



## Cultural Identity at Risk: The Magar Language and Its Endangerment



Anita Magar<sub>1</sub>, Hari Krishna Lamichhane<sub>2</sub>

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Padmodaya Secondary School, Kathmandu

E-mail: anitamagar1989@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1548-214X>

Faculty Member, Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Nepal, & Faculty Member of English, Faculty of Social Science and Education, Nepal Open University

E-mail: hkclamichhane@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2273-3914>

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### ABSTRACT

*This research critically examines the factors behind the endangerment of indigenous languages in Nepal in general and the decline of Magar language in Malbase Village from Ilam district in Eastern Nepal in particular. According to the Census report (2021), the Magars constitute one of the largest indigenous community in the country; however, they are facing the major challenge of the endangerment and decline of their native and mother language being influenced by Nepali language and other societal influences. Based on field survey and interviews to the people from the study area along with data analysis and interpretation of their opinions, this research examines the role of preference to mainstream language, migration, mixed communities, and inter-caste marriage as key contributors to language decline. This research is significant since language endangerment is a burning problem worldwide. It addresses the research gap in the area of indigenous language loss in general and Magar language in particular. The research points out the role of community, government, institutions and organizations and their efforts in revitalizing indigenous languages like Magar language in preserving the cultural identity and heritage of the communities.*

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### Introduction

Language is a crucial component of human culture and civilization, serving as a system of communication that reflects how different societies perceive and categorize the world. Lewis, Simons, & Fennig (2016) have claimed that there are around 7,500 languages spoken worldwide. However, just like biodiversity, linguistic diversity is declining at an alarming rate due to colonization,

nationalism, and globalization, threatening the loss of significant cultural and knowledge systems (Crystal, 2000). Sreekumar (2014) defines language as a “reciprocal public good developed by a speech community that derives benefits from it, and it can sustain itself only if these conditions are met. Language endangerment is the result of an acceleration in the trend of a speech community not developing it or deriving benefits from it or the absence of both.”

Nepal is a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual country with 59 recognized indigenous groups (NFDIN). Among these, the Magar community occupies the 6.9% of the total population of Nepal (Census, 2021). Magar community is concentrated in the mid-western and western parts of Nepal, is experiencing a significant decline in the use of its native language. Although Magars are the third-largest ethnic group in the country in terms of their population, only 2.8 % of them speak the Magar language (Census, 2021). It shows the cultural endangerment of the indigenous people in general and the decline of their indigenous language more particularly the Magar language from Malbase Village of Ilam district, where Magar people have increasingly adopted Nepali as their primary language, leading to the jeopardization of their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Language loss is not only a problem in the context of Nepal but it is a global issue. Fillmore (2000) defines language loss as the outcome of both internal and external forces operating on children. The internal factors have to do with the desire for social inclusion, conformity, and the need to communicate with others. The external forces are the socio-political ones operating in the society against outsiders, against differences, against diversity.

According to Oxford (1982), language loss is the “loss or attrition of skill in one's native language (L1) or a second or foreign language (L2).” Oxford further argues that language loss has “both sociological and psychological

forms”, can be “exhibited by a whole cultural or linguistic group or by an individual; it can be analyzed in terms of rate, sequence, linguistic components, or skill types.”

This research explores the reasons behind the loss of indigenous culture in general and the loss of Magar language in particular from the Malbase Village in Ilam district in Nepal and how the Magar people from this village have gradually adopted Nepali language as their primary language instead of their native language i. e. Magar language as their mother language. In this context, language is more than a means of communication; it is a vessel for cultural identity and collective memory (Pun, 2007). This research claims that it is the duty of people, society and state to preserve the language and other cultural phenomenon of every minority group from the country to preserve the cultural diversity of the country.

### **Research Questions**

This study investigates the following key questions regarding the loss of the Magar language in Malbase Village:

1. What factors are responsible for the loss of the Magar native language?
2. What are the perceptions of the Magar people regarding the retention and learning of their native language?
3. What are the efforts made by individuals, community and state to preserve indigenous languages in Nepal?

### **Research Objectives**

The primary objective of this study is to explore the significance of native language

among the Magar people, despite their shift to using Nepali for communication. Specific objectives include:

1. To identify the reasons behind the gradual disappearance of indigenous languages in Nepal in general and Magar language in Malbase Village in particular.
2. To understand why Magar people have chosen to speak Nepali over their mother tongue.
3. To examine the efforts made by individuals and organizations to preserve the Magar language.

### Significance of the Study

This research is significant as it contributes to the understanding of linguistic loss among indigenous groups in Nepal, particularly that of the Magar community. Being focused on the community level especially the Malbase village from Ilam district in Nepal, this study provides insight into the reasons behind the language shift and its endangerment. By exploring the perceptions from the local people through interviews, this study raises awareness about the importance of preserving cultural diversity especially through the preservation of the minority languages like the Magar language. This study can serve as a reference for future researchers, linguists, and policymakers interested in the dynamics of language loss and revitalization in Nepal.

### Conceptual Framework

The Magar people of Malbase Village, despite having a distinct native language (Tibeto-Burman), have adopted Nepali as their

primary language for daily communication. This shift reflects broader patterns of language loss, where native languages are replaced by dominant ones due to various factors, such as economic pressures, education systems, and social integration.

Language loss occurs when speakers abandon their native language in favor of a more widely spoken language, such as Nepali. In Malbase Village, the preference for Nepali has disrupted the transmission of the Magar language to younger generations, leading to its gradual decline. Additionally, the education system, which emphasizes Nepali and English, has contributed to the marginalization of the Magar language.

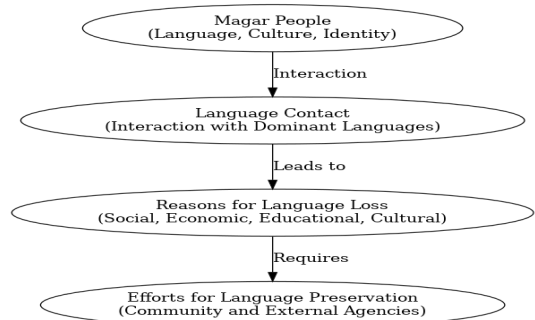


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Language is a phenomenon that we can preserve through its usage and its transmission from generation to generation. In light of this argument, in order to preserve the Magar language, it is very important to promote its use within the community and ensure its transmission to the future generations. The conceptual framework guiding this study revolves around understanding the interplay between language, identity, culture, and

the factors that lead to language loss. The framework includes:

1. Magar People: Their language, culture, and identity are interlinked.
2. Language Contact: Interaction with dominant languages like Nepali.
3. Reasons for Language Loss: Social, economic, educational, and cultural factors.
4. Efforts for Language Preservation: Contributions from the community and external agencies.

## Literature Review

### Global Context of Language Loss

The loss of language has become a issue of attention of linguists, researchers and commiunities worldwide. While there is no precise data on how many languages have disappeared over the past centuries in the world, Nelson (2007) estimates that more than 10,000 languages may have existed throughout human history. However, many of these languages have become extinct or are endangered due to a lack of transmission from one generation to the next.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL, 2017) defines language vitality as the extent to which a language is used in different social contexts. A language is endangered when its speakers shift to using another language, either voluntarily or due to external pressures (Crystal, 2000). Many minority languages, especially those spoken by indigenous groups, face extinction because their speakers no longer use them or prefer dominant

languages for social and economic reasons.

According to Bhattachan (2008), Nepal is home to 59 indigenous nationalities, with the Magars being one of the largest. The Magars are believed to have Mongolian origins and settled in the Himalayan region around 2,800 years ago. They inhabit various parts of Nepal, with a concentration in the Kaligandaki region.

### Factors Influencing Language Loss

Language loss can occur due to a combination of internal and external factors. Sasse (1992) identified cultural, historical, economic, and political forces that affect speech communities and their language use. These forces can create negative attitudes toward minority languages, leading to a shift toward dominant languages, such as Nepali in the case of Nepal.

Beck and Lam (2008) argue that language loss is often linked to the extinction of a minority language due to the dominance of a majority language. In many cases, indigenous people abandon their native language in favor of the more widely spoken national language.

Nettle and Romaine (2000) categorize the causes of language endangerment into two types: physical danger (such as war, natural disasters, and disease) and language shift, where people choose to assimilate into another language group. This shift can be either forceful, due to colonization or government policies, or voluntary, where communities perceive benefits in adopting the dominant language.

## **Language Families and the Importance of Preservation**

Linguists often focus on language families when studying endangered languages because related languages share common features. Approaching language preservation at the family level can offer more significant insights and resources than studying languages in isolation (Whalen & Simons, 2012). However, this broader approach may overlook unique linguistic traits that make each language valuable.

Michael Krauss (1992) suggests that a language needs at least 100,000 speakers for survival. Without active use and transmission of the language, it risks becoming endangered. In Nepal, many indigenous languages, including the Magar language, are facing this threat.

## **Language Loss in Nepal**

Nepal is a multilingual nation where indigenous languages are often overshadowed by Nepali, the national language. During the Rana and Panchayat periods, a "One Nation, One Language" policy suppressed many indigenous languages, creating a negative perception of them as inferior and impractical for education or business (Yadav, 2007). This has contributed to the marginalization and eventual loss of many minority languages in the country, including the Magar language in Malbase Village.

The Magar people of Malbase Village have almost entirely replaced their native language with Nepali. Even within their own

community, they do not speak their original language. The education system, media, and official settings all prioritize Nepali and English, further diminishing the use of indigenous languages.

## **Language as an Identity and Cultural Component**

Language is intrinsically linked to identity and culture (Ginder, 2015). The loss of a language is not just the loss of a communication tool but also a loss of cultural heritage, worldview, and historical knowledge (Fishman, 2002). Language plays a vital role in shaping how communities perceive and interact with the world around them. When a language is lost, unique perspectives and traditions tied to that language also disappear.

In the case of the Magar people of Malbase Village, language loss is exacerbated by the strong preference for Nepali, which is seen as more practical and prestigious. Over time, this has led to the erosion of their linguistic and cultural identity.

## **Comparing Language Loss to Biodiversity Loss**

Language loss has been compared to biodiversity loss. Just as environmentalists work to preserve endangered species, sociolinguists argue for the preservation of endangered languages (Fishman, 2002). Both forms of loss diminish the richness and diversity of human existence. However, while significant efforts are made to protect biodiversity, less attention is given to the preservation of languages.

## Research Methods

### Research Design

The research follows a descriptive research design, aiming to systematically describe the situation, problem, or phenomenon under study. The study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to present data objectively. Facts and figures are presented in tables and explained without bias, ensuring the researchers remain an outsider. The qualitative aspect relies on the experiences and narratives of respondents, offering rich descriptive data related to language loss.

### Study Area

The research was conducted in the Eastern Nepal, Ilam District, Malbase Village, Ward No. 5, where the researchers could easily establish rapport with the respondents due to being from the same Magar community. This area, being a mix of native and second-language speakers, is ideal for exploring the causes of language loss, particularly of the Magar language.

### Nature and Sources of Data

The study relies on primary and secondary data, with primary data given priority. Primary data was gathered through household surveys, interviews, and observations, while secondary data came from literature such as journals and books. Archival data and field notes were used to ensure authenticity. The research mainly follows a qualitative method.

### Sampling

Random and judgment sampling methods were used. From each household, three

respondents of different generations, genders, qualifications, and ages were selected. The selection process was designed to include diverse speakers while fulfilling the study's objectives.

### Data Collection Tools and Techniques

1. **Interview:** Formal and informal interviews were conducted with Magar locals of various demographics, with five formal and seven informal interviews recorded for data analysis.

These interviews covered topics such as demographic details, language use, intergenerational transmission, and community efforts for language preservation. Example questions include:

- a. What does native language mean to you?
- b. Do you believe in the necessity of preserving your native language?
- c. Who are more responsible for language loss in your community?

2. **Household Survey:** Surveys were conducted with family heads, though other family members were also included. This helped in gathering reliable and accurate data.

3. **Observation:** The researchers observed daily language use, cultural practices, and rituals, paying close attention to both what respondents said and how they expressed it.

### Validity and Reliability

Cross-checking methods were used to ensure the data's reliability and validity. Data from



VDC offices and previous records were compared to verify accuracy.

### **Data Analysis**

Both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed using simple statistical techniques, such as tables and diagrams. The data was categorized and tabulated according to the research objectives.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The researchers ensured privacy, non-discrimination, and respect for respondents' culture and language. Ethical guidelines such as honesty, trustworthiness, and maintaining confidentiality were followed throughout the research.

### **Limitation of the Study**

This study focuses on a single village, Malbase, and does not include comparative analysis or broader perspectives beyond the local community. The research is limited to exploring the reasons for language loss within this specific community.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

#### **General Background of the Study Area**

Ilam is a municipality located in the hilly region of the Mechi Zone, part of Nepal's Eastern Development Region. The district headquarters, Ilam Bazar, is about 600 kilometers from Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. Ilam is known for its scenic beauty, tea production, and agricultural diversity, making it an important town in the region.

The study area, Malbase, is one of the

villages in Ilam district, situated in Ward No. 5, approximately 10 kilometers from the municipality. Malbase lies between two villages: Toribari and Dhanmana. Toribari, predominantly inhabited by Brahmins, is well known for fruit production, particularly oranges and guavas. Dhanmana, on the other hand, is populated by the Kami community. The area is surrounded by government-owned forests, and while transportation infrastructure is lacking, Malbase is rich in natural resources, particularly water, which ensures sufficient irrigation for agriculture.

The village is primarily engaged in farming, with agriculture being the main source of livelihood. Major products include guava, ginger, and local chili. The nearest trading center, Biblante, is five kilometers away from the village. Malbase is a mixed community in terms of caste, predominantly following Hinduism. Despite its multi-ethnic composition, Nepali is the dominant language used for daily communication. The socio-economic activities of the village are closely tied to the Brahmin community, which holds a significant influence on local customs and practices.

#### **Demographic Information of Malbase Village**

Table 1 below presents the demographic data of Malbase Village, focusing on the household structure, sex, age, religion, major occupation, number of family members, and type of family.

Table 1

## Demographic Information of Malbase Village

S. N.	Head of the Household	Sex	Age	Religion	Major Occupation	Family Members	Type of Family
1	Respondent 1	Male	78	Hindu	Agriculture	6	Joint
2	Respondent 2	Male	65	Hindu	Agriculture	4	Single
3	Respondent 3	Male	60	Hindu	Agriculture	13	Joint
4	Respondent 4	Male	42	Hindu	Agriculture	5	Single
5	Respondent 5	Male	46	Hindu	Agriculture	5	Single
6	Respondent 6	Male	44	Hindu	Agriculture	4	Single
7	Respondent 7	Male	42	Hindu	Agriculture	4	Single
8	Respondent 8	Male	50	Hindu	Agriculture	8	Joint
9	Respondent 9	Female	70	Hindu	Agriculture	1	Single
10	Respondent 10	Male	48	Hindu	Agriculture	4	Single

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Most of the households in Malbase are headed by males, primarily involved in agriculture. The majority of families are nuclear, though joint families are also present. Despite belonging to the Magar ethnic group, all households follow Hinduism, indicating a long-standing cultural assimilation with Hindu traditions.

### Population Structure of Malbase Village

Malbase Village is home to a diverse community in terms of caste and ethnicity. The table below presents the population structure of Ward No. 1 in Malbase, categorized by major ethnic groups.

Table 2

## Ethnic Population Structure of Malbase Village

Ward No.	Brahmin/Chhetri	Rai	Limbu	Magar	Darjee	Newar	Total Population
1	596	17	21	53	30	194	911

Source: Malbase VDC Statistics, 2024

Brahmins and Chhetris make up the largest portion of the population, followed by Newars and Magars. Despite this diversity, the village exhibits strong social harmony, with Nepali

serving as the common language. Brahmin-Chhetri culture significantly influences the village's way of life, especially in terms of religious practices and social interactions.



## Lifestyle

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Malbase people who grow various crops in their land. All households in Malbase own land, typically a combination of khet (irrigated fields), bari (dry land for crops like maize), and pakha (sloping land). Khet is used mainly for growing food crops like paddy and maize, while bari is used for seasonal crops such as chili, ginger, and potatoes. Pakha is often used for cardamom, broomstick, and timber, contributing significantly to the village's income. The Magar people in the village have to work together with other community while working in their fields. They cannot speak their Magar language in course of agricultural activities. This is also a reason for the decline of their language.

## The Voices and Opinions of Local People

This section draws on the knowledge, experiences, and perspectives of the people of Malbase Village regarding their native Magar language, the reasons for its decline, and their efforts toward revitalizing it. The respondents come from different age groups, genders, classes, and educational backgrounds. Their insights are shared below:

A respondent of 22-year-old bachelor's student, as a respondent, attributes his lack of fluency in the Magar language to his exposure to a diverse linguistic environment, "Language is our identity and culture, but I don't know how to speak my own language. In college, we use Nepali to communicate with people from various castes. Nepali has become dominant, and English is now more

important to us." This highlights how young people, especially students, are increasingly using Nepali and English instead of their native languages due to their wider social utility. As Toba and Rai (2005) explain, Nepali is the lingua franca and official language used across all sectors in Nepal, which marginalizes indigenous languages.

Similarly, another respondent, a 20-year-old student, emphasizes the perceived economic and career disadvantages of learning his native language, "Language is our identity, but learning our language won't help me survive in the outside world. I would rather learn international languages like Korean and Japanese, which are more beneficial for my career." This statement illustrates the internalized perception that native languages hold little practical value compared to global languages, reflecting the pressures of globalization and career aspirations.

In the same line of argument, another respondent, a 35-year-old farmer, laments the loss of his language and suggests that community usage is essential for its survival, "A few years ago, I knew some words of my native language, but I have since forgotten them. Language can only be preserved if it is used regularly within a community." He touches on a critical issue: the decline of indigenous languages is not just a result of external factors, but also the lack of everyday communication within the community.

Similarly, another respondent, a 39-year-old employed man with a master's degree, stresses the importance of teaching native

languages to younger generations, "I encourage the younger generation to speak our language, but they don't practice it. Even though I know how to speak it, there aren't enough people in the community to communicate with." His experience echoes the challenges of linguistic preservation in small communities, where few speakers remain, and younger generations prioritize more commonly spoken languages.

Furthermore, another respondent, a 35-year-old shopkeeper and housewife, shares a more personal anecdote about the practical uses of her native language, "My mother-in-law speaks to us in our language, especially when sharing secrets. I didn't know the language before, but now I can understand a few words." This insight reflects how language can be a tool for intimacy and privacy within families, even when it is not widely spoken.

Similarly, another respondent, a 27-year-old housewife, recounts how her use of the Magar language diminished after marriage, "I used to speak my language in my natal home, but after getting married, I stopped. Now, I mostly communicate in Nepali, even with my mother-in-law who speaks Magar fluently." Her statement highlights the impact of marriage and relocation on language usage, especially when moving into communities where the native language is not widely spoken.

Finally, several respondents, including older villagers of their 70s and 80s, express regret over their inability to pass on the language to younger generations. They blame factors

such as inter-caste marriages, exposure to Brahmin/ Chhetri culture, and the dominance of Nepali language in public life for the erosion of their native language.

These testimonies collectively reveal a complex picture of language decline, shaped by external pressures such as national language policies and internal dynamics like intergenerational communication. Although there are efforts toward revitalization, such as encouragement from elders and a recognition of the cultural importance of language, the overall trend is one of gradual erosion, with many speakers feeling powerless to reverse it.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has examined the reasons behind the decline of the Magar language in Malbase Village, located in Ilam district in the eastern Nepal. The Magars, despite maintaining their customs and cultural traditions, are gradually losing their native language. Although the Magar people are rich in culture, they are poor in terms of language preservation. Language is seen as a vital part of identity, and its loss signifies a loss of culture and connection with the worldview embedded in the language. The study reveals that the Magar people of Malbase are losing their language and, consequently, their identity. They are responsible for this decline, as they have not prioritized the preservation of their language by passing it on to future generations.

Magar, like other indigenous languages, is at risk, particularly as Nepal's official

language, Nepali, is increasingly favored in schools and society. Additionally, the prioritization of English and other dominant languages contributes to the diminishing use of indigenous languages. The 2021 Census by Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) shows that although Magars constitute 6.9% of the total population of Nepal, only 3.09% speak the Magar language, among which 0.31% speak Magar Kham dialect whereas 2.78% speak Magar Dhut dialect (CBS, 2021). In comparison to this, the 2011 Census shows that Magars constituted 7.12% of the population, and only 3% used to speak Magar language (CBS, 2011). This decline reflects a national trend of language endangerment. While external factors such as government policies and social attitudes towards standard languages (like Nepali and English) play a role, the Magar community itself needs to take responsibility for revitalizing their language. Urgent steps, like increased awareness and grassroots efforts, are necessary to preserve the Magar language and its cultural heritage.

Although Nepal is linguistically diverse, many of its indigenous languages, including Magar, are in danger of extinction. A significant threat is the tendency of families to prioritize Nepali over their native languages, often due to social pressure. Children who are fluent in Nepali are often more favored, and schools predominantly use Nepali, reducing incentives to learn indigenous languages. This trend is evident among the Magar community in Malbase Village.

Language serves as a vital expression of culture, and its decline results in an irreversible loss of cultural heritage. Maintaining indigenous languages is crucial for preserving the identity and dignity of marginalized communities. Although the Nepalese government has introduced a multilingual education system, its impact has been limited by poor implementation and a lack of grassroots support. For effective language preservation, there must be a cultural shift towards valuing indigenous languages, both socially and educationally. Media, academic institutions, local government, province government and the central government can play vital role in the preservation of indigenous languages like Magar language to preserve the cultural diversity of Nepal.

Magar language, a part of the Tibeto-Burman group, has been in decline since the unification of Nepal in the 18th century. The 2001 Census categorized Nepal's languages into four families: Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian, with Magar belonging to the Sino-Tibetan group. The loss of the Magar language in Malbase is primarily due to the mixed community, where the dominant language (Nepali) overtakes the native language. To prevent further language loss, Nepal's constitution grants communities the right to preserve and develop their language. However, it is ultimately up to the Magar people to take effective steps to revive and sustain their language for future generations.

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