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Magar as an Endangered Language of Sikkim

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This paper is an attempt to define Magar as an endangered language of Sikkim. To look upon factors responsible for its endangerment on the basis of UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework is another goal of this paper. The study shows that Magar is a definitely endangered language caused mainly by the tendency of language shift, poor maintenance and lack of intergenerational transmission of the language.

1. Background

Sikkim is as rich as any other Indian states in terms of linguistic diversity. Its multilingual scenario persists out of the mostly two groups of languages: TibetoBurman and IndoAryan. The Tibeto Burman group embraces eleven different languages like Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu, Rai, Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Sherpa, Bhujel, Newar and Sunwar. Under the IndoAryan group, Nepali is the language of contact here and is spoken as first language by more than 60% of the total population. The languages other than these are due to the influx of people from around the country like Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Malayalam etc. The Linguistic Survey of India (Sikkim, Part I and II) shows that almost all the indigenous languages in Sikkim are endangered where the factors responsible and degree of the endangerment vary language to language. In this paper an attempt has been made to define Magar language of Sikkim as one of endangered languages on the basis of nine factors responsible for a language to be threatened provided by UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework.

The term *Magar* is an ethnonym as well as a glottonym and is also known as *Magari*, *Manger* and *Mangar* in the different literatures. The language is spoken by one of the Mongoloid community of the Himalayan range in South East Asia. The Magar people are basically found in Nepal and scarcely in India, Bhutan and Myanmar. In India, they specially reside in the states of Sikkim and West Bengal. About the origin of the Magar people, there are two assumptions one of which puts that they are believed to have migrated from Tibet via Sikkim like other prominent ethnic groups. The literature on the history of Sikkim (Rishley, 1984; Pradhan, 1994; Allay, 2003; Tiwari, 2014) and historical remnants found elsewhere in Sikkim support the fact that the Magars like Lephas, is one of the aboriginal communities of Sikkim. According to the State Socio-Economic Census conducted by the Department of Economic and Statistics Monitoring and Evaluation, Government of Sikkim, 2006, the population of the Magar people in Sikkim is 15,702 (2.70 % of the total population) and they are

concentrated in the west and south districts of the state.

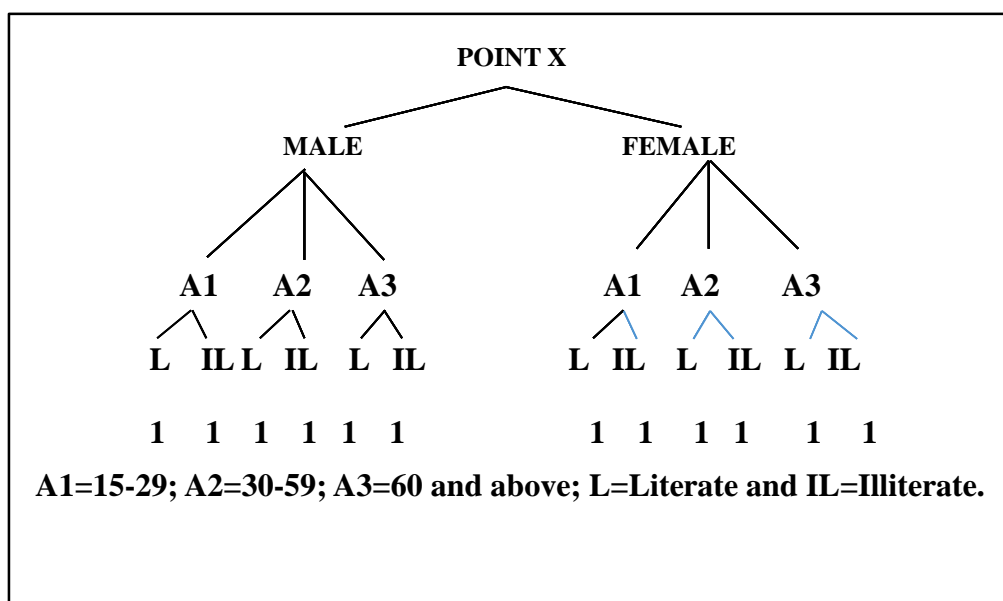
G.A. Grierson (1909: Vol. III) has grouped Magar language under the Non-Pronominalized Himalayan group of Tibeto-Burman sub family whereas as per the subsequent classification by Paul Benedict (1972), Magar (in Sikkim) belongs to the Himalayan group of Tibetan–Kanauri (Bodish-Himalayish) branch of Tibeto Burman sub-family. It has been grouped with other Tibeto-Burman languages like Gurung, Tamang/Murmi, Sunuwar, Newari, Pahari, Lepcha/Rong and Toto. There are mainly two dialects of Magar language: Western and Eastern. The Magar language spoken in Sikkim falls under the Eastern dialect. Till date no intensive study on Magar language spoken in Sikkim has been done except the *Linguistic Survey of India (1909: Vol.III, Part 1)* and *Linguistic Survey of India (2009: Sikkim, Part 1)*. According to *Linguistic Survey of India*, speakers of the Magar language in India is below 10,000 (data on state wise speakers of the language is missing).

2. Methodology

The primary data for this paper has been collected and recorded from various sources like media, conversations and socio-cultural gatherings. Sociolinguistic Questionnaire (A) developed by Linguistic Survey of Nepal and Swadesh basic word list are taken as tools for the collection of data. The sources of data are also based on researcher’s informal field study like social talking, business talking, debate and conversations etc. rather than written sources. The secondary data are collected from different libraries and sources available.

The data are collected from three different areas of Sikkim: Kadamtam (East Sikkim), Assangthang (South Sikkim) and Suldung (West Sikkim). The figure below presents a model for sampling of informants from each point in Sikkim for Magar speech community.

Figure 1: Sampling model of informants in survey.



Following the sampling method to the maximum, at least 12 informants are selected age ranging 15-29 (A1), 30-59 (A2), 60 and above (A3) with their sex and educational background in each survey point. The total of 36 informants were asked by the researcher and the answers given by them have been recorded in the questionnaire.

3. Magar as an endangered language of Sikkim

Derhemi (2002) defines an endangered language as ‘a language that may soon vanish, ceasing to be used as a vehicle of communication perhaps even disappearing completely from human history.’ The topic of language endangerment is seen as a matter of great concern in the contemporary linguistics as ‘about 7,000 languages spoken across the world; and that at least half of these may no longer continue to exist after a few more generations as they are not being learnt by children as first languages. The UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework has presented nine important factors for the language endangerment out of which intergenerational transmission is one of the most important factors. Accordingly, the same framework has categorized the level of endangerment on the basis of those factors into six types: safe, vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct.

The UNESCO's atlas of World Languages in Danger has figured out 147 languages in India are threatened or endangered to the different degree or levels. That is why the discussion and debate over the preservation, promotion and revitalization of those languages has gained momentum in recent years in India. Multilingualism is one of the key factors for the language endangerment in countries with vast linguistic diversity like India where the language contact and language convergence are considered as a common phenomenon. In this context, with each states having enormous linguistic diversity has their own kind of language endangerment attributes with various causes, circumstances and results. This paper is concerned with such attributes of language endangerment in a tiny but linguistically rich state of India i.e. Sikkim. The linguistic survey of India (Sikkim, Part 1: 2009) has stated Nepali as the largest language in this state. The table below presents the numerical data on the speaker's strength of different languages in Sikkim.

Table 1: The Languages of Sikkim and their Speaker Strength

| Language | Speakers | Language | Speakers | Language | Speakers | Language | Speakers |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|------------|
| Nepali | 3,38,606 | Limbu | 34,292 | Bengali | 6,320 | Malayalam | 1,021 |
| Bhutia | 41,825 | Sherpa | 13,992 | Urdu | 2,930 | Magar | Below 1000 |
| Hindi | 36,072 | Tamang | 10,089 | Tibetan | 1,977 | Sunuwar | Below 1000 |
| Lepcha | 35,728 | Rai | 8,856 | Punjabi | 1,364 | Newar | Below 1000 |

After a critical view on the data provided by LSI (2009), the indigenous languages of Sikkim other than Nepali are on the verge of extinction. The proportion of speakers plays an important role in

determining the vitality of a language. The fact that more than 60% of population in Sikkim speak the lingua franca Nepali as their first language and only around 40% of the population speak more than eleven languages shows that the socio linguistic setting of Sikkim itself is prone to the extinction of its indigenous languages in near future. Magar language along with Sunwar and Newar have negligible proportion of speakers i.e. under 1000 speakers at the national level. Perhaps the LSI (2009) gives somehow a clear picture regarding the linguistic scenario of Sikkim, the ground reality about the exact attributes of linguistic situation is yet to come into light as there are many issues related to the different linguistic communities which will be best known only after the extensive research on each and every language here.

UNESCO's Atlas for world languages in danger has marked Sikkim's indigenous languages with following status according to their degree of their endangerment:

Table 2: Degree of Endangerment for languages of Sikkim

| Language | Degree of Endangerment | Language | Degree of Endangerment |
|----------|------------------------|----------|------------------------|
| Bhutia | * | Rai | * |
| Lepcha | Definitely Endangered | Magar | Definitely Endangered |
| Limbu | Definitely Endangered | Gurung | Definitely Endangered |
| Sherpa | Vulnerable | Newar | Definitely Endangered |
| Tamang | Definitely Endangered | Bhujel | ** |
| Sunwar | Vulnerable | | |

* Language with more than one sub-language

** Information unavailable

The above status state that Magar language is definitely endangered and a language is marked with such status when 'children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home' (Austin, et al., 2011:3). In the following sub-sections, an attempt has been made to find out the factors responsible for Magar language to be endangered.

2.1. Factors responsible for endangerment of Magar in Sikkim

UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework has presented broadly nine factors for the endangerment of a language as follows:

2.1.1. Intergenerational transmission

Intergenerational transmission, a 'gold standard' (Fishman, 1991) of language vitality is most crucial factor for the endangerment of Magar language in Sikkim. The intergenerational transmission of the Magar language in Sikkim is very low in the sense that only children who reside in the Magar dominated rural areas in South district (Assanhang, Mamley, Kamrang, Magarjong, Kateng etc.) and West district (Suldung, Kamling, Budang, Ribdi, Barphok etc.) speak the language. Most of the Magar children do not speak language and have greater tendency of language shift towards dominant language. Only the older generation has maintained the language in mostly home domains. The ethnic communities of Sikkim other than Bhutia and Lepcha are considered as sub communities of so called main community 'Nepali' which has inspired all these communities to drop and shift not only their language but also their customs and traditions in favor of Nepali.

Another reason for lack of intergenerational transmission of Magar language is due to the tendency of unstable bilingualism among speakers of this language. Most of Magar speakers in Sikkim are bilingual in Magar and Nepali and they have such a loyalty towards Nepali language that some of them consider both languages as their mother tongue. Such a tendency has caused their own language to be in threat because Nepali is dominant and has been continuously used widely and increasingly which finally has taken over the roles previously carried by their native tongue.

2.1.2. Absolute number of speakers

A language with more absolute number of speakers is tend to be 'safe' in the sense that 'a smaller speaker base may be more susceptible to sudden shift' (Austin *et al*, 2011). It is another main factor for the endangerment of Magar language in Sikkim. In this context Derhemi (2002) correctly puts that 'an endangered language is not necessarily a minority language and not every minority language is necessarily endangered. But there is a high probability that with time a neglected minority language will become endangered.' The exact figure on number of Magar speakers in Sikkim is not yet available but the fact that Magar language falls under the category of Indian languages with less than 10000 speakers in national level is well enough to show very poor speaker's strength of this language.

2.1.3. Proportion of speakers within the total population

The percentage of population which speaks the language is called as the proportion of speakers. It is also an important factor for determining the vitality of a language. A language with less proportion obviously has high possibility of endangerment and Magar language in Sikkim is best instance of it.

The population of Magar people in Sikkim as stated above is only 2.7% of the total population and hence this factor is also crucial for the endangerment of Magar language in Sikkim.

2.1.4. Trends in existing language domains

Decreasing functional domains of a language is one of the main factors for language endangerment. The domains of language use for Magar language in Sikkim is limited to home and intra-community activities.

2.1.5. Response to new domains and media

There is negligible use of Magar language in new domains and media. Some scarce use of this language in entertainment domain like song is found and in the domain of mass media, the language is used in 'Akaashvaani Gangtok' and 'Sikkim Herald'.

2.1.6. Materials for language education and literacy

Under the state's language policy, the government of Sikkim has introduced mother tongue education in government schools since 2005. Major indigenous languages like Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu are taught up to university level whereas other minority indigenous languages like Rai, Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Sherpa, Bhujel, Sunwar and Newar are taught up to the level of class VIII. Magar language as a compulsory subject up to class VIII is being taught in 18 government schools in places like Mamley, Kamrang, Assangthang, Lower Assangthang, Dhargaon, Rong, Ramabong and Kateng in South district; Takuthang, Kamling, Lower Suldung, Khani Sirbung, Tinkuna Bhasmey, Berfok and Karji in West District; Namchebung, Kadamtam and Syari in East district. Textbook called 'kunung moi dhutou galaam phuing (Vol. 1 to 8)' written in Akkha script and published by Akhil Sikkim Magar Sangh is been used as language education material in these schools.

2.1.7. Governmental and institutional attitudes and policies, including official status and use

The state government of Sikkim by the state official languages act, 1995 has granted Magar the status of state language along with other ten languages. Since December 1994, the proceedings of State Legislative Assembly is being translated and published into Magar language in Akhha script. This type of language policy made by Govt. of Sikkim is a positive factor for the preservation, promotion and revitalization of endangered Magar language in Sikkim.

2.1.8. Community members' attitudes toward their own language

In present day scenario, there seems a very positive attitude of the speech community towards Magar language in Sikkim. With the establishment of organisations like Akhil Magar Sangh with district and village levels committees is active in preservation, promotion and revitalization of Magar language and culture.

2.1.9. Amount and quality of documentation

There are very few works available on the documentation of Magar language in Sikkim. Grierson (1909), Allay (2003), LSI (Sikkim, Part 1: 2005) are some works in this regard.

6. Conclusion

Sikkim, like any other Indian states is rich in linguistic diversity. Among more than 16 languages, state has recognized eleven languages as state languages and Magar is one of them. The study shows every indigenous languages of Sikkim are under threat and they may vanish soon whereas factors and degree of endangerment for these languages vary language to language. In this paper, an attempt to define and find out the factors behind endangerment of Magar language has been made. UNESCO's atlas of world languages in danger has marked Magar language as a definitely endangered language with only older generation to speak the language. Lack of proper intergenerational transmission, less proportion of speakers and decreasing domains of language use are the main factors for endangerment of Magar language. However, with positive governmental attitude and policies as well as positive attitude of speech community towards the language there is hope of regaining vitality by this language in near future.

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