

Evolving Trends in Sociolinguistic Research in Nepal

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Abstract This paper provides an overview of different trends in sociolinguistic studies in Nepal from a socio-historical perspective, based on available data, research, and publications. It briefly outlines and critically assesses research conducted through sociolinguistic surveys of Nepalese languages from 2008 to 2022 by various institutions. The paper then describes the current sociolinguistic situation in Nepal, its impacts, and its context within the changing scenario of multilingualism. It highlights various aspects of applied linguistics and their significance in preserving and protecting minority languages in Nepal's unique language contact situations. The overview suggests that the process of language officialization and management has often been a source of conflict in many local areas, where people speaking different languages share educational materials in the same classroom.

Keywords Survey. LiNSuN. Contact and conflict. Change. Policy.

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1 Background

Nepal is diverse in culture, language, ethnicity, and ecology. It has more than 124 languages and 142 ethnic groups (NSO, 2023). The languages of Nepal belong to the Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian (Munda) families, along with a language isolate, Kusunda. This linguistic diversity forms part of Nepal's socio-historical identity, where cultural and ethnic diversities are essential elements of Nepalese society.

Nepal's ethnic and cultural diversity is unique because people often speak one language but represent many ethnicities. For instance, Newar is a language spoken by a single ethnicity (the Newar people), whereas various ethnic groups such as Brahmin, Chhetri, Thakuri, and Sanyasi share Nepali as their common mother tongue. Similarly, other ethnic groups speak distinct languages such as Tamang, Limbu, Sherpa, Thakali, Kumal, Majhi, Dhimal, Byansi, and Satar.

Some ethnic groups are multilingual, speaking more than one language. These include the Magar (Kham, Kaise, Poike, Dhut), Chepang (Bankariya, Chepang), Gurung (Ghale, Gurung), and Rai (Bantawa, Chamling, Kulung, Yamphu, Thulung, etc.). Several ethnic groups in the Terai region speak one of three major languages - Maithili, Bhojpuri, or Awadhi - yet belong to diverse communities such as Yadava, Musahar, Teli, Chamar, Kurmi, Lohar, Rajput, Kayastha, and Thakur.

Languages spoken in Nepal are classified into different families and groups, as shown in Table 1, which presents the population distribution among the major language families.

Table 1 Population of major language families in Nepal

SN	Language family	No. of languages	No. of speakers	% of speakers
1	Indo Aryan	47	22,807,534	78.3%
2	Tibeto-Burman	72	6,249,472	21.4%
3	Austro Asiatic	3	59,174	0.2%
4	Dravidian	1	40,637	0.0%
5	Language Isolate	1	87	0.00%
6	Others		5,200	0.0%
7	Unidentified		2,474	0.0%
Grand total		124	29,164,578	100%

Source: Population of Nepal by Mother Tongues (NSO, 2023)

The table shows that Indo-Aryan languages account for the largest proportion of the population (78%), whereas the Tibeto-Burman (TB) language family represents the largest number of languages (72). However, TB languages are spoken by only 21.4% of the total

population, which is quite remarkable. The Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, and other language groups each account for less than 1% of the total population, indicating a significant disparity between majority and minority languages and reflecting a complex sociolinguistic landscape.

The multilingual reality of Nepal has drawn the attention of scholars both in the past and present. The nuances of multilingualism and its impact on daily communication across linguistic communities play an essential role in shaping communities, affirming identities, and participating in cultural activities. Since language and culture are inseparable, conducting a historical review of research trends in linguistic studies not only helps scholars understand where the discourse is heading but also how future researchers can contribute to and expand the field.

However, such topics remain under-researched in the Nepalese context. Therefore, this paper summarizes sociolinguistic surveys conducted between 2008 and 2022 by the Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LiNSuN) and the Language Commission (LC) Nepal, focusing on their methodologies and findings through selected case studies, with the aim of guiding future research in a more systematic and meaningful direction.

2 Methods

This paper employs a qualitative-interpretive approach to sociolinguistics through the analysis of socio-historical documents. The reason for using this method is to review previous works and assess their impact on sociolinguistic studies in Nepal. By examining documents related to linguistic and sociolinguistic research from different periods, the paper aims to uncover how language both reflects and constructs social identities, ideologies, and power dynamics over time.

Sociolinguistic survey reports (2008-22) and related studies serve as a lens through which to examine the interaction between language and society in the Nepalese context. These documents provide insights into how people have used language and expressed their beliefs from a sociolinguistic perspective. Most of the survey reports were collected from the Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University (TU), and a qualitative-interpretive approach was applied, focusing on historical background and methodology. Finally, key themes were generated and synthesized to form the basis of this paper.

3 An Overview of Linguistic Studies in Nepal

Linguistic studies in Nepal have a history spanning more than two centuries. The first linguistic research was carried out by Brian Houghton Hodgson (1828-1888), a pioneering naturalist and ethnologist who worked in India and Nepal. He published several papers on Nepalese languages in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*. His study was based on comparative wordlists of about 53 Nepalese languages.

Subsequently, William Carey completed a study of about 33 languages spoken in the Indian subcontinent, among which *Nepal[i]*, *Mythilee (Maithili)*, and *North Koshala (Awadhi?)* were identified as languages of Nepal (Grierson 1927, 11-12). Hoernle (1880) carried out a typological study of Nepali and several Indo-Aryan languages spoken in Nepal.

Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) conducted a systematic linguistic study of the South Asian region, including more than 30 Nepalese languages (1927, 389). Grierson categorized these languages into various families and subfamilies based on social and geographical factors and produced descriptive grammatical sketches based on limited data and analysis.

Between 1965 and 1975, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) conducted descriptive studies of 21 different languages. SIL published wordlists, phonemic summaries, texts, sketch grammars, and sociolinguistic information on 57 Nepalese languages.

Similarly, Chura Mani Bandhu carried out a field survey in the Bagmati and Janakpur areas in 1968. According to Bandhu (personal communication), the team surveyed eight languages: Thami, Jirel, Majhi, Danuwar, Pahari, Dolakha, Newar, and Tamang. Bandhu's fieldwork was based largely on his personal experience rather than a systematic methodology.

Warren Glover and John K. Landon (1980) conducted a detailed study of Gurung dialects that was more systematic than previous works. Their study included analyses of language attitudes, wordlists, isoglosses, sound shifts, intelligibility testing (a modified Casad method), and demographic distributions. This represented one of the first comprehensive studies of Gurung spoken in the Gandaki-Dhaulagiri region.

Between 1981 and 1984, Werner Winter initiated the *Linguistic Survey of Nepal* project, conducting extensive fieldwork in eastern Nepal with a focus on the Rai-Kiranti languages. His research covered around 40 languages spoken across the Terai and highlands of eastern Nepal.

Toba et al. (2002) prepared a basic sociolinguistic profile of 59 Nepalese languages (45 Tibeto-Burman, 11 Indo-Aryan, 1 Austro-Asiatic, 1 Dravidian, and 1 language isolate - *Kusunda*) using a

questionnaire adapted from the *UNESCO World Languages Report (China)*.

The Central Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University conducted preliminary documentation of around 30 languages between 2004 and 2008, supported financially by the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN). This documentation included basic lexicons, grammar outlines, and texts based on narratives and conversations. Collectively, these efforts made a unique contribution to linguistic research in Nepal and laid the groundwork for more detailed and systematic sociolinguistic studies in the years that followed.

4 Sociolinguistic Survey of Nepalese Languages (2008-22)

In 2007, the Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LiNSuN) project (2008-18) was initiated by senior linguists including Chudamani Bandhu, Tej Ratna Kansakar, Yogendra Yadava, Madhav Pokharel, Noble Kishore Rai, Nirmalman Tuladhar, and David E. Watters. It was commissioned by the National Planning Commission of Nepal and officially launched in 2008 at the Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu.

The LiNSuN project primarily focused on the sociolinguistic survey of all Nepalese languages, with the goal of preparing comprehensive sociolinguistic profiles. However, after the establishment of the Language Commission (LC) of Nepal in 2016, sociolinguistic surveys continued with financial support from the Commission. The LC also employed the same tools developed under the LiNSuN project. The Sociolinguistic Survey (SLS) adopted the following tools.

4.1 Sociolinguistic Survey Questionnaires

A set of sociolinguistic questionnaires (A, B, and C) was used to understand the language situation (Gautam 2019). These questionnaires included biographical information, language use patterns, bilingualism/multilingualism, language attitudes, and other metadata.

Questionnaire A was administered to real speakers selected based on age, gender, and literacy level across different geographical locations of the language community.

Questionnaire B was distributed during focus group discussions conducted through participatory observation at each survey site.

Questionnaire C was given to language activists and local leaders to identify different attitudes toward language and community.

4.2 Sentence Repetition Test (SRT)

The Sentence Repetition Test (SRT) was recently developed by survey investigators working in South Asia. It operates on the assumption that one cannot easily repeat long and complex utterances correctly. This technique was used in the Sociolinguistic Survey of Nepal (SLS) to assess the language attitudes of native speakers and to test their levels of competency in Nepali and other dominant languages in a multilingual context (Gautam 2019).

4.3 Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is another qualitative research tool used to explore people's opinions about a language and their attitudes toward bilingualism and multilingualism (Gautam 2019). This technique also gathers biographical data and information on literacy resources and educational experiences, allowing participants to share their aspirations and motivations related to language use and identity.

4.4 Dialect Survey

Based on a standard 210-word list elicited from native speakers across five different locations within a language area, various dialects can be identified, along with sociolinguistic variations determined by lexical similarity among different groups. The results can be presented in a table illustrating relative linguistic distances among speech communities, while lexical differences can be compared through a detailed matrix of word pairs.

The technology for evaluating, comparing, and interpreting word lists is well established (Blair 1990, 21-32; Simons 1984) and provides useful preliminary information about any previously undescribed language.

4.5 Progress and Activities

In 2008, LiNSuN conducted a pilot study in Jhapa District to test and evaluate the developed questionnaires. Jhapa is the only district where languages from all major families are spoken. Thirteen languages - Malpande, Karuwa, Sadri (Kissan), Danuwar, Marwari, Nepali, Maithili, Urdu, Hindi, Bantawa, Meche, Uraun, and Khadiya - were surveyed by a team of experts and researchers. Following this comprehensive pilot study, the SLS questionnaires

and SRT modules were revised and refined for use in the main field surveys. The pilot phase verified the effectiveness of the LiNSuN tools for future surveys. The sociolinguistic surveys were conducted with financial support from the Government of Nepal, the Embassy of Finland, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), the Language Commission (LC), and several other institutions such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) Nepal and the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN).

Altogether, the survey covered 104 languages, and 95 language reports were prepared, representing all language families and geographical regions of the country. Table 1 provides a summary of these surveys.

Table 1 Summary of Languages in SLS

Year	Indo-Aryan	Tibeto-Burman	Austro-Asiatic	Dravidian	Remarks
2009	2	3			LiNSuN
2010	1	3			LiNSuN
2011	1	4	1		LiNSuN
2012	14	6			LiNSuN
2013	7	6	1	1	LiNSuN
2014	2	7			LiNSuN
2015	2	3			LiNSuN
2016	4	7			LiNSuN
2017		6			LiNSuN
2017	4	11			LC
2018		5			LC
2019		1			LC
2020		2			LC
Total=104	37	64	2	1	

Source: LiNSuN (2008-18) and Language Commission Nepal.

The table shows that out of 104 sociolinguistic surveys, only 23 were conducted by the Language Commission Nepal with technical support from the Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University. This suggests that SLS activities have not been sufficiently structured or analyzed in line with the evolving trends in sociolinguistic research in Nepal. A review of all survey reports indicates that the same tools were applied uniformly across all languages, which is problematic. Tools suitable for major languages such as Nepali, Tamang, Newar, and Maithili cannot effectively capture the linguistic realities of smaller or endangered languages such as Tilung, Kumal, Lohwa, or Chepang (Gautam 2019). This highlights the need for

future sociolinguistic studies in Nepal to adopt more theoretically and methodologically refined approaches.

5 **Sociolinguistic Studies in the Last Decade**

Beyond the national sociolinguistic survey, several studies have been conducted by organizations such as SIL International, the University Grants Commission (UGC) Nepal, the Nepal Academy, and the Language Commission Nepal, both individually and collaboratively.

Gautam (2016) conducted a study titled *Contact Nepali in Kathmandu Valley*, based on qualitative and quantitative data collected from Newar, Maithili, and Sherpa speakers in the valley. Supported by UGC Nepal, the study highlighted recent linguistic contact phenomena in Kathmandu from a sociolinguistic perspective.

In 2017, the Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Development (CERID) at Tribhuvan University conducted a study on language shift in Nepal with financial support from the Language Commission. The study analyzed Limbu, Tamang, Newar, Maithili, Tharu, Jumli, Doteli, and Nepali, using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions.

With University Grants Commission (UGC) support, Gautam (2020) conducted a detailed study on language shift among Newar speakers in Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, and Kabhrepalanchok districts, focusing on language use and attitudes across age, gender, and socio-professional groups.

Gautam (2023) also completed a sociolinguistic study of the Tamang community in Kathmandu Valley, focusing on language attitude, shift, and change, supported by the Nepal Academy. Data were collected from Sundarijal, Nagarkot, Bosan, and Dakshinkali using questionnaires (Gautam 2021), interviews, and narratives.

Currently, the Research Management Cell (RMC) at the Central Department of Linguistics is preparing updated sociolinguistic profiles of seven selected languages - Maithili, Chamling, Gurung, Bhujel, Kumal, Hayu, and Doteli - in both Nepali and English. These ongoing efforts demonstrate that sociolinguistic research in Nepal is expanding with new methods, techniques, and theoretical orientations, aligning with global trends in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.

6 **Evolving Trends in Sociolinguistic Researches**

Contemporary sociolinguistic studies in Nepal have expanded to encompass various areas of applied linguistics, including language planning and policy. Earlier surveys were limited to descriptive tools

and guidelines, often lacking strong theoretical frameworks. Gautam (2019) points out several methodological shortcomings in earlier studies, such as inconsistent sampling and inadequate site selection. The following points illustrate emerging trends in sociolinguistic research in Nepal.

6.1 Language Planning and Policy

Scholars from various theoretical and methodological backgrounds use the terms *multilingualism* and *plurilingualism* to describe linguistically diverse societies, individuals' communicative abilities, and educational approaches that promote multiple languages in schools (Erling, Moore 2021).

Following the implementation of Nepal's 2015 Constitution, 11 new languages were recommended as provincial and official languages by the Language Commission in 2022: *Limbu, Maithili, Bajjika, Bhojpuri, Tamang, Newar, Gurung, Magar, Tharu, Awadhi, and Doteli*. Bagmati Province has already passed a law authorizing its provincial languages, while other provinces are in the process of doing so. However, there is still no comprehensive plan for managing Nepal's linguistic diversity within a multilingual framework.

As Strani (2020, 26) notes, power imbalances in multilingual settings are influenced not only by education and access but also by government policy and language choice. Some local authorities - such as the Kathmandu Metropolitan City, Kirtipur Municipality, and several municipalities outside the valley - have already initiated mother-tongue education at the primary level. However, these initiatives are often driven by emotional or political motivations rather than grounded multilingual policy, which could result in unintended consequences for Nepal's multiethnic and multilingual society.

In this context, a balanced language policy must be developed and implemented to effectively manage languages across different regions, ethnicities, and communities. The 2015 Constitution supports the preservation and promotion of Nepalese languages through careful language planning. The process of language officialization should be guided by principles of linguistic and social justice so that marginalized language communities - such as *Kusunda, Raute, and Lunkhim* - can benefit equally.

6.2 Language Contact and Conflict

A political language conflict reaches its most intense point when language becomes the central symbol of disagreement, bringing together disputes from politics, economics, administration, and

education under a single issue (Nelde 2010, 35). Such conflicts arise when differing values, beliefs, and worldviews collide, deeply influencing how people perceive themselves, raise their children, receive education, and engage with their communities (37).

Nepal's multilingual context has produced complex situations due to issues of language contact and conflict. Many urban centers have become linguistic hubs for Nepali, English, and Hindi (Gautam 2022), driven by language politics in education, business, and other socio-political spheres. Studies have already indicated the presence of language conflicts within both communities and classrooms in cities such as Kathmandu Valley (Gautam, Poudel 2024).

Social, historical, political, and economic power relations strongly influence the linguistic outcomes of language contact (Sankoff 2001; Thomason, Kaufman 1988), shaping ideologies and attitudes toward languages. Reviewing various sociolinguistic survey reports reveals a high degree of bilingualism and multilingualism in several language communities – such as Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Thulung, Tharu, and Limbu – driven by media, migration, and inter-caste marriage in Nepal's sociocultural context. Table 2 illustrates the multilingual situation among Awadhi children.

Table 2 Language known by Awadhi children

Languages	Male	Female	Where learnt?
Nepali	57%	60%	Schools, colleges, in towns, cities
Hindi	53%	33%	Local markets, India, watching Hindi movies and televisions
English	13%	3%	School, colleges
Tharu	7%		In the society

Source: Thakur, Yadav (2013)

The table shows that a majority of Awadhi children are bilingual in Nepali and Hindi. Among male respondents, 57%, 53%, 13%, and 7% of children are bilingual or multilingual in Nepali, Hindi, English, and Tharu, respectively. Similarly, 60%, 33%, and 3% of female respondents' children speak Nepali, Hindi, and English. Awadhi children acquire their mother tongue at home and learn Tharu within the community. Nepali and Hindi are acquired through education, media, and urban exposure, while English is primarily learned in schools and through media technologies such as mobile phones and online communication. This extensive multilingualism creates both linguistic contact and conflict across age and social

groups. Multilingual classrooms in Nepal exemplify such conflict, as home and community languages are often marginalized while official or dominant languages are imposed for instruction. Gautam and Poudel (2024) identify significant language conflicts in multilingual classrooms in Kathmandu Valley.

6.3 Areal and Typological Study

In any sociolinguistic research, it is essential to understand the value of areal and typological studies for future perspectives. Considering ethnographic, sociocultural, ecological, and geographical factors, Nepal's languages can be categorized into the following groups.

6.3.1 Language with Diverse Ecological Landscapes

Nepal's geography is highly diverse in terms of vegetation, landscape, and climate. Between 2010 and 2022, I studied five languages spoken in the Terai region: Awadhi, Doteli, Tharu, Bhojpuri, and Khadiya. Among them, Khadiya is a minority language spoken by a small number of people in the eastern Terai. It is largely confined to older generations and family domains, with younger speakers shifting to Nepali or English due to education and employment. In contrast, Tharu, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Doteli are widely spoken in the central and western Terai, each with multiple dialectal varieties. However, the younger generation often speaks Nepali, English, or Hindi outside the home domain. Similarly, I participated in sociolinguistic surveys of languages spoken in the hilly and mountainous regions – such as Kaire, Dhuleli, Thulung, and Lohwa. Kaire and Dhuleli are relatively isolated, with strong language vitality, while Lohwa speakers are in frequent contact with Tibetan, English, and Nepali due to tourism in Upper Mustang. Languages such as Thulung, Aathpahariya, Lungkhim, and Limbu, spoken in the eastern hills, experience intense contact with neighboring languages such as Nepali, Kulung, Bantawa, and Tamang. Migration, modernization, media, and the education system contribute to intergenerational language shift in these communities.

6.3.2 Cross Border Languages

Many cross-border languages are spoken between Nepal, India, and China. I have personally observed three Indo-Aryan languages – Awadhi, Bhojpuri, and Kurmali – spoken in the Terai

bordering India, and two Tibeto-Burman languages - Dhuleli and Lohwa - spoken in Bajhang and Mustang, bordering China (Tibet).

Kurmali is spoken by a small number of speakers in Jhapa District (Kantharghutu, Anandagunj, Kachhubari, and Maheshpur). Awadhi is spoken in the western Terai districts (Nawalparasi, Rupandehi, Kapilvastu, Banke, Bardia, Dang, Kailali, and Kanchanpur), while Bhojpuri is spoken in Rautahat, Bara, Parsa, Chitwan, Nawalparasi, and Rupandehi. The mother-tongue proficiency among Bhojpuri speakers remains strong, with lexical similarity ranging from 56% to 92% among surveyed varieties, indicating dialectal diversity without loss of mutual intelligibility.

In 2016, I visited Dhuleli communities near the Chinese (Tibetan) border. The Dhuli core survey point showed 79-81% lexical similarity with other sites (Jagera, Nyuna, and Balaudi) (Regmi, Prasain 2017). In 2017, I visited Lohwa-speaking villages in Upper Mustang, where the Lo Manthang core point exhibited 70-79% similarity with other sites (Kimaling, Chungjung, Choser, and Charang) (Regmi et al. 2018).

My observations suggest that border languages near China (Tibet) are heavily influenced by Tibetan dialects and cultures such as *Lhosar*, *Bon*, and *Buddhism*, whereas languages in the Terai are influenced by Hindu and Indian cultures. Nevertheless, some minority groups like Dhuleli and Lohwa have preserved their linguistic and cultural identities. Most minority languages, however, are shifting toward dominant languages such as Nepali and English (Gautam 2025).

6.4 Language Shift and Endangerment

Many languages in Nepal are undergoing rapid shift toward Nepali, English, and Hindi (Gautam 2021; Gautam et al. 2022). A major cause is the *M³ effect* - media, music, and marriage - which accelerates language shift toward dominant languages (Gautam 2020). Inter-caste and inter-ethnic marriages are increasingly common among communities such as Thulung, Lungkhim, Aathpahariya, Tamang, Newar, Magar, Gurung, and Limbu. English and Hindi are especially popular among the younger generation due to mass media and entertainment, particularly Hindi cinema and music.

When conducting sociolinguistic surveys, it is crucial to consider the sociocultural context of each language and its community. For example, Lungkhum is nearly extinct, surviving within a single family in a multilingual community in Suryodaya Municipality, Ilam, where Bantawa is dominant. In Lunkhum (Bhojpuri), residents speak Kulung and Nepali but no longer use Lunkhum in daily conversation.

7 Conclusion and Implications

Nepal has a long history of sociolinguistic studies, surveys, and linguistic research. Many ideas, methods, and approaches have evolved alongside changes in the nation's sociolinguistic landscape. Ethnographic observation remains vital for understanding the ethnic identity of people and places, particularly amid identity politics.

Participant observation - long central to qualitative sociolinguistics - is increasingly employed in quantitative studies as well (Johnstone 2000, 80). Cultural background, socio-economic status, caste, gender, and social roles are all critical in understanding linguistic peculiarities.

Younger generations are often less invested in heritage languages and cultures, instead embracing globalization, modernization, and digital communication. Case studies based on qualitative data are essential to understanding how language connects with community roles and cultural identity through personal narratives.

Since the 1990s, Nepal's neoliberal policies have valorized English as a global commodity, creating a hierarchy in which minoritized languages such as Newar, Sherpa, Maithili, Tharu, Limbu, and Kurmali occupy lower status. Rapid socio-political and economic transformations across all linguistic communities have reshaped individual identities, influenced by age, gender, social status, and lived experience - challenging traditional notions of Nepal's sociolinguistic landscape.

Future research should prioritize the lived realities of language use, diversity, and socio-political contexts, exploring how ethnic and cultural practices evolve within Nepal's multilingual society in the era of globalization.

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