Population Census Questionnaire to Promote Mother-Languages

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Abstract

Nepal is a small, multilingual country. It has given birth to many different languages. In the last sixty-five years almost all Nepal's mother languages speakers have dropped unexpectedly. Today there is a concern among many citizens that many of these mother languages may become extinct. The census is the main source of language statistics in Nepal. To stem the tide of mother language extinction, the census needs to collect the information that will help us understand what is happening and its reasons, so that mother languages can be preserved. The censuses of Nepal used to collect data on mother languages and other-languages/second language. The pilot census in 2021 added an extra question: "What is [Name's] ancestral language?" Today, citizens of Nepal are more aware and have the desire to preserve their mother languages. However, the newly added question may not solve the problem. I propose questions on languages for Nepal's 2021 census that are simple and will provide the information needed to plan for the preservation of mother languages in Nepal.

Key words: Census; Language statistics; Mother-language; Pilot census; Questionnaire

Introduction

The first scientific population census of Nepal was the 1952/54 census although the population census was initiated in 1911. In this paper I discuss language statistics from the 1952/54 census and onward and propose language questions for the upcoming Nepalese's population census to promote the mother languages of Nepal. The next decennial census will be held in June 8 – 22, 2021. The preparation for the coming census has been on-going, and the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) has already published a pilot population census questionnaire. The pilot questionnaire for 2021 has added an additional question from that of the previous questionnaire.

Languages play an important role in a multilingual country like Nepal and, as usual, indigenous and Madhesi people are watching this upcoming population census carefully. Nepal has published statistics related to mother-languages and religions regularly since the first modern census in 1952/54. The primary purpose for collecting mother-language data should be for promoting mother-languages and not for other reasons. The mother-language and other languages spoken by the indigenous and the Madhesi people of Nepal are correlated with their territory and their caste/ethnicity. However, caste/ethnicity and language statistics may not be the same. In the context of Nepal, where mother-languages of Nepal are not allowed to be used in their territory, the caste/ethnicity and mother-language may not be identical.

During the thirty year period of the Panchyet regime[1], Nepal conducted censuses in 1961, 1971 and 1981. In those censuses the Nepal government removed the caste/ethnicity question from the census questionnaires. Rajbanshi and Sharma (1977) stated that, "In the absence of direct questions on ethnicity in the censuses, an attempt has been made to identify the ethnic group on the basis of the mother tongues spoken. Although the main objective of collecting data on the linguistic composition of the population was to obtain a supplementary indicator of ethnic origin, the classification by mother tongue was not uniform in the three latest censuses of Nepal." It is notable that caste/ethnicity statistics were not published by the government of Nepal until the people's movement in 1990. The first caste/ethnicity statistics of Nepal were published for the 1991 census. Dahal, D.R (2003), writes in his report, "the CBS continued collecting the caste/ethnicity data up to the 1952/54 census but they never published them officially." Also see census questionnaire 1952/54, Table 1.

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[1]Panchyet was the political system established by King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shahdev after overthrowing the first democratically elected government and dissolving the parliament in 1960.

Table 1: General questionnaire, Census 1952/54, Nepal

Questionnaires, Census of Population, 1952/54
General Questionnaire

Serial Number _____   District ____   Thum or praganna _____

Village _____   Family number _____

1.   a) Name   b) Relationship to the head of the family
2.   a) Caste   b) Religion
3.   Sex
4.   Age in completed Years

5.   State whether: never married   --- Married   --- Widowed   --- Divorced
6.   Are you able to read (a book)?   To Write (a letter)?
      Have you passed any examinations?
7.   What is your mother tongue? What other languages do You Speak?
8.   Do you support yourself by your own earnings?
      If so: a) what is your occupation? What kind of work?
           b) Are you an employer --employee- own account worker?
9.   If you do not support yourself by your own earnings, give the occupation and kind of work of
      the person on whom your are dependent.
10.   a) Are you now employed?   b) If not, give reason*

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, Nepal

Citizens, especially the indigenous citizens of Nepal, are concerned that their mother-languages may soon become extinct. They want a favorable environment to use their languages in the territory where Nepal's mother languages originated. They want the mother-languages of Nepal to be allowed in formal school education, government services, and health care. To promote the mother-languages of Nepal and prevent them from extinction, the census questionnaire on languages should provide valuable information. To that end, we should collect information that allows us to explore the reasons for the mother-language not being transferred from parents to their offspring.

Previous population censuses of Nepal have asked one or two questions on languages. The 1952/54 census had two questions on languages: (i) what is [Name's] mother-language? and (ii) what other languages does [Name] speak? The Panchyet regime period censuses in 1961, 1971, and 1981 removed the "other languages spoken" question from the questionnaire and kept only one question on languages: (i) what is [Name's] mother-language? The 1991, 2001, and 2011 censuses conducted after the establishment of a democracy in 1990 had two questions on languages: (i) what is [Name's] mother-language, and (ii) what is [Name's] second language? In Nepal, a large proportion of people can speak two or more languages. For example, a Newa citizen may have Nepalbhasa as his/her mother-language. And the other languages he/she speaks could be Nepali, Tamang, or English. Similarly, a Madhesi may speak his/her own mother-language and their other languages could be Maithali, Bhojpuri, Nepali, Hindi or English. *(From this point forward, the language named "Nepalbhasa" is written as Nepal-language because "Bhasa" means language.)* The 2021 pilot population census has three questions: (i) what is [Name's] mother-language? (ii) what second language has [Name] learned? and (iii) what is [Name's] ancestral language? The 2021 pilot population census has also changed around the second language question. The censuses 1991 - 2011, asked, "what is [Name's] second language?" The pilot census 2021 asks, "what second language has [Name] learned?" Note that, the second language learned by an individual is not the same as second language of an individual, and hence they are not identical and not strictly comparable. It is not clear why CBS changed this question.

Language statistics in Nepal

Mother-languages

Nepal is a multilingual country. The number of languages identified in previous censuses are very different, which creates uncertainty when direct comparisons are attempted between censuses. The CBS of Nepal was established in 1959 and conducts censuses. When CBS identifies more/less mother-languages in a census, they should also list the reasons. The reason for differences in identified mother-languages should be provided to the public, so that students, linguists, researchers and development planners can understand.

The 1952/54 population census identified 44 different languages in Nepal. The population census conducted during the Panchyet regime identified 36 *(1961)*, 17 *(1971)* and 18 *(1981)* languages. The censuses conducted after the peoples' movement in 1990 reported the identified languages as 31 *(1991)*, 92 *(2001)* and 123 *(2011)*.
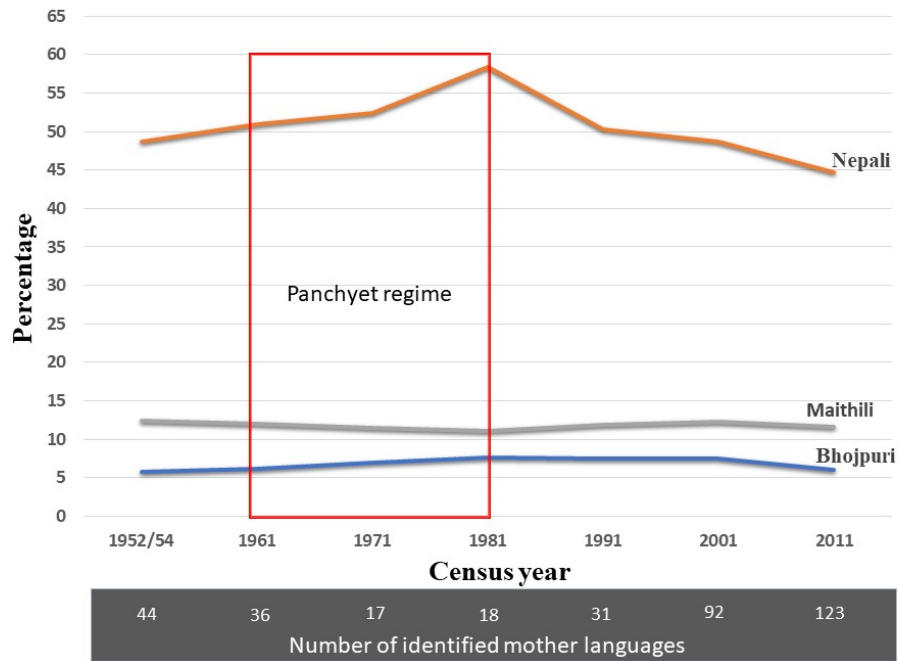

Figure 1: Trend of three major mother-language speakers by censuses (in %), Nepal

In the 2011 census, the 19 major mother-languages were spoken by 95.9% of the total population (Yadav, Y.P 2014). Despite census language data not being strictly comparable, I have attempted to draw line charts using censuses data for preliminary understanding about the trend of the mother-languages. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show trends indicating that during the Panchyet regime (1961-1981), the percentage of people using Nepali as their mother-language increased, and almost all percentages of other mother-languages speakers of indigenous and Madhesi people decreased. The speakers of the Bhojpuri mother-language increased in this Panchyet period, and the Magar language speakers increased in the 1961 census. The reasons behind the Bhojpuri and Magar languages increasing in those time period needs to be explored. After the peoples' movement in 1990, the percentage of almost every mother-language used by indigenous and Madhesi people increased. At the same time the number of identified mother-languages also increased from 18 *(1981)* to 31 *(1991)*. The proportion of speakers of Nepali as a mother-language decreased after 1990. The increasing trend of percentage of mother-languages of indigenous and Madhesi citizens can be attributed to the raised awareness of the citizens with their own mother-languages. The Nepal-language speakers in 1981 *(Nepal Era 1101)*, 1991 *(Nepal Era 1111)* and 2001 *(Nepal Era 1121)* counts are 448,746 *(2.99%)*, 690,007 *(3.76%)*, and 825,458 *(3.63%)* respectively. Looking at these statistics, around 1981 there is more awareness within Newa people with their mother-language a "Nepal-language". Around this time, Newa organizations seem more active and aware in preserving their mother-language (Manandhar, B. 2009). As the number of identified mother-languages raised to 123 in 2011, the proportion of speakers of the indigenous and Madhesi mother-languages decreased. See Table 2 and Figure 2.

Table 2: Some major mother-languages speakers by censuses (in %), Nepal

Mother Tongue	Census year						
	1952/54	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Nepali	48.74	50.96	52.45	58.36	50.31	48.61	44.64
Maithili	12.44	12.01	11.49	11.11	11.85	12.30	11.67
Bhojpuri	5.80	6.13	6.98	7.61	7.46	7.53	5.98
Tharu	4.37	4.32	4.29	3.63	5.37	5.86	5.77
Tamang	6.01	5.62	4.80	3.48	4.89	5.19	5.11
Nepal-language	4.65	4.01	3.94	2.99	3.73	3.63	3.20
Magar	3.32	2.71	2.50	1.42	2.30	3.39	2.98
Awadhi	3.99	5.07	2.74	1.56	2.03	2.47	1.89
Limbu	1.77	1.47	1.48	0.86	1.37	1.47	1.30
Gurung	1.97	1.68	1.49	1.16	1.23	1.49	1.23
Rai, Kirat	2.87	2.55	2.01	1.47	2.38	-	0.60
Rajbansi	0.43	0.59	0.48	0.40	0.46	0.57	0.46
Bhote, Sherpa	0.85	0.89	0.69	0.49	0.66	0.57	0.43
Santhali	-	0.11	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.18	0.19
Danuwar	0.11	0.12	0.09	0.09	0.13	0.14	0.17
Sunuwar	0.21	0.14	0.18	0.07	-	0.12	0.14
Thakali	0.04	0.07	-	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.02

Sources: Population Monograph, 2003, Vol-1, Chapter-4, Table 4.1

Population Monograph 2013 - Volume II, Chapter-2, Annex 2.1

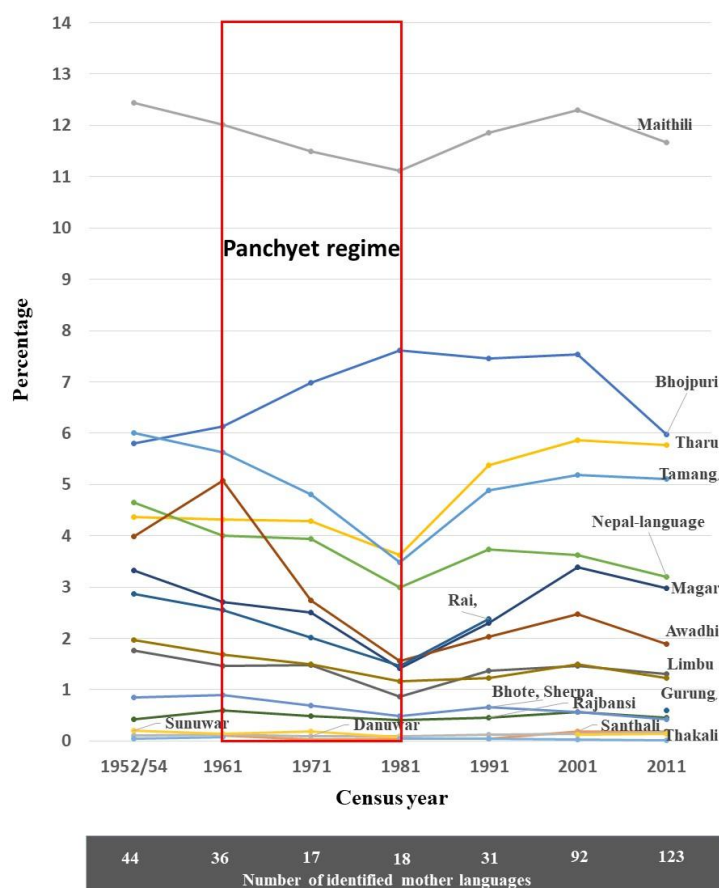Note for 2011 census : 0.60% includes only Rai language and 0.43% includes only Sherpa language

Figure 2: Trend of mother-language speakers by censuses (in %), Nepal

Choice between other Languages or second language

The 2011 census reported that 41% *(11 million)* of Nepalese speak at least one more language other than their mother-language (Yadav, Y.P 2014). The census in 1952/54 asked "what other languages does [Name] speak?" This collected information on all other languages (any nation's or international languages) spoken by an individual. While censuses from 1991-2011 asked "what is [Name's] second language?," this question is less informative since it collects only one second language. The definition of a second language given was, *"the language learned later than the mother-language for communication with neighbors, for other work activities, or the language mostly used to communicate with others."*

The census in 1952/54 published multilingual statistics at the district level using the information of other languages spoken. In the context of multilingual Nepal it makes sense to collect data on other languages spoken by an individual. In the Kathmandu (inside block) district during 1954, there were 71,915 citizens speaking the Nepal-language; 36181 *(50.31%)* of them can speak at least one more other language and 35734 *(49.69%)* of them know only Nepal-language. Those 36181 citizens, who can speak at least one other languages than "Nepal-language" include: 31549 *(43.9%)* Nepali, 2890 *(4.01%)* Hindi, 1565 *(2.17%)* English, 100 *(0.139%)* Urdu, 57 *(0.079%)* Sanskrit, 13 *(0.018%)* Bangali, 3 *(0.004%)* Tamang, *and* 3 *(0.004%)* Bhote (Department of statistics, 1958).

Proposed language questions for the census 2021

There has been an increase in awareness of citizens who desire more information on languages to promote their mother-languages and prevent them from extinction. Citizens also want to have formal education in their mother-languages and want government services and health facilities provided in their mother-languages. In this section, I am proposing some language questions for the census 2021 questionnaire that may help in solving problems with mother-languages and other-languages/second-languages issues in Nepal. The 2021 pilot census questionnaire has three questions on languages: mother-language, second language learned, and ancestral language. See Table 3. The ancestral language question is a newly-added question in the history of Nepal's censuses. The expected result from the ancestral language question and its uses are not clear. For Nepal, the census questionnaire needs to collect language information that helps to find the reasons behind mother-languages not being passed to the new generations.

Table 3: Pilot census questions on languages, Census 2021, Central Bureau of Statistics, Nepal					
S.N	**What language did [Name] learn first to speak (Mother-language)?** (Write the name of mother-language and its code from the code book. If other languages, please specify.)		**What language did [Name] learn secondly?** (Write the name of language learned secondly and its code from the code book. If other languages, please specity.)		**What is [Name's] ancestral language?** (Write the name of ancestral language and its code from the code book. If other languages, please specify.)
	(code)		**(code)**		**(code)**
(1)	(8)		(9)		(10)
1	……………………………		……………………………		……………………………
⋮	⋮		⋮		⋮	⋮
8	……………………………		……………………………		……………………………

Proposed language questions for the census

I have proposed six language questions for the 2021 census (see Table 4). Four of them are new questions for the census of Nepal: three are yes/no questions and one is a multiple-choice question. These explore the usage of mother-languages and the reasons for not passing on an ancestral language.

Table 4: Proposed questions for languages in census, Nepal

S.N.	Write your mother language and your ancestral language(s) and its code.	Did [Name] ever get an opportunity to get formal education in ancestral language in schools? 1............. Yes 2................No	If [Name] is given an opportunity for formal education in his/her ancestral language would [Name] likes to join? Ask if question (2) has NO answer. 1............. Yes 2..............No	Does [Name] have an opportunity to formally apply his/her ancestral language in the government offices, attorney offices, and health care services? 1............. Yes 2................No	What are the reasons behind [Name] not knowing his/her ancestral language? Or, if he/she knows ancestral language then please provide the reasons for not passing ancestral language to offsprings in his/her society. Multiple choice question. Please circle the reasons and for other reason, please write it out.	What other language(s) can [Name] speak? Write all languages [Name] can speak.
ID	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
1	Ancestral ....Code........ Great grandparents.................Code......... Grandparents........................Code......... Parents................................ Code........ [Name]................................Code.........				1...School has mandatory Nepali language 2...Schools do not allow mother languages 3...Afraid of not getting government job 4...May have accent while speaking Nepali 5...Mother languages not allowed in any offices 6...Government never promote mother languages 7...Learning ancestral language is not useful 8...Other	Language Code ....
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
8	Ancestral ....Code........ Great grandparents.................Code......... Grandparents........................Code......... Parents................................ Code........ [Name]................................Code.........				1...School has mandatory Nepali language 2...Schools do not allow mother languages 3...Afraid of not getting government job 4...May have accent while speaking Nepali 5...Mother languages not allowed in any offices 6...Government never promote mother languages 7...Learning ancestral language is not useful 8...Other	Language Code ....

Mother-language and ancestral language

The question, "What is [Name's] ancestral language?" as requested in the pilot census of 2021 does not seem to help explain the existing problem with mother languages. For example, every Newa ethnicity has a Nepal-language as his/her ancestral language. This ancestral language information may possibly link to ethnicity. However, we could improve this question to make it more informative and useful. If we collect the mother-language of an individual and his/her ancestral language(s) for the past four or more generations, it could be informative and help to trace back to the time period where the individual's and ancestral language changed. The less the number of generation gaps between individual's mother-language and ancestral language, the higher the probability of reviving their ancestral language. So, I suggest recording ancestral languages as far as past four generations[2].

Opportunities with mother-languages

I have proposed three yes/no questions about mother-languages and one multiple choice question to explore the reasons for not knowing ancestral language. These four new questions are simple, fast, and require no recoding.[3] Questions (2) and (3) collect information on whether individual received an opportunity to have formal education in their ancestral language and whether the individual wanted to get a formal education in their ancestral language? Here we are connecting with the individual's ancestral language rather than the individual's mother-language.[4]Question number (3) will help to plan for mother-languages according to the proportion of yes/no answers. Question number (4) shows the proportion of citizens getting basic government services, health cares and attorney services in their mother-languages. Question number (5) asks, why an individual does not learn his/her ancestral language. These questions will help the government of Nepal in making policies on mother-languages. These four questions may help in understanding the mother-language condition and help the government plan for future mother-language policies in Nepal.

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[2] In the grandfather's generation, there may be a difference between the grandmother's and the grandfather's languages. In such cases we need to record the language that is primarily used in the grandfather/mother's household, and same rule also applies to other generations.

[3]If we wish, recoding for other answers on question number (5), "the reason behind [Name] not knowing ancestral language", can be done at the coding process.

[4]For those who do not know their ancestral language ([Name's] mother-language and ancestral are language different), obviously they would get a formal education in today's constitutionally declared official Nepali language, which is reported as an individual's mother-language.

Multilingual or bilingual question

In the context of Nepal, multilingual information is more useful than bilingual information. The 1952/54 census asked, "what other languages does [Name] speak?" This provides multilingual knowledge of Nepalese. The 1991, 2001, and 2011 censuses asked "What is [Name's] second language?" For more informative questions, I propose to keep the same question, "Other languages known to individual" as in the 1952/54 census.

Conclusion

The population census is the main source of language statistics in Nepal and is the only source for many mother languages of Nepal that are spoken by minorities. Since the modern census of 1952/54, Nepal has regularly published mother language statistics. For information on languages spoken other than the mother language, the census 1952/54 collected "other languages spoken", while censuses 1991, 2001, and 2011 collected "second language". The pilot census of 2021, changed the second language question to "second language learned". The 2021 pilot census has also added one more question on language: "What is [Name's] ancestral language?" It is not clear what new and useful information this question will provide. There is a desire for information on mother languages due to awareness aimed at preserving and reviving mother languages of Nepal and prevent them from becoming extinct. The citizens of Nepal want to have formal education, health care, government services, and attorney services available in their mother languages. They want the government of Nepal to initiate these steps. The three current questions in the 2021 pilot census questionnaire may not be sufficient to provide information to address the demand of mother languages awareness. I am proposing six language questions for Nepal's census 2021 to address the demands on mother-languages data. Four of these proposed questions are new questions. For the information about other languages spoken than his/her mother language, I suggest keeping the "other languages spoken" question as asked in the census of 1952/54.

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