, Yakkha, Hyolmo, Chhaintan, Tangbe, Tin Gaunle Bahra Gaunle and Marphali Thakali speech communities as long as they are living in the native locations are significantly using their respective mother tongues while celebrating the rituals. Although the Rai possesses a strong and unified ethnic identity, the diversity of the languages spoken as mother tongues has created issues concerned with distinct linguistic identities within the community.

Marginalized Group. The marginalized group include Bhote, Bhujel, Darai, Dhimal, Dolpo, Dura, Fri, Gangai, Kumal, Larke, Lhopa, Mugali, Pahari, Rajbanshi, Sunuwar, Tajpuriya, Tamang, Tharu, Topkegola and Walung. In some communities like Bhote, Dolpo, Larke, Lhopa, Mugali, Topkegola, many of the rituals are traditionally performed in the respective languages. However, these communities are facing challenges of language endangerment as the younger generations are highly motivated to adopt Nepali and other dominant languages. Life-cycle rituals in Bhujel, Darai, Kumal, Dhimal, Dura, Rajbanshi, Gangai and Tajpuria are performed with a little use of the mother tongues (Regmi, 2021a; Regmi, 2021b). However, in the

Tamang speech community, all the life-cycle and social rituals, which are deeply rooted in Buddhism and ancient Bon Animism, are conducted using the mother tongue. In Sonam Lhosar, the specific chants and prayers have reported being conducted in the Tamang language.

Highly Marginalized Group. Bote, Baram, Chepang, Danuwar, Dhanuk, Jhangad, Lhomi, Majhi, Santhal, Siyar, Thami and Thudam are included in the highly marginalized group. In the Lhomi, Santhal, Siyar and Thudam, mother tongues are significantly used in life-cycle rituals and other cultural activities. However, such rituals are mostly performed in non-mother tongues in the Bote, Baram, Majhi and Danuwar speech communities. The Danuk, Jhangad and Thami speech communities do minimally employ their mother tongues in performing rituals and cultural activities.

Endangered Group. Hayu, Kisan, Kusunda, Lepcha, Meche, Raji, Raute, Banakariya, Surel and Kushbadiya are categorized as endangered ethnic groups in Nepal. In these communities, mother tongues are minimally used for linguistic identity. In the Hayu community, major rituals like Wonchhimi (Worship of the Goddess), Sikari puja (worship of hunting deities) and Bhume puja (worship of the earth) are observed by using mother tongue. Similarly, the Kusunda observe the shamanistic forest worship, birth and funeral rites by using their mother tongue.

Mother Tongue in Education, Mass Media, ICT and Written Tradition

The integration of mother tongues within education, media, and technology serves as an indicator of the interplay between ethnicity and linguistic identity. The 59 mother tongues analyzed across five tiers of marginalization demonstrate distinct states of this relationship. Around one-third of the languages have their native writing tradition. Regmi and Regmi (2025) critically reveal that Lhowa, an ethnic group, is experiencing a

tension between maintaining their socio-cultural identity by using their native scripts and easing educational efforts by using the Devanagari Script. This applies to other ethnic groups in Nepal. The states of interrelationship based on such indicators in different categories of marginalization are briefly discussed as follows:

Table 6

Use of Mother Tongues Spoken by the Endangered Ethnic Group

S. N.	Ethnicity	MT	MT Education		Mass Media	ICT	Written Tradition		
			Formal	Informal			Pre-literate	Having	Oriented
1	Hayu	Hayu/Vayu	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x
2	Kisan	Kisan	x	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓
3	Kusunda	Kusunda	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
4	Lepcha	Lapcha	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
5	Meche	Meche	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	✓
6	Raji	Raji	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
7	Raute	Khamchi (Route)	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
8	Banakariya	Bankariya	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
9	Surel	Surel	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x
10	Kushbadiya	Pashi	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
			1	0	2	1	5	2	2

Note. Yonjan-Tamang (2081 BS), Regmi (2021a & b) and Eppele et al. (2012)

Table 6 indicated that Meche is currently being introduced into formal education in Haldibari Rural Municipality and mass media with a developing stage of writing tradition. The Kisan language with its developing phase of writing tradition is only used in mass media and technology. The Surel and Hayu languages are reported as having a written tradition; however, they are neither used in education nor in mass media or technology. It indicates that they are restricted to oral communication in the limited domains of language use. It further indicates that they are endangered, marginalized, or lacks

Mother Tongues in the Endangered Ethnic Group. Except for the Meche, no language spoken by the endangered ethnic groups has been reported to be used in all the domains of MT education, mass media and technology. Table 6 presents status of use of mother tongues spoken by the endangered ethnic group in Nepal.

institutional support. They have a very low digital vitality.

Use of Mother Tongues in the Highly Marginalized Ethnic Group. The languages spoken by the ethnic groups categorized as highly marginalized are in a slightly better position than the languages spoken by the endangered ethnic groups. Table 7 presents status of use of mother tongues spoken by the highly marginalized ethnic group in Nepal.

Table 7*Use of Mother Tongues Spoken by the Highly Marginalized Ethnic Group*

S. N.	Ethnicity	MT	MT Education		Mass Media	ICT	Written Tradition		
			Formal	Informal			Pre-literate	Having	Oriented
1.	Bote	Bote	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
2.	Baram	Balkura/Baram	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
3.	Chebang	Chebang	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓
4.	Jhangad	Uranw/Urau	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
5.	Danuwar	Danuwar	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓
6.	Majhi	Majhi	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
7.	Santhal	Santhali	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
8.	Thami	Thami	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	x
9.	Siyar	Chum	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
10.	Lhomi	Lhomi	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
11.	Thudam	Thudam	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
12.	Dhanuk	Magahi	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓
			4	4	5	5	4	1	7

Note. Yonjan-Tamang (2081 BS), Regmi (2021a & b) and Eppele et al. (2012)

Table 7 shows that languages like Uranw, Majhi and Santhal are being used in education, mass media and technology. Some languages like Bote, Baram, Chum and Thudam exist in oral form or having writing systems but not used in the domains of education, mass media and technology. It indicates that there is a high risk of marginalization of both languages and the ethnic groups.

Use of Mother Tongues in the Marginalized Ethnic Group. The mother tongues used in the marginalized ethnic communities presents linguistic endangerment with high rates of language shift and significant linguistic inequality. Table 8 presents status of use of mother tongues spoken by the marginalized ethnic group in Nepal.

Table 8*Use of Mother Tongues Spoken by the Marginalized Ethnic Group*

S. N.	Ethnicity	MT	MT Education		Mass Media	ICT	Written Tradition		
			Formal	Informal			Pre-literate	Having	Oriented
1.	Bhote	Bhote	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
2.	Darai	Darai	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
3.	Dhimal	Dhimal	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
4.	Dura	Dura	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
5.	Gangai	Ganagai	x	x	x	✓	✓	x	x
6.	Bhujel	Bhujel	x	✓	x	x	x	x	✓

S. N.	Ethnicity	MT	MT Education		Mass Media	ICT	Written Tradition		
			Formal	Informal			Pre-literate	Having	Oriented
7.	Kumal	Kumal	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x
8.	Pahari	Pahari	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
9.	Rajbanshi	Rajbanshi	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
10.	Sunuwar	Sunuwar	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x
11.	Tajpuria	Tajpuriya	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓
12.	Tamang	Tamang	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x
13.	Tharu	Tharu	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
14.	Walung	Waling/Walung	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
15.	Topkegola	Dhokpya	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
16.	Dolpo	Dolpali	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓
17.	Fri	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
18.	Mugali / Mugam	Mugali	x	x	✓	x			✓
19.	Larke /Chum/Nubri	Chum/Nubri	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
20.	Lhopa	Lhopa	x	✓	x	x	x	x	✓
			5	7	7	7	10	2	8

Note. Yonjan-Tamang (2081 BS), Regmi (2021a & b) and Eppele et al. (2012)

Table 8 shows that only five languages, viz., Dhimal, Rajbanshi, Sunuwar, Tamang and Tharu are used in formal as well as informal education, mass media and technology. More than two-third of the languages are pre-literate and they are not used in such domains. It indicates a high risk of language extinction, prevalence of monoglossic ideology, marginalization of the communities,

ineffective policy implementation and a need for urgent revitalization.

Use of Mother Tongues in the Disadvantaged Ethnic Group. Only a few languages spoken by the disadvantaged groups are used in education, mass media and technology. Table 9 presents status of use of mother tongues spoken by the disadvantaged ethnic group in Nepal.

Table 9

Use of Mother Tongues Spoken by the Disadvantaged Ethnic Group

S. N.	Ethnicity	MT	MT Education		Mass Media	ICT	Written Tradition		
			Formal	Informal			Pre-literate	Having	Oriented
1	Byansi	Byansi	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
2	Chhantyal	Chhantyal	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓
3	Gurung	Gurung	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x
4	Jirel	Jirel	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓

S. N.	Ethnicity	MT	MT Education		Mass Media	ICT	Written Tradition		
			Formal	Informal			Pre-literate	Having	Oriented
5	Limbu	Yakthung/Limbu	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x
6	Magar	Magar Dhut	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x
		Magar Kham	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓
		Magar Kaike	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
7	Rai	Rai	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
8	Sherpa	Sherpa	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓
9	Yakha	Yakkha	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓
10	Hyolmo	Hyolmo/Yholmo	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓
11	Chhaintan	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
12	Tangbe	Serke	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
13	Tin Gaule Thakali	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
14	Barha Gaunle	Baragunwa	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
15	Marphali	Marphali	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓
	Total		6	4	6	6	4	3	7

Note. Yonjan-Tamang (2081 BS), Regmi (2021a & b) and Eppele et al. (2012)

Table 9 shows that only the four languages like Gurung, Limbu, Magar Dhut and Sherpa are used in education, mass media and technology. Similarly, Marphali, Hyolmo, Sherpa, and Chhantyal have been found to be oriented towards developing orthography. However, majority of the languages are not used in the domains of education, mass media and technology. It indicates a high risk of language endangerment, inequality in access and education and a severe digital divide. Neither the languages are transmitted to the next generation, nor are the communities able to use mother tongues

as the medium of instruction in schools. More importantly, the speakers of such languages do not have any access of information to participate in the digital world.

Use of Mother Tongues in the Advanced Ethnic Group. Of the two languages categorized as spoken by the advanced ethnic groups, Newar has a very long written tradition. It has been used in both formal and informal education, mass media and technology. Table 10 presents status of use of mother tongues spoken by the advanced ethnic groups in Nepal.

Table 10

Use of Mother Tongues Spoken by the Advanced Ethnic Group

S. N.	Ethnicity	MT	MT Education		Mass Media	ICT	Written Tradition		
			Formal	Informal			Pre-literate	Having	Oriented
1.	Newar	Nepalbhasha	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x
2.	Thakali	Thakali	x	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓
			1	1	2	2	0	1	1

Note. Yonjan-Tamang (2081 BS), Regmi (2021a & b) and Eppele et al. (2012)

Table 10 shows that Thakali does not have a robust written tradition. However, it has been simultaneously used in mass media and technology. It means that there is a shift towards modernization and revitalization of the language through digital

means, despite the language is shifting towards dominant languages like Nepali. Table 11 presents the use of mother tongues across the ethnic groups in Nepal.

Table 11

Use of Mother Tongues Across the Ethnic Groups

S. N.	Ethnicity	No. MT (Data Available)	MT Education		Mass Media	ICT	Written Tradition		
			Formal	Informal			Pre- Literate	Having	Oriented
1	Endangered Ethnic Groups	9	1 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (22.2%)	1 (11.1%)	5 (55.5%)	2 (22.2%)	2 (22.2%)
2	Highly Marginalized Ethnic Groups	12	4 (33.3%)	4 (33.3%)	5 (41.7%)	5 (41.7%)	4 (33.3%)	1 (8.3%)	7 (58.3%)
3	Marginalized Ethnic Groups	20	5 (25.0%)	7 (35.0%)	7 (35.0%)	7 (35.0%)	10 (50.0%)	2 (10.0%)	8 (40.0%)
4	Disadvantaged Ethnic Groups	14	6 (42.8%)	4 (28.6%)	6 (42.8%)	6 (42.8%)	3 (21.4%)	4 (28.6%)	7 (50.0%)
5	Advanced Ethnic Groups	2	1 (50.0%)	1 (50.0%)	2 (100.0%)	2 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (50.0%)	1 (50.0%)
Total	All Groups	57	17 (29.8%)	16 (28.7%)	22 (38.6%)	21 (35.6%)	22 (38.6%)	10 (16.9%)	25 (42.4%)

Note. Yonjan-Tamang (2081 BS), Regmi (2021a & b) and Eppele et al. (2012)

Table 11 indicates that formal and informal educational contexts utilize less than one-third of languages, a figure comparable to ICT usage. Furthermore, 38.6% of languages are employed in mass media, while an equal percentage (38.6%) are pre-literate. Finally, 42.4% of the languages are oriented towards a written tradition. Table 12 also shows the percentage distribution of languages spoken across individual ethnic groups. While over 55% of languages spoken by endangered ethnic groups are preliterate, 58.3% of languages of highly marginalized groups are oriented toward a writing tradition. Similarly, 42.8% of languages of disadvantaged groups are utilized in formal education, mass media, and ICT. The data in Table 12 presents a situation of linguistic marginalization

and unequal digital /literacy access. The survival of the languages is threatened by their exclusion from very essential domains of language use. On the whole, these languages do not present a satisfactory bond with the ethnicity.

Power Dynamics

Gautam (2022; 2025b) explains the power dynamics related to linguistic diversity and ethnolinguistic communities in the Tarai-Madhesh. Ethno-linguistic movements have not yet been fully subsided in Nepal. The ethnic communities are still actively demanding cultural, linguistic and political rights. There are provisions regarding language which are against the spirit of multilingualism and socialism envisaged by the Constitution, 2015. With 44.86% speakers of the total population,

against the spirit of linguistic diversity, Nepali has been declared as the language of official use in Nepal. In practice, more recently, English has been inadvertently encouraged to be used in administration, education and media. Only a few mother tongues, following the principle of majority, have been recommended for the languages of official use for the provinces of Nepal. Endangered mother tongues are being neglected by governments, leaving them without official safeguarding for use in education. These observations suffice to exemplify how the hierarchical relationship is maintained between different languages in Nepal. In other words, there is an unjustifiable dominance of Nepali and hegemony of English leading to

the marginalization of the languages spoken by the ethnic groups of Nepal. The recommendation of the mother tongues for the provinces based on the absolute number of speakers is in the risk of creating linguistic inequality. Of 59 mother tongues spoken by the ethnic groups, Limbu (in Koshi), Tamang and Newar (in Bagmati), Magar Dhut and Gurung (in Gandaki) and Tharu (in Lumbini and Susurpashchim) have been recommended. There are two languages, namely, Tharu and Magar Dhut which are recommended for more than one province; viz., Tharu in Lumbini and Magar Dhut in Karnali. Table 12 presents the six major languages by number of speakers in the seven provinces of Nepal.

Table 12

Six Major Languages by Number of Speakers in the Seven Provinces

S. N.	Province	Major Languages in the Province Including Nepali (With Number of Speakers					
		I	II	III	IV	V	VI
1	Koshi	Nepali (2,246,027; 45.27%)	Maithili (579,347; 11.68%)	Yakthung/ Limbu (332,512; 6.70%)	Tharu (218,534; 4.40%)	Tamang (175,445; 3.54%)	Magar Dhut (143,117; 2.88%)
2	Madhesh	Maithili (2,551,917; 41.73%)	Bhojpuri (1,149,962; 18.81%)	Bajjika (1,127,255; 18.44%)	Nepali (352,109; 5.76%)	Tharu (254,685; 4.17%)	Urdu (249,614; 4.08%)
3	Bagmati	Nepali (3,427,981; 56.04%)	Tamang (1,100,442; 17.99%)	Nepalbhasa (722,943; 11.82%)	Magar Dhut (146,738; 2.40%)	Tharu (95,423; 1.56%)	Maithili (76,445; 1.25%)
4	Gandaki	Nepali (1,810,003; 73.39%)	Magar Dhut (236,729; 9.60%)	Gurung (28,088; 8.44%)	Tharu (42,795; 1.74%)	Nepalbhasa (37,801; 1.53%)	Tamang (33,471; 1.36%)
5	Lumbini	Nepali (2,604,614; 50.85%)	Awadhi (855,264; 16.70%)	Tharu (695,994; 13.59%)	Bhojpuri (562,062; 10.97%)	Magar Dhut (194,948; 3.81%)	Magar Kham (59,104; 1.15%)
6	Karnali	Nepali (1,500,161; 88.85%)	Khas (107,084; 6.34%)	Magar Dhut (27,072; 1.60%)	Magar Kham (13,535; 0.80%)	Tharu (7,791; 0.46%)	Bhote (5,636; 0.33%)
7	Sudurpashchim	Nepali (1,143,562; 42.44%)	Doteli (486,868; 18.07%)	Tharu (398,914; 14.80%)	Baitadeli (151,571; 5.62%)	Achhami (138,474; 5.14%)	Bhajhanghi (99,334; 3.69%)

Note. NSO (2023)

According to Table 12, the provincial government has disregarded the Tharu (4.4%) and Tamang (3.54%) as official languages without providing convincing reasons. Despite significant demographic representation, the Madesh and Bagmati Province governments have failed to include Tharu (4.17%) and Magar Dhut (2.4%), respectively, as official languages. In the same vein, the Lumbini and Sudurpashchim Province have not recognized Magar Dhut (3.81%) and Baitadeli (5.62%) and Achhami (5.14%), respectively, as official languages. By far the most interesting point is the recognition of Khas (6.34%) and Magar Dhut (1.6%) as official language of the Karnali Province. Does Karnali genuinely require two additional official languages, viz., Khas and Magar Dhut when their combined speakers comprise less than 10% of the total speakers? While this remains an academic question for now, implementation poses significant practical challenges within the province.

In Nepal, the power dynamics of the languages have been found shaped by three factors. They include the weak implementation of multilingual language policy, irresistible social and economic pressure to learn English and Nepali and a lack of resistance among the ethnic groups to preserve their native tongues. Besides, such power dynamics are providing opportunities, resources and social mobility to the speakers of the dominant languages like Nepali whereas the speakers of the non-dominant languages, no matter they are recognized as official languages in the provinces, are gradually shifting towards the dominant languages.

Opinions From Experts, Linguists and Stakeholders

All the experts, linguists and stakeholders are very concerned about the weak interrelationship between the ethnic groups and mother tongues. Some stakeholders opine that ethnic mother tongues are losing their strength of use day by day due to globalization. They suggest that an appropriate language policy, including legislation, must be immediately framed by the government

to preserve the endangered languages in Nepal. Another expert notes that the over-politicization of ethnic organizations dedicated to language and culture preservation is the main reason for lack of momentum in implementing the language rights guaranteed by the constitution. Some linguists argue that the traditional livelihood system is neglected by both the community and the government, and language preservation programs are not linked to local income generation. Therefore, they suggest that all such programs should be tied directly to economic benefits. There are other views as well. Bagmati and Gandaki Provinces have enacted language acts; however, they still lack the procedural rules for full implementation. As the acts have focused on official government business, the provinces may face uncertainty about how to develop other mother tongues. They suggest that a language development department should be established within the provincial academy. While communities play a vital role in preserving languages, experts warn that ethnic languages are increasingly endangered due to migration. To protect these languages from the adverse impacts of migration, the concerned speech communities must adopt deliberate family language policies to encourage mother tongue use at home and community.

Major Factors for the Weakening Interrelationship

It has been long argued that the constitutional provisions for preserving languages are very positive in Nepal; however, the interrelationship between ethnic identity and use of languages in expected domains is weakened. Some of the general factors may include globalization/modernization, economic pressure, and insufficient implementation of bilingual education policies. There are some specific factors for the weakened interrelationship between ethnicity and mother tongues in Nepal. They are briefly discussed as follows:

Dominant Language Ideology

Since the unification, Nepali has been promoted as official language of Nepal. Against

the spirit of multilingualism, Nepali, written in the Devnagari script has been exclusively declared as the default official language in Nepal. Besides, currently English, an international language, is increasingly used in education, government, and media. This situation has adversely pressurized the minority language speaking communities to abandon their native tongues.

Lack of Formal Multilingual Language Policy

Except for stating Nepal as a multilingual country in the preamble of the constitution, Nepal lacks a formal multilingual language policy. Such language policy officially recognizes the linguistic diversity to shift from the persistent monolingualism to multilingualism, preserve minority languages and promote social equity as envisaged in the constitution. As there is a lack of such policy, the mother tongues spoken by the majority of speakers in province have been recommended as official languages in Nepal.

Lack of Resources and Materials

One of the effective strategies to preserve the mother tongues is the implementation of mother tongues in education. However, there is a significant shortage of trained teachers, teaching materials, viz., textbooks and dictionaries in local languages. Due to the lack of resources and materials, the communities are in pressure to send the children to schools where the primary medium of instruction is Nepali or English.

Prestige and Economic Factors

In Nepal, English or Nepal are generally considered as prestigious languages. These two languages are supposed to be only gateways to better economic opportunities and power. Thus, parents often prioritize education in English or Nepali. In other words, there is a irresistible social pressure for learning Nepali and English.

Policy Gaps and Implementation Issues

Nepal lacks practicing bottom-up approach. Most of the policies and strategies are made by the authorities in high office. The policies and

strategies are not effectively matched with the needs and aspiration of the local communities (Regmi, 2021c).

Strategies for Strengthening Interrelationship to Preserve the Ethnic Languages

Regmi (2017, pp.146-147) outlines several general strategies for revitalizing the endangered languages in Nepal. Many of these apply directly to improving interrelationship between the ethnic groups and their mother tongues. These strategies are briefly discussed as follows:

Framing a Formal Multilingual Language Policy

First and foremost, a comprehensive multilingual language policy has to be framed to resolve constitutional inconsistencies. Such policy may effectively manage linguistic diversity, promote educational equity, implement MTB education, and preserve cultural identity.

Strengthening MTB-MLE Implementation

Education is the most effective domain of language use which can effectively encourage using mother tongues in the community. A loose MTB-MLE policy has been reflected in the constitution and concerned regulations. However, the policy has not yet been seriously implemented by the concerned authorities. Thus, a strong or compulsory MTB-MLE policy has to be framed and implemented in the basic education in Nepal. More importantly, ethnolinguistic communities have to be made aware of the linguistic rights assured in the constitution and the fact that a better proficiency in Nepali or English is best achieved through mother tongue based multilingual education.

Digitalization and Media Promotion

Unless digital tools, viz., apps, online dictionaries and televisions are employed to document and revitalize ethnic languages, younger generations will not be encouraged to be acquainted with their mother tongues. Thus, without making any delay, such tools have to be developed in each mother tongues and children have to be encouraged to use the maximally.

Grassroots Initiatives

Top-down approaches that Nepal is following in the preservation of languages are not result-oriented. Neither the communities are aware of their needs nor do they have any interest in the programs initiated by the government. To correct the course, a needs analysis of the communities has to be conducted with the involvement of the experts and activists. Once they are made fully aware of these needs, they will be automatically encouraged to take ownership of language preservation through oral traditions, community-based language classes, and creating local literature.

Political Advocacy and Legal Actions

By far the most important strategy is to formalize and promote local languages in government services and education immediately by-passing language policies and laws. To this today, no political party is inherently aware of the importance of the local languages and cultures. Thus, political advocacy is mostly needed for the preservation of the ethnic languages.

Conclusion

This study has revealed a weakened relationship between ethnic identity and mother tongue tongues in the ethnic groups in Nepal. The constitution has strongly promised to recognize the linguistic diversity; however, the majority of the mother tongues spoken by those ethnic groups are marginalized and excluded from education, mass media and technology, affecting the linguistic rights of ethnic communities. English or Nepali has been promoted as the primary medium of instruction in both community and private schools across Nepal. This has created educational inequality for the ethnic students. Even though language has been raised as one of the major issues for political identity, the expected momentum is lacking in the ethnic communities. The speakers of some languages are facing limited access to opportunities due to the historical dominance of the Nepali language. All these factors together are pushing the ethnic languages into endangerment. In order

to correct the course for language preservation, the federal government has to frame a formal multilingual language policy based on the research of the languages and ethnic groups in Nepal. MTB-MLE has to be effectively implemented in the basic education with the full participation of the speech communities. Digital tools, viz., apps, online dictionaries, documentaries, televisions, etc. have to be fully utilized to document and revitalize the endangered languages so that the materials will be more relevant to the access and interest of the younger generations. The speech communities have to be encouraged to take ownership in language preservation through the transmission of oral traditions, language classes and creation of local literatures. More importantly, speech communities, local governments, experts and non-government organizations should work together to preserve the non-dominant languages. Political advocacies and framing policies and laws are equally important for improving the relationship between ethnic identity and the mother tongues in Nepal.

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Note.

1. However, there is a discrepancy between the number and names of the ethnic groups recorded by the 2021 census and NFDIN. Chhairrotan, Tangbe, Thudam, Tin Gaunle, Bahra Gaunle, Marphali Thakali and Siyar are not recorded as ethnic groups by the 2021 census.
2. Hachhethu et al. (2025, p. 45) notes that the main language spoken by Dhanuk as mother tongue is Magahi.
3. In Hachhethu et al. (2025, p. 31) Pashi has been identified as mother tongue of Kushbadiya. However, it not recorded in any government documents.

