

# CHAPTER 2

## LANGUAGE USE IN NEPAL

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### Abstract

*This chapter aims to analyse the use of languages as mother tongues and second languages in Nepal on the basis of data from the 2011 census, using tables, maps, and figures and providing explanations for certain facts following sociolinguistic insights. The findings of this chapter are presented in five sections. Section 1 shows the importance of language enumeration in censuses and also Nepal's linguistic diversity due to historical and typological reasons. Section 2 shows that the number of mother tongues have increased considerably from 92 (Census 2001) to 123 in the census of 2011 due to democratic movements and ensuing linguistic awareness among Nepalese people since 1990. These mother tongues (except Kusunda) belong to four language families: Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian, while Kusunda is a language isolate. They have been categorised into two main groups: major and minor. The major group consists of 19 mother tongues spoken by almost 96 % of the total population, while the minor group is made up of the remaining 104 plus languages spoken by about 4% of Nepal's total population. Nepali, highly concentrated in the Hills, but unevenly distributed in other parts of the country, accounts for the largest number of speakers (44.64%). Several cross-border, foreign and recently migrated languages have also been reported in Nepal. Section 3 briefly deals with the factors (such as sex, rural/urban areas, ethnicity, age, literacy etc.) that interact with language. Section 4 shows that according to the census of 2011, the majority of Nepal's population (59%) speak only one language while the remaining 41% speak at least a second language. Finally, this chapter summarises its major findings and explores the implications for formulating language policy on language use in administration, education, etc. and applying it in academic research.*

### 2.1 Background

Language occupies a central role in human self-expression, interpersonal communication, activity, and identity. It is deemed crucial in formulating inclusive national policy. From this perspective language has been considered important for achieving equitable and sustainable development as envisaged in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNESCO 2012; Tamang and Gurung, (Eds.) 2014). Hence, it is recognised as one of the significant social characteristics by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), Government of Nepal, that they need to be well-informed about when formulating national language plans and policies relevant to developing various national sectors.

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Historically, Nepal has been a conglomeration of different groups of peoples with different cultures and languages. In addition, its topography is varied ranging from different altitudes of high mountains and hills to the plains of Tarai. Accordingly, it has gradually evolved into a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual country, despite being small in area.

In Nepal, data on language use have been collected every 10 years in the decennial censuses since the first census in 1952/54 in the modern sense, although it was first collected in 1911. The estimates on the languages used in the country reveal that Nepal is a country where every Nepali speaks at least one language, called their ‘mother tongue’<sup>1</sup> and/or other languages, known as ‘second languages’<sup>2</sup>. In this multilingual situation, mother tongues are global to Nepalese people but they also optionally use second languages. It is therefore essential to collect data on both mother tongues and second languages.

Although the question on language use has varied over time, two questions designed for the census of 2011 have been in practice since 1952/54 (see Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1: The question on language use (CBS 2011)**

<b>Q. 10. What are the mother tongue and the second language of .....(a given respondent)?</b>
1. Mother tongue .....
2. Second language .....

The first question seeks a response on the mother tongue acquired from parents during childhood. The second question asks respondents to name the second language learned later than the mother tongue for communicating with neighbours or others in carrying out activities.

Census enumerators were not provided with a list of languages/dialects spoken in Nepal during the data collection of 2011. As a result, several blurry, indistinct or wrong language names were enumerated as responses to mother tongues and second languages. This issue was resolved to a large extent through the formation of a subcommittee of linguists representing different language groups. Eventually, 123 languages were identified in Nepal (despite being small in area), merging a number of indistinct languages as ‘others’ (spoken by 21,173 respondents) in the lack of complete information, while 47,718 respondents were coded as non-responses.

This chapter is an attempt to understand the linguistic diversity and the languages used as mother tongues and second languages in Nepal on the basis of the data acquired and recorded from the census of 2011. Data from earlier censuses have also been referenced where relevant.

1 The term ‘mother tongue’ usually refers to the first language acquired from parents at home during childhood. The CBS Nepal (2011) assumes that every respondent during census enumeration will claim a single mother tongue; however, more than one mother tongue has been reported in some censuses elsewhere. Besides, a first language acquired from birth may not be learnt from mothers or parents but from playmates, neighbors, etc.. Hence, applied linguists prefer to use the term ‘first language’ instead of ‘mother tongue’.

2 CBS Nepal Guidelines (2011) define the term ‘second language’ as a language learnt later than a mother tongue for performing certain communicative functions in society. The CBS questionnaire also has a single slot for the second language although the Nepalese linguistic context is often different, in that an individual may often know more than one second language besides his/her mother tongue. Hence, there is a need to record more than one second language (as well as mother tongue) for a valid and reliable enumeration of the country.

## 2.2 Mother tongues

### 2.2.1 Approximations

There have been several attempts to enumerate the languages spoken in the country as mother tongues, including the decennial censuses. The census-based approximations of Nepal's languages listed in Table 2.1 show variation. This table suggests two distinct trends. Of the seven censuses, five censuses were numerically larger (1952/54, 1961, 1991, 2001 and 2011) than two (1971 and 1981) in terms of the number of languages enumerated, with the 1971 and 1981 censuses having a lower number. In addition, there has been a steady increase in language enumeration from the 1991 to 2011 census.

**Table 2.1: A comparison of census enumerations of languages (1952/54 - 2011)**

Censuses	1952/54	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Number of languages	44	36	17	18	31	92	123

The existing rise in languages since the 1991 census may be attributed to a number of factors. Since the restoration of democracy in 1990, there has been a drastic increase in ethno-linguistic awareness among linguistic minorities (including indigenous peoples) about their mother tongues. Subsequently, linguists and other social scientists have been consulted for a precise identification of Nepal's languages enumerated in different censuses (Yadava 2003, 2013). Uncertainty about the number of Nepal's languages has been prevailing due to the lack of a detailed and comprehensive linguistic survey (LinSuN 2008<sup>3</sup>; Sharma 2014).

The reason why there was a decrease in the number of languages in the 1971 and 1981 censuses was mainly due to the assimilation policy ('one language, one nation') and the social exclusion prevailing in Nepal, especially during the Panchayat regime as well as earlier, apart from a lack of ethno-linguistic awareness in ethnic and other minority communities (Yadava 2003).

In addition to the seven consecutive decennial censuses, there have also been individual attempts to rationalise the number of Nepal's languages. Malla (1989) and Toba (1992) mentioned 70 while Noonan (2005:2) has estimated that at least 140 languages are spoken in Nepal. Recently, the *Ethnologue: Languages of Nepal* (Epele et al. 2012) has listed 124 languages.

All these attempts (including the seven censuses) for enumeration of languages spoken in Nepal as mother tongues have so far remained a sort of approximation or rationalisation. There is obviously a need for an in-depth study to arrive at their accurate number; the on-going Linguistic Survey of Nepal, started in 2008, could be conclusive in this direction (LinSuN 2008).

### 2.2.2 Language families

The mother tongues enumerated in the census of 2011 (except Kusunda) belong to four language families: Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian, while Kusunda is a language isolate<sup>4</sup> consisting of a single language without any genetic relationship with other languages. Their number of speakers with percentages is shown in Table 2.2.

3 For the details of the LinSuN proposal search <http://cdltu.edu.np/site/LinSuN%20Proposal%20Final%20Draft.pdf>

4 "A language isolate is a language which has no known structural or historical relationship to any other language." (Crystal 1997: 328). Whitehouse et al. (2004) mention that Kusunda has been misclassified as a Tibeto-Burman language. Instead, they claim on some linguistic evidence that this language is a member of the Indo-Pacific family though it needs to be further supported by its speakers' DNA evidence.

Table 2.2: Population by the language families of mother tongues (1952/54-2011).

Language families	Census years													
	1952/54		1961		1971		1981		1991		2001		2011	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. Indo-European	6,351,899	77.13	7,449,604	79.14	9,062,435	78.42	12,417,886	82.66	14,701,283	79.50	17,982,769	79.1	21,753,009	82.10
2. Sino-Tibetan	1,795,337	21.08	1,813,083	19.26	1,982,635	17.16	1,811,944	12.06	3,098,698	16.76	4,183,995	18.4	4,584,523	17.30
3. Austro-Asiatic	16,751	0.20	29,485	0.31	23,853	0.21	28,208	0.19	33,332	0.18	40,260	0.2	49,858	0.19
4. Dravidian									15,175	0.1	28,615	0.1	33,651	0.13
5. Others (including the foreign languages)	70,340	0.85	114,392	1.22	487,060	4.21	764,802	5.09	648,627	3.51	NA	NA	25,745 *	0.09
6. Not stated	752	0.01	6,432	0.07					9,157	0.05	503,295	2.2	47,718	0.18
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,235,079</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>9,412,996</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>11,555,983</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>15,022,839</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>18,491,097</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>22,738,934</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>26,494,504</b>	<b>100%</b>

This figure includes Kusunda, foreign and sign languages in addition to others.

Sources: *Population censuses (1952/54-2011)*.

Nepal's languages are mostly either Indo-European or Sino-Tibetan, while only a very few of them are Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian. The 48 Indo-European languages,

which are of the Indo-Aryan subfamily (excluding English), constitute the largest group in terms of the numeric strength of their speakers, nearly 82.1% (Census 2011).

The Sino-Tibetan family of Nepal’s languages forms a part of its Tibeto-Burman group. Though spoken by relatively less number of people than the Indo-European family (17.3%), it includes a greater number of languages, about 63 languages (Census 2011).

Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian languages rank third at 0.19% and fourth at 0.13%, respectively, while only about 28 people speak Kusunda.

According to Table 2.2, the percentages of speakers of individual languages within the four language groups show inconsistent trends in their increase and decline.<sup>5</sup>

**2.2.3 Distribution**

The distribution of Nepal’s languages is shown in the map below.

**Map 2.1: Distribution of Nepal’s languages (mother tongues) (Census 2011)<sup>6</sup>**



Nepali, spoken by 44.6% of Nepal’s total population, is the largest language in terms of the number of speakers in all the censuses. It is spoken across the country; however, it is not evenly distributed throughout. As shown in

5 See Annex 2.1 for the family wise languages with the number and percentages of their speakers.  
 6 Thanks are due to Irene Tucker, SIL Lead Cartographer, who produced this map with the help the help of Matt Benjamin, Eva (Ujlakyova) Horton, and Stephen Tucker for *Ethnologue* (2012, eds. Epele et al).

Table 2.3, it is spoken mostly in the Hills but less in the Tarai and even less so in the Mountains.

**Table 2.3: Region wise distribution of Nepali as a mother tongue (in percentage)**

Ecological regions			
Mountains	Hills	Tarai	Total
4.16	27.29	13.19	44.64

Maithili is spoken by 11.7% of the population and ranks first in the Tarai and second (i.e. next to Nepali) in the national context. Its core area are the 6 districts of the eastern and central Tarai (Sunsari, Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, and Sarlahi) while it occupies second position in Morang and Nawalparasi, and is also spoken significantly in the four central Tarai districts (Rautahat, Bara, Parsa and Rupandehi).

Bhojpur, spoken by 5.98% of the population, is the third largest language at the national level but second in the Tarai. It is mostly spoken in the four central Tarai districts (Rautahat, Bara, Parsa and Rupandehi).

Tharu is spoken by 5.77% of the population across the Tarai, although primarily in two districts (Bardiya and Kanchanpur) and constitutes the fourth largest language at the national level and ranks as the fourth Tarai language. Bajjika, Urdu, Avadhi, and Rajbanshi are other major Tarai languages mainly spoken in Rautahat and Bara, and throughout the Tarai, Kapilvastu and Banke, and Jhapa districts, respectively.

Tamang is another major language largely spoken in the Hills and also in the Mountains. Newar is mainly confined to the three districts of the Kathmandu Valley, Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur.

Magar, another important language of the hilly region, occupies the second position in 12 districts (Tanahu, Syangja, Parbat, Pyuthan, Arghakhanchi, Myagdi, Rolpa, Salyan, Baglung, Rukum, Surkhet and Gulmi) whereas it occupies the third position in 3 districts (Khotang, Udayapur and Sindhuli).

The Rai-Kirati languages (including Bantawa) are primarily spread across the eastern Hills districts, namely, Bhojpur, Dhakuta, Okhaldhunga, Khotang, Udaypur and Ilam. The Limbu language is mainly concentrated in Panchthar, Taplejung and Tehrathum districts and also largely spoken in Ilam and Dhankuta districts.

Moreover, a considerable number of Sherpa speakers reside in the mountains, namely, Taplejung, Sankhuwasabha, Solukhumbu and Dolakha districts<sup>7</sup>.

To sum up, the percentages of mother tongue Nepali speakers has gradually declined across the last seven decennial censuses (1952/54-2011). Concurrently, there has been an increase in languages other than Nepali and their speakers. The increase in these languages has been mainly due to two factors. First, Doteli, Baitadeli, Achchami, Bajhang, Dailekhi, Darchuleli, Jumli, Dadeldhuri and Gadhwali have been recorded as separate languages in the census of 2011, while they were treated as dialects of Nepali and merged into it in 2001 and other earlier censuses. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, various ethnic and other minority communities have been determined to have their mother tongues recognised as separate languages owing to the growth of their ethno-linguistic awareness.

The approximations arrived at in the census of 2011 (as well as earlier censuses) may give the impression that these languages are 'isolated units' (Watters 2008). Instead, they may in fact be interrelated.

<sup>7</sup> See Table 21 (CBS 2012) for details about the distribution of all major and minor mother tongues in Nepal.

The Indo-European languages of the Indo-Aryan subfamily spoken all across the Tarai, from Mechi (in the east) to Mahakali (in the west), for example, are continuously related from the perspective of mutual intelligibility. It is difficult to demarcate where one language ends and another begins. This may also be true for other genetically related language groups such as Rai-Kirati, Himalayish, and other subgroups. Owing to this linguistic continuum, people living in two adjacent separate language communities can understand each other's languages and communicate with each other.

#### 2.2.4 Language groupings: major and minor languages

Nepal's mother tongues may be categorised into major and minor groups in terms of the number of their speakers recorded in the census of 2011. If 100,000 speakers is the cut off for 'major' languages, their number in Nepal is 19, and their cumulative percentage of the population is approximately 96%. Inversely, the remaining 104 plus languages (barring a few of the cross-border languages with their kin states) are spoken by about 4% of Nepal's total population (Yadava 2013). Nepali accounted for the largest number of speakers (almost 12 million speakers; 44.64%) although it decreased in percentages of its speakers from earlier decennial censuses carried out since 1952/54<sup>8</sup>. The other 18 languages spoken by at least 100,000 populations are listed with their speakers, percentages and cumulative percentages in Table 2.4.

**Table 2.4: Nepal's major languages (minimum 100, 000 speakers, CBS 2012)**

S.No.	Languages	Speakers	Per cent	Cumulative per cent
1.	Nepali	11,826,953	44.64	44.64
2.	Maithili	3,092,530	11.67	56.31
3.	Bhojpuri	1,584,958	5.98	62.29
4.	Tharu	1,529,875	5.77	68.07
5.	Tamang	1,353,311	5.11	73.18
6.	Newar	846,557	3.20	76.37
7.	Bajjika	793,416	2.99	79.37
8.	Magar	788,530	2.98	82.34
9.	Doteli	787,827	2.97	85.32
10.	Urdu	691,546	2.61	87.93
11.	Avadhi	501,752	1.89	89.82
12.	Limbu	343,603	1.30	91.12
13.	Gurung	325,622	1.23	92.35
14.	Baitadeli	272,524	1.03	93.37
15.	Rai	159,114	0.60	93.97
16.	Achhami	142,787	0.54	94.51
17.	Bantawa	132,583	0.50	95.01
18.	Rajbanshi	122,214	0.46	95.48
19.	Sherpa	114,830	0.43	95.91

Inversely, the remaining 104 plus languages comprising less than 100,000 speakers may be referred to as 'minor'

<sup>8</sup> In the earlier censuses the percentages of Nepali mother tongue speakers were 48.74% (1952/54), 50.96% (1961), 52.45% (1971), 58.36% (1981), 50.31% (1991), and 48.61% (2001).

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languages and are spoken by about 4% of Nepal's total population (Yadava 2013). These minor languages can be further subcategorised into three subtypes in terms of their respective number of speakers: (i) minor languages with 99,999 to 10,000 speakers, (ii) minor languages with 9,999 to 1,000 speakers, and (iii) minor (or marginalised) languages with less than 1,000 speakers. They are listed with their speakers, percentages and cumulative percentages in Tables 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6, respectively.

**Table 2.5: Minor languages (10,000 - 99,999 speakers, CBS 2012)**

S.No.	Languages	Speakers	Percent	Cumulative percent
20.	Hindi	77,569	0.29	96.20
21.	Chamling	76,800	0.29	96.49
22.	Bajhangi	67,581	0.26	96.75
23.	Santhali	49,858	0.19	96.94
24.	Chepang	48,476	0.18	97.12
25.	Danuwar	45,821	0.17	97.29
26.	Sunuwar	37,898	0.14	97.33
27.	Magahi	35,614	0.13	97.46
28.	Uranw	33,651	0.13	97.59
29.	Kulung	33,170	0.13	97.72
30.	Kham (Magar)	27,113	0.10	97.82
31.	Rajasthani	25,394	0.10	97.92
32.	Majhi	24,422	0.09	98.01
33.	Thangmi	23,151	0.09	98.10
34.	Bhujel	21,715	0.08	98.18
35.	Bangla	21,061	0.08	98.26
36.	Thulung	20,659	0.08	98.34
37.	Yakkha	19,558	0.07	98.41
38.	Dhimal	19,300	0.07	98.48
39.	Tajpuriya	18,811	0.07	98.55
40.	Angika	18,555	0.07	98.62
41.	Sampang	18,270	0.07	98.69
42.	Khaling	14,467	0.05	98.74
43.	Wambule	13,470	0.05	98.79
44.	Kumal	12,222	0.05	98.84
45.	Darai	11,677	0.04	98.88
46.	Bahing	11,658	0.04	98.92
47.	Bajhangi	10,704	0.04	98.96
48.	Yholmo	10,176	0.04	99.00
49.	Nachhering	10,041	0.04	99.04



**Table 2.6: Minor languages with 1,000 to 9,999 speakers, CBS 2012)**

S.No.	Languages	Speakers	Percent	Cumulative percent
50.	Yamphu	9,208	0.03	99.07
51.	Bote	8,766	0.03	99.10
52.	Ghale	8,092	0.03	99.13
53.	Dumi	7,638	0.03	99.16
54.	Lapcha	7,499	0.03	99.19
55.	Puma	6,686	0.03	99.22
56.	Dungmali	6,260	0.02	99.24
57.	Darchuleli	5,928	0.02	99.26
58.	Athpariya	5,530	0.02	99.28
59.	Thakali	5,242	0.02	99.30
60.	Jirel	4,829	0.02	99.32
61.	Mewahang	4,650	0.02	99.34
62.	Sign language	4,476	0.02	99.36
63.	Tibetan	4,445	0.02	99.38
64.	Meche	4,375	0.02	99.40
65.	Chantyal	4,283	0.02	99.42
66.	Raji	3,758	0.01	99.43
67.	Lohorung	3,716	0.01	99.44
68.	Chhintang	3,712	0.01	99.45
69.	Gangai	3,612	0.01	99.46
70.	Pahari	3,458	0.01	99.47
71.	Dailekhi	3,102	0.01	99.48
72.	Lhopa	3,029	0.01	99.49
73.	Dura	2,156	0.01	99.50
74.	Koce	2,080	0.01	99.51
75.	Chhiling	2,046	0.01	99.52
76.	English	2,032	0.01	99.53
77.	Jerung	1,763	0.01	99.54
78.	Khas	1,747	0.01	99.55
79.	Sanskrit	1,669	0.01	99.56
80.	Dolpali	1,667	0.01	99.57
81.	Hayu	1,520	0.01	99.58
82.	Tilung	1,424	0.01	99.59
83.	Koi	1,271	0.00	—
84.	Kisan	1,178	0.00	—
85.	Waling	1,169	0.00	—
86.	Musalban	1,075	0.00	—

*In Table 2.6, there are quite a few marginalised languages with less than 1,000 speakers.*

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**Table 2.7: Minor languages (less than 1,000 speakers, CBS 2012)**

S.No.	Languages	Speakers	Percent	Cumulative percent
87.	Hariyani	889	0.00	
88.	Jumli	851	0.00	
89.	Lhomi	808	0.00	
90.	Punjabi	808	0.00	
91.	Belhare	599	0.00	
92.	Oriya	584	0.00	
93.	Sonaha	579	0.00	
94.	Sindhi	518	0.00	
95.	Dadeldhuri	488	0.00	
96.	Byangshi	480	0.00	
97.	Assamese	476	0.00	
98.	Raute	461	0.00	
99.	Sam	401	0.00	
100.	Manange	392	0.00	
101.	Dhuleli	347	0.00	
102.	Phangduali	290	0.00	
103.	Surel	287	0.00	
104.	Malpande	247	0.00	
105.	Chinese	242	0.00	
106.	Khariya	238	0.00	
107.	Kurmali	227	0.00	
108.	Baram	155	0.00	
109.	Lingkhim	129	0.00	
110.	Sadhani	122	0.00	
111.	Kagate	99	0.00	
112.	Dzonkha	80	0.00	
113.	Bankariya	69	0.00	
114.	Kaike	50	0.00	
115.	Gadhawali	38	0.00	
116.	French	34	0.00	
117.	Mizo	32	0.00	
118.	Kuki	29	0.00	
119.	Kusunda	28	0.00	
120.	Russian	17	0.00	
121.	Spanish	16	0.00	
122.	Nagamese	10	0.00	
123.	Arabi	8	0.00	
124.	Not reported	47,718	0.18	99.77
125.	Others	21,173	0.08	99.85

In the census of 2011 there has been a sizeable numeric increase in the number of mother tongues. The census of 2001 enumerated 92 languages, which has increased to 123 languages in the census of 2011. These 32 additional languages include: Doteli, Baitadeli, Achhami, Bajhang, Thangmi, Bajureli, Darchuleli, Athpariya, Gangai, Dailekhi, Lhopa, Dolpali, Musalban, Jumli, Lhomi, Sonaha, Dadeldhuri, Manange, Dhuleli, Phangduali, Surel, Malpande, Kurmali, Kagate, Dzonkha, Bankariya, Gadhawali, French, Kuki, Russian, Spanish, and Nagamese. Twelve of them were earlier considered to be dialects of Nepali and merged into it in the previous censuses. Languages like Athpariya, Lhopa, Dolpali, Lhomi, Sonaha, Manange, Phangduali, Surel, Malpande, Kurmali, Kagate, Dzonkha, and Bankariya, which were missing in the census of 2001 have now been returned as separate languages in the census of 2011. The remaining few languages such as Dzonkha, French, Kuki, Russian, Spanish and Nagamese are foreign languages.

Besides the approximation of 123 mother tongues spoken as recorded by the census of 2011, a number of indistinct or fuzzy languages spoken by 21,173 respondents have surfaced which have been grouped together into a category called 'others' in the lack of precise information. The census of 2011 also coded 47,718 responses as 'non-responses' in the mother tongue section of the census questionnaire.

### **2.2.5 Cross border languages**

Nepal, south of China, is surrounded by Indian borders on three sides; east, south and west. Concomitantly, there are many languages in Nepal that are also spoken in India. Such languages are often referred to as 'cross-border languages' whereby languages are spoken by the populations whose traditional geographic areas have been politically divided into one or several frontiers or the languages whose speakers migrated at some point in their history (Yadava 2010). They mainly include 47 languages of Indo-European (Angika, Avadhi, Bajjika, Bengali, Bhojpur, Hindi, Nepali, Maithili, Urdu, Rajbanshi, and Tharu), Sino-Tibetan (Bodo, Tamang, Magar, Dzonkha, Byangsi, Lapcha, and Rai-Kirati), Austro-Asiatic (e.g. Santhali) and Dravidian (e.g. Kurux) stocks.

### **2.2.6 Foreign and recently migrated languages**

A few of the languages listed in Census 2011 are 'foreign' such as Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and French. They are obviously foreign and international languages, but minority ones in the Nepalese context. Being marginalised they may be endangered, however they have 'a kin state'. These international migrant languages are therefore not threatened; the same argument also holds for most migrant languages such as Santhali, Uranw, and Lapcha (Gorter 2007; Yadava 2013). In addition, there are quite a few languages that have recently migrated from India to Nepal; they include Mizo (32 speakers), Kuki (29 speakers), Nagamese (10 speakers), Dzonkha (80 speakers), Assamese (476 speakers), Sindhi (518 speakers), Oriya (584 speakers), Punjabi (808 speakers), Hariyanwi (889 speakers), and Rajasthani (25,394 speakers).

## **2.3 Crosscutting dimensions**

The fundamental theme of this chapter is to analyse Nepal's languages on the basis of census language data. There are, however, a number of issues that can interact with language. These crosscutting issues may be sex, rural/urban areas, ethnicity, age, literacy, etc. In terms of sex, English, Sanskrit, Arabic, and Chinese are found to be more male dominated, while the speakers of other languages are generally sexually neutral:

i.e. they are almost evenly spoken by both males and females. Similarly, the speakers of all languages, except Newar, are more numerous in rural than in urban areas because the Nepalese population is higher in rural than in urban areas (17.07%). The Kathmandu Valley has long been the native location of the Newar language; hence, Newar speakers are obviously more numerous in urban than in rural areas.

Nepal's languages, being a multiethnic nation, interact in a threefold ethnic-linguistic structure: a. one (ethnic group)-to-one (language), e.g. Rajbanshi speaking a single language, namely, Rajbanshi; b. one (caste/ethnic group)-to-many (languages), e.g. Yadav speaking Maithili, Bhojpuri and Avadhi languages in the east, central and western Tarai regions; c. many (castes/ethnic groups)-to-one (language), e.g. Bahun, Kshetri, Kami, Damai, Thakuri, Sarki and Sanyasi speaking a single language Nepali (Yadava 2003, 2013). Such language-ethnicity interactions are important to understand the social structure of castes and ethnic communities and languages and need further analysis on the basis of available census data.

Another factor that interacts with language is age. Children begin the acquisition of their mother tongues at the age of 1 or so. They start learning additional second languages only later. It would therefore be reasonable to elicit responses to census language questions not at the age of 1 year but only later (5 years and above). No such age restriction<sup>9</sup> has so far been observed in the censuses carried out in Nepal to date.

Likewise, it is relevant to understand the interaction between mother tongue and education since it has been assumed in various reports and academic studies (Skutnabb et al. 2008; Skutnabb and Mohanty 2009) that there have been greater drop-outs and out-of-school children, and a deterioration in the quality of education at the basic level of school education owing to the use of dominant language instead of mother tongue as a medium of instruction. It is therefore deemed essential to analyse the census data on mother tongue-education correlation.

### 2.4 Second languages

The present census shows that the majority of Nepal's population (15.6 million people (59%)) are monolinguals (i.e. they only speak one language), while the remaining 11 million people (41%) speak at least a language other than their mother tongues, called 'a second language'. Of the latter group who speak at least a second language, Nepali is spoken by the largest number, 8,682,499 (32.77%), while Hindi ranks second with 1,225,950 speakers (4.62%). It is to be noted that there has been a drastic increase in the population speaking Hindi as a second language although the population speaking Hindi as a mother tongue has considerably declined in the censuses of 2011 (77,569 speakers; 0.29%), 1991 (170997 speakers; 0.92%) and 2001 (105765 speakers; 0.47%).<sup>10</sup>

The next largest second-language speaking groups are Maithili (195,287 (0.73%)) followed by Bhojpuri (159,518 (0.60%)), Tharu (84,748 (0.31%)), English (81,447 (0.30%)), Bajjika (60,863 (0.22%)), Urdu (45,766 (0.17%)), Avadhi (45,428 (0.17%)), Magar (42,952 (0.16%)), Tamang (33,450 (0.12%)), Newar (32,594 (0.12%)), and Bantawa (28,459 (0.10%)).

Most of the second languages are largely spoken in rural than in urban areas. However, there are a few lan-

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9 Note that CBS has observed such age restrictions on coding census population for literacy and educational attainment (age of 5+) and also marriage (age of 10+). It is also imperative to make a similar provision for collecting data on mother tongues and second languages.

10 The drastic increase in the percentage of the speakers of Hindi as a second language may be ascribed to migration, regular contact with Hindi electronic media and also the decrease in the speakers of Hindi as a mother tongue owing to their awareness about their genuine mother tongues.

guages used reversely. For examples, Kisan, Oriya, Mizo and Kharia have more speakers in urban than rural areas and English and Newar are used almost equally in both urban and rural areas. Most of the languages enumerated as mother tongues (91) are also used as second languages but 32 of the mother tongues, which include the earlier dialects of Nepali and some marginalised and foreign languages, do not figure as second languages.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.5 Findings

This chapter has analysed the linguistic diversity and the language use in Nepal on the basis of the data from the census of 2011. As background, it has briefly dealt with the varied settlements at different times and uneven topography as the sources of Nepal's linguistic plurality. To acquire the details about this plurality a set of two questions were asked during the census of 2011 to enumerate respondents' mother tongues and second languages. It has been found that there are 123 languages spoken as mother tongues normally acquired from parents; this is an increase of 31 additional languages compared to the census of 2001. These mother tongues (except Kusunda) belong to four language families: Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian, while Kusunda is a language isolate. Of them 19 are 'major' languages (spoken by more than 100,000 population) and their cumulative percentage of the population is 96%. Inversely, the remaining 104 + languages are spoken by about 4% of Nepal's total population and may be deemed endangered in different degrees. Nepali accounts for the largest number of speakers (almost 12 million speakers; 44.64%) although it decreased in percentages of its speakers from earlier decennial censuses carried out since 1952/54 owing to the rise in ethnolinguistic awareness among minority communities. Nepali as a mother tongue is highly concentrated in the Hills and not evenly distributed across the country like the remaining languages. There are a large number of cross-border languages spoken along the Indian border, as well as some foreign and recently migrated languages used in Nepal. It has been observed that language interacts with factors such as sex, rural/urban areas, ethnicity, age, and literacy. In addition, the census of 2011 recorded 91 languages spoken as second languages. According to this, the majority of Nepal's population (15.6 million people (59%)) are monolinguals, while the remaining 11 million people (41%), a sizable minority, speak at least a language other than their mother tongues, called 'a second language'. Of the latter group who speak at least a second language, Nepali is spoken by the largest number, 8,682,499 (32.77%) while Hindi ranks second with 1,225,950 speakers (4.62%). Most of the languages enumerated as mother tongues (91) are also used as second languages but 32 of the mother tongues, which include the earlier dialects of Nepali and some marginalised and foreign languages do not figure as second languages.

## 2.6 Policy implications

The findings of this chapter may be vital for formulating language policy at national and local levels and helpful for researchers to further investigate the language situation in Nepal. The findings may be used for devising national policy on the following issues:

- i. use of a language or languages in administration at the different levels of governance to be decided in the future federal state;
- ii. use of mother tongues in multilingual education<sup>12</sup> as medium/subject of instruction in both formal and non-formal education; and
- iii. identification of language endangerment, documentation, promotion and preservation.

<sup>11</sup> See Annex 2.2 for the population of the second languages.

<sup>12</sup> By 'multilingual education' we mean that a child will acquire basic educational skills through the medium of his/her mother which the affairs of government are carried on" (Fishman 1968: 698) and finally learn a foreign language (e.g. English) for broader communications and access to science and technology (Yadava and Grove 2008)

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**Annex 2.1: Languages and their population by language families**

Mother Tongue		Population	per cent
<b>A. Indo-European</b>		<b>21,753,009</b>	<b>82.10</b>
1.	Nepali	11,826,953	44.64
2.	Maithili	3,092,530	11.67
3.	Bhojpuri	1,584,958	5.98
4.	Tharu (a single)	1,529,875	5.77
5.	Bajjika	793,416	2.99
6.	Doteli	787,827	2.97
7.	Urdu	691,546	2.61
8.	Avadhi	501,752	1.89
9.	Baitadeli	272,524	1.03
10.	Achhami	142,787	0.54
11.	Rajbanshi	122,214	0.46
12.	Hindi	77,569	0.29
13.	Bajhanghi	67,581	0.26
14.	Danuwar	45,821	0.17
15.	Magahi	35,614	0.13
16.	Rajasthani	25,394	0.10
17.	Majhi	24,422	0.09
18.	Bangla	21,061	0.08
19.	Tajpurija	18,811	0.07
20.	Angika	18,555	0.07
21.	Kumal	12,222	0.05
22.	Darai	11,677	0.04
23.	Bajureli	10,704	0.04
24.	Bote	8,766	0.03
25.	Darchuleli	5,928	0.02
26.	Gangai	3,612	0.01
27.	Dailekhi	3,102	0.01
28.	English	2,032	0.01
29.	Khas	1,747	0.01
30.	Sanskrit	1,669	0.01
31.	Dolpali	1,667	0.01



	<b>Mother Tongue</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>per cent</b>
32.	Kisan	1,178	0.00
33.	Musalban	1,075	0.00
34.	Hariyani	889	0.00
35.	Jumli	851	0.00
36.	Punjabi	808	0.00
37.	Oriya	584	0.00
38.	Sonaha	579	0.00
39.	Sindhi	518	0.00
40.	Dadeldhuri	488	0.00
41.	Assamese	476	0.00
42.	Dhuleli	347	0.00
43.	Malpande	247	0.00
44.	Khariya	238	0.00
45.	Kurmali	227	0.00
46.	Sadhani	122	0.00
47.	Gadhawali	38	0.00
48.	Arabic	8	0.00
<b>B. Sino-Tibetan</b>		<b>4,584,523</b>	<b>17.30</b>
1.	Tamang	1,353,311	5.11
2.	Newar	846,557	3.20
3.	Magar	788,530	2.98
4.	Limbu	343,603	1.30
5.	Gurung	325,622	1.23
6.	Rai	159,114	0.60
7.	Bantawa	132,583	0.50
8.	Sherpa	114,830	0.43
9.	Chamling	76,800	0.29
10.	Chepang	48,476	0.18
11.	Sunuwar	37,898	0.14
12.	Kulung	33,170	0.13
13.	Kham (Magar)	27,113	0.10
14.	Thangmi	23,151	0.09
15.	Bhujel	21,715	0.08

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	<b>Mother Tongue</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>per cent</b>
16.	Thulung	20,659	0.08
17.	Yakhkha	19,558	0.07
18.	Dhimal	19,300	0.07
19.	Sampang	18,270	0.07
20.	Khaling	14,467	0.05
21.	Wambule	13,470	0.05
22.	Bahing	11,658	0.04
23.	Yholmo	10,176	0.04
24.	Nachhering	10,041	0.04
25.	Yamphu	9,208	0.03
26.	Ghale	8,092	0.03
27.	Dumi	7,638	0.03
28.	Lapcha	7,499	0.03
29.	Puma	6,686	0.03
30.	Dungmali	6,260	0.02
31.	Athpariya	5,530	0.02
32.	Thakali	5,242	0.02
33.	Jirel	4,829	0.02
34.	Mewahang	4,650	0.02
35.	Tibetan	4,445	0.02
36.	Meche	4,375	0.02
37.	Chantyal	4,283	0.02
38.	Raji	3,758	0.01
39.	Lohorung	3,716	0.01
40.	Chhintang	3,712	0.01
41.	Pahari	3,458	0.01
42.	Lhopa	3,029	0.01
43.	Dura	2,156	0.01
44.	Koce	2,080	0.01
45.	Chhiling	2,046	0.01
46.	Jerung	1,763	0.01
47.	Hayu	1,520	0.01
48.	Tilung	1,424	0.01
49.	Koi	1,271	0.00

	<b>Mother Tongue</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>per cent</b>
50.	Waling	1,169	0.00
51.	Lhomi	808	0.00
52.	Belhare	599	0.00
53.	Byangshi	480	0.00
54.	Raute	461	0.00
55.	Sam	401	0.00
56.	Manange	392	0.00
57.	Phangduali	290	0.00
58.	Surel	287	0.00
59.	Chinese	242	0.00
60.	Baram	155	0.00
61.	Lingkhim	129	0.00
62.	Kagate	99	0.00
63.	Dzonkha	80	0.00
64.	Bankariya	69	0.00
65.	Kaike	50	0.00
66.	Mizo	32	0.00
67.	Kuki	29	0.00
68.	Nagamese	10	0.00
<b>C. Austro-Asiatic</b>		<b>49,858</b>	<b>0.19</b>
1.	Santhali	49,858	0.19
<b>D. Dravidian</b>		<b>33,651</b>	<b>0.13</b>
1.	Uranw	33,651	0.13
<b>E. Language Isolate</b>		<b>28</b>	<b>0.00</b>
1.	Kusunda	28	0.00
<b>F. Others (Including foreign and sign languages)</b>		<b>25,717</b>	<b>0.09</b>
Not reported		47,718	0.18
<b>Total</b>		<b>26,494,504</b>	<b>100%</b>

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### Annex 2.2: Population by second languages

S.No.	Population by second languages	
1	Nepali	8,682,499 (32.77%)
2	Hindi	1,225,950 (4.62%)
3	Maithili	195,287 (0.73%)
4	Bhojpuri	159,518 (0.60%)
5	Tharu	84,748 (0.31%)
6	English	81,447 (0.30%)
7	Bajjika	60,863 (0.22%)
8	Urdu	45,766 (0.17%)
9	Avadhi	45,428 (0.17%)
10	Magar	42,952 (0.16%)
11	Tamang	33,450 (0.12%)
12	Newar	32,594 (0.12%)
13	Bantwa	28,459 (0.10%)
14	Gurung	22,834 (0.08%)
15	Limbu	22,202 (0.08%)
16	Rajbanshi	20,060 (0.07%)
17	Rai	17,199 (0.06%)
18	Magahi	10,813 (0.04%)
19	Sherpa	8,181 (0.03%)
20	Chamling	6,359 (0.02%)
21	Jero/Jerung	3,619 (0.01%)
22	Bahing	3,552 (0.01%)
23	Sanskrit	2,975 (0.01%)
24	Bangla	2,879 (0.01%)
25	Danuwar	2,846 (0.01%)
26	Khash	2,438 (0.00%)
27	Sampang	2,001 (0.00%)
28	Angika	1,727 (0.00%)
29	Thulung	1,599 (0.00%)
30	Bhujel	1,592 (0.00%)
31	Sunuwar	1,557 (0.00%)
32	Yakkha	1,490 (0.00%)
33	Kumal	1,407 (0.00%)
34	Kulung	1,389 (0.00%)

S No.	Population by second languages	
35	Majhi	1,320 (0.00%)
36	Tajpuriya	1,175 (0.00%)
37	Khaling	1,167 (0.00%)
38	Chepang	1,135 (0.00%)
39	Dhimal	1,125 (0.00%)
40	Dumi	1,017 (0.00%)
41	Chhintang	1,008 (0.00%)
42	Rajsthani	1,006 (0.00%)
43	Santhali	977 (0.00%)
44	Wambule	869 (0.00%)
45	Thakali	764 (0.00%)
46	Nachhiring	727 (0.00%)
47	Tibetan	693 (0.00%)
48	Uranw/Urau	691 (0.00%)
49	Hyolmo/Yholmo	482 (0.00%)
50	Punjabi	469 (0.00%)
51	Thami	384 (0.00%)
52	Bote	375 (0.00%)
53	Darai	348 (0.00%)
54	Yamphu/Yamphe	328 (0.00%)
55	Arabi	320 (0.00%)
56	Puma	317 (0.00%)
57	Chhantyal	293 (0.00%)
58	Ghale	288 (0.00%)
59	Lohorung	258 (0.00%)
60	Assami	252 (0.00%)
61	Lapcha	233 (0.00%)
62	Pahari	230 (0.00%)
63	Mewahang	226 (0.00%)
64	Tilung	209 (0.00%)
65	Dungmali	209 (0.00%)
66	Koyee	201(0.00%)
67	Chhiling	197 (0.00%)
68	Dura	172 (0.00%)
69	Meche	147 (0.00%)

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S No.	Population by second languages	
70	Jirel	137 (0.00%)
71	Byansi	72 (0.00%)
72	Sadhani	57 (0.00%)
73	Baram	55 (0.00%)
74	Raji	54 (0.00%)
75	Hayu/Vayu	45 (0.00%)
76	Kisan	45(0.00%)
77	Chinese	44 (0.00%)
78	Khamchi (Raute)	41(0.00%)
79	Sindhi	41(0.00%)
80	Koche	37(0.00%)
81	Sing language	35 (0.00%)
82	Oriya	27 (0.00%)
83	Mizo	21(0.00%)
84	Lingkhim	18(0.00%)
85	Kaike	17(0.00%)
86	Khariya	16 (0.00%)
87	Belhare	12 (0.00%)
88	Waling/Walung	11(0.00%)
89	Kusunda	10(0.00%)
90	Hariyanwi	10 (0.00%)
91	Sam	10(0.00%)
92	Others	5,697 (0.02%)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>10,883,804 (41.04%)</b>