

Mind your languages

MARK TURIN

Nepal's extraordinary biological diversity is matched by a similar level of cultural and linguistic variety. For a country with a relatively small landmass, 123 languages used as mother tongues remain an impressively high number and mean that Nepal is home to more language families than Europe. It has more distinct and individual languages than those officially recognised across the European community.

Language death is often compared to species extinction, and some experts believe that they have found an inverse correlation between language diversity and latitude. Areas rich in languages also tend to be rich in ecology and species. Around the world there appears to be a co-concurrence of rich flora and fauna and languages, as in the Nepal Himalaya which has 5,400 species of higher plants and more than 860 species of birds. This high level of biodiversity per unit area is matched by a similar degree of linguistic variation.

Yet, it remains a race against time to document, protect, and nurture Nepal's increasingly endangered linguistic diversity. While some of Nepal's languages are thriving, most notably Nepali, many other speech forms used by Nepal's many distinct communities are not faring so well. The key measure of a language's viability is not only the number of people who speak it, but the extent to which children are still learning and using the language, and the degree to which inter-generational transmission continues.

There are many reasons and ways by which mother tongues become endangered. Declining speaker numbers

It is a race against time to document and support Nepal's increasingly endangered linguistic diversity

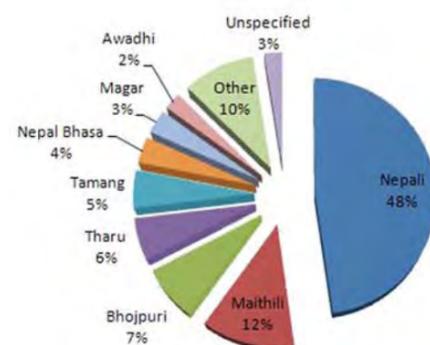
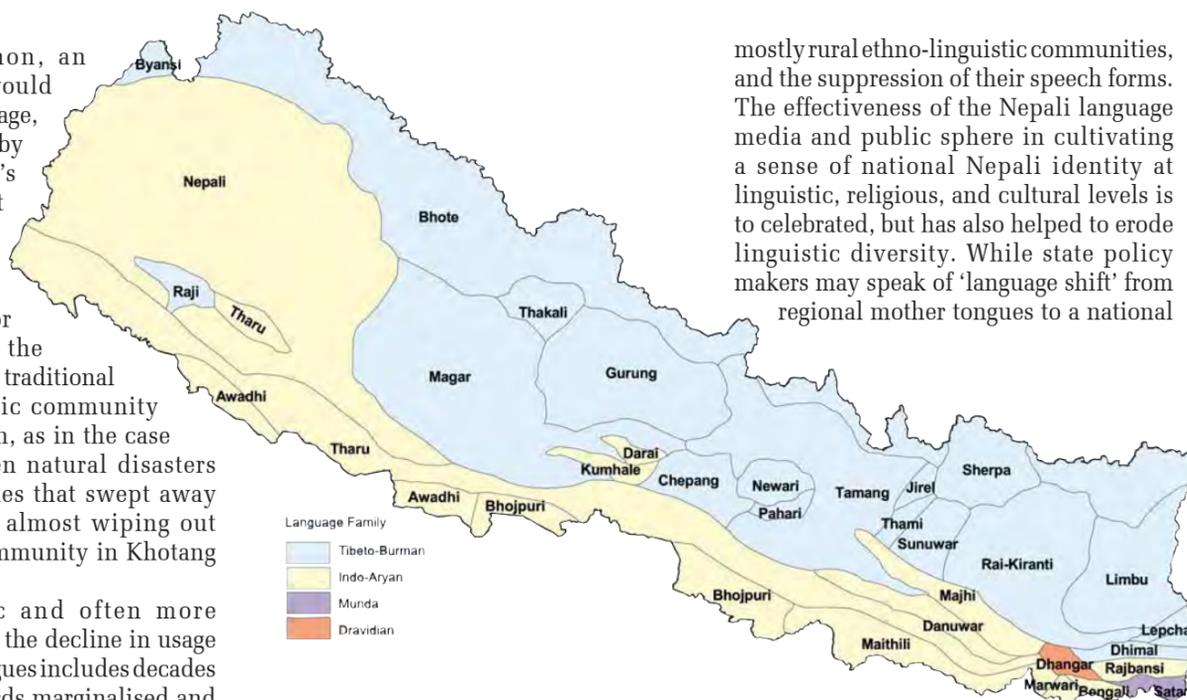
is the most common, an example of which would be the Kusunda language, recently documented by Tribhuvan University's Central Department of Linguistics, and found to have only a couple of speakers left. Other reasons for the decline include the transformation of the traditional habitat of a linguistic community through deforestation, as in the case of the Raute, or even natural disasters such as the landslides that swept away two entire villages, almost wiping out the Koi-speaking community in Khotang district.

A more prosaic and often more pernicious reason for the decline in usage of Nepal's mother tongues includes decades of state neglect towards marginalised and

mostly rural ethno-linguistic communities, and the suppression of their speech forms. The effectiveness of the Nepali language media and public sphere in cultivating a sense of national Nepali identity at linguistic, religious, and cultural levels is to be celebrated, but has also helped to erode linguistic diversity. While state policy makers may speak of 'language shift' from regional mother tongues to a national

language, members of the affected community may feel rather differently about it, and perceive this process as a form of encroaching 'linguicide'.

One way to support endangered languages is through mother tongue instruction. While some suggest that learning 'through' Gurung or Bhojpuri at school would disadvantage children who speak these languages at home





LEARNING HER ABC'S: Grade 2 student at the Jana Jyoti School in Geeling of Mustang district learning Tibetan. The school is one of the few in Nepal that puts an emphasis on mother tongue instruction.

KUNDA DIXIT

GOING, GOING, GONE ...

UNESCO's classification system to measure endangered languages:

- Vulnerable - most children speak the language but only at home
- Definitely endangered - children no longer learning language as 'mother tongue'
- Severely endangered - spoken by older generations, while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves
- Critically endangered - the youngest speakers are grandparents or older, they speak it infrequently
- Extinct - there are no speakers left

Medium is the message

In a bid to promote education in the mother tongue of Nepalis, the government is trying through its School Sector Reform Plan (2009-2015) to introduce multilingual education in about 7,500 schools across the country. However, there are less than 30 schools where the medium has been changed to mother tongues in primary level.

"The government has formulated guidelines and the Interim Constitution of 2007 even has a provision for primary level education through mother tongues, but as always, implementation has been



the hardest part," says linguist Amrit Yonzon who also heads the Multilingual Education Society in Nepal.

While there are text books for 20 mother tongues at the primary level, and *Naya Goreto*, a textbook for non-formal education, is published in 14 languages. However, experts note that just translating books is not enough, and the local culture that the language represents should also be included in the text.

Says Yonzon: "Unless elements of local culture are infused in the curriculum, mother tongue based education won't be effective."

Bhrikuti Rai

when compared to mother tongue Nepali speakers, years of robust international research shows that children learn best in their mother tongue and perform better in their studies over time. The high rate of school absenteeism and dropouts among young students from non-Nepali speaking backgrounds has been directly linked to the challenges they face in a culturally and linguistically alien classroom.

Curriculum development is an important element in the development of mother tongue language materials. Historically, government-funded mother tongue initiatives simply translated Nepali language primary school books into other languages, without regard for cultural differences. Such schemes are doomed to fail, since the content of a school book must reflect the cultural, dietary, and religious values of its students. As for the suggestion that if students learn through their mother tongue they won't learn

Nepali or English properly, we would do well to remember that most of the world is resolutely multilingual and that young minds have an amazing capacity to learn, absorb, and process language. It's not a question of either the national language or one's mother tongue, since many languages can be learned, taught, and used simultaneously. 🇳🇵

Mark Turin is a linguistic anthropologist who has worked in Nepal for 20 years. Collocated at Cambridge and Yale universities, he directs the Digital Himalaya Project (www.digitalhimalaya.org) and the Yale Himalaya Initiative (himalaya.yale.edu).

Listen to a three-part BBC series on linguistic diversity with a focus on Nepal. 🎧

nepalitimes.com

A mother of mother tongue education, #343

THANGMI VOCABULARY



HIKMAT KHADKA

RESCUE EFFORT: Mark Turin (centre), returns a grammar book of the Thangmi language to one of his principal research partners and language teachers Man Bahadur Thami (right) during an interview for a BBC Radio program in Kokati, Sindhupalchok last year.

Mother tongues consist of far more than grammar and words. The Tibeto-Burman language, Thangmi, is spoken by a community of around 30,000 people in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok, and has a wealth of unique indigenous terms for local plants and animals with ritual and medicinal value.

As fluency in Nepali increases, much of this local knowledge is falling into disuse. When children cease to speak their mother tongue, the oral transmission of specific ethno-botanical and medical knowledge is also put at risk. Linguistic diversity is an integral component in ecological stability and the delicate fabric of cultural life.

The Thangmi language has four semantically distinct verbs all of which are translated into English as 'to come', reflecting something of the terrain in which the speakers live:

yusa: 'to come from above' (down the mountain)

wangsa: 'to come from below' (up the mountain)

kyelsa: 'to come from level' (around a natural obstacle)

rasa: 'to come from an unspecified direction'