

Language Shift in Sherpa

Bhim Lal Gautam *

Abstract

This paper explores the language shift in Sherpa, the ethnic migrated language community living in Kathmandu valley. The research focuses on language contact situations in different domains viz. social, cultural, personal, and official as well as media related activities where the informants are asked to use different languages i.e. Nepali, English, Hindi etc. along with the use of their own mother tongue i.e. Sherpa. This socio-ethnographic research aims at providing some clues as to how the discovery of a minority language triggers changes in representations and attitudes.

Key words: Language Contact, Language Shift, Use and Attitude, Ideology, Globalization

1. Sherpa People and Language: An Introduction

The Sherpa are a people of Tibetan origin and cultural affinities. They migrated from eastern Tibet in several different waves in the 16th through 18th centuries, and settled in the present Solukhumbu area of Nepal, south of the Himalayas, near Mt. Jomolangma (Mount Everest). Sherpa are also found in three other regions adjacent to the Khumbu: Shorong (Solu), Pharak, and Rolwaling. Sherpa settlements are generally found at elevations between 2000 and 4500 meters above sea level. A substantial number of Sherpa speakers are also found in Sankhuwasabha and Taplejung districts to the east of Solukhumbu, and in Dolakha, Sindupalchok, and Ramechaap districts to the west of Solukhumbu. There are also some Sherpa speakers in Rasuwa district, which is otherwise predominantly populated by Tamangs. In recent decades, the Sherpa have become increasingly involved in running tourism businesses such as travel logistics, hotel and lodge operation, trekking, climbing, and guiding. Sherpa have also expanded international appreciation for their mountaineering skills, and some of them have become quite famous. The Sherpa practice Vajrayana Buddhism and are followers of the Nyingma school. They are proud of their rich tradition, which they would like to preserve and develop. Since they settled in the southern Himalayas, the Sherpa have been in contact with other indigenous groups in the area, such as the Magar, Rai, Gurung, Sunwar, Jirel, and many Hindu hill castes.

Table 1.1: Sherpa population in different census

S N	Census Year	Total Populatio n	Percentag e in Total population	Remark s
1	1952/54	70132	0.85%	
2	1961	84229	0.89%	
3	1971	79218	0.69%	
4	1981	73589	0.49%	

* Central Department of Linguistics, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu Nepal

5	1991	121819	0.66%	
6	2001	129771	0.57%	
7	2011	114830	0.43%	

Source: Different census reports

The Sherpa language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family, which comprises at least 25 languages and more than 200 dialects. These varieties share a common history: they are all derived from Old Tibetan, a language verified at the time of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th centuries). The Sino-Tibetan family is itself included in a larger linguistic family called Tibeto-Burman, which comprises about 400 languages. Although the Tibeto-Burman languages are genetically related, they show wonderful diversity and they differ entirely in their vocabulary and syntax. This is not at all the case with in the Tibetan family, whose languages are closely related and share many common features – even when they are not always readily mutually intelligible. The Tibeto-Burman languages are currently spoken in five countries: China, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan.

The mutual intelligibility between Sherpa and Jirel is not high. Jirel has been more strongly influenced by Nepali and Hindu language and culture than has Sherpa. Yolmo is another Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Sindhupalchok and Nuwakot districts. It is often referred to as “Helambu Sherpa” by the Nepalese people. However, as demonstrated by Anna Maria Hari (2004: 699), Yolmo is closely related to Kagate, and is not a Sherpa dialect.

2. The Ethno-Linguistic Situation of Sherpa in Kathmandu Valley

Sherpas are the newly migrated people living in Kathmandu valley. In the beginning they were the seasonal migrating people in the Kathmandu valley. The 1990 Political movement brought a lot of changes in Nepalese societies, cultures and politics. Party less Panchayat System changed into multiparty system and the powerful monarchy became ceremonial so that the dominated and minority groups from all aspects of society including languages flourished automatically. On the other hand, people started migrating to the nearest cities from the villages and to the capital because of job opportunity, better education and political opportunities. Many Sherpa people have been migrating and living in Kathmandu first as seasonal migrants and then permanently. Census 2001 shows that there were 15,537 Sherpa living in Kathmandu valley whereas 2011 census records 24,778 Sherpa population in Kathmandu valley. Migrated Sherpa speak different languages in different domains and purposes. Kathmandu is a cosmopolitan capital city because people from different cast, religion and ethnic groups live together and shares the common feeling of brotherhood and nationality. It has got a very long cultural and political history in Nepal. The major population of Kathmandu valley is dominated by different language speakers migrated from the various parts of the country. “Nepali is the official language as well as lingua franca in Kathmandu. Kathmandu has now become a multilingual city where we find people speaking at least 3 or more languages. Because of urbanization, a large number of other language speaking peoples like Indo Aryan (Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, etc.) and Tibeto-Burman (Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Limbu etc.) are migrating in the capital city day by day especially after 1990s political revolution in Nepal. This movement of people has offered a lot of possibilities to study language contact and linguistic convergence in Nepal” (Gautam2012). These days, the capital city of Kathmandu has become a meeting place for Sherpa speakers from different mountain regions because of seasonal as well as permanent migration. Some young Sherpa living in Kathmandu or elsewhere outside of the Solukhumbu area no longer speak the language. Also, members of other ethnic groups with which the Sherpa are in close contact may identify themselves as Sherpas, though they do not speak the language. Sherpa culture developed and evolved in a high-altitude environment. The Kathmandu valley has been the politically and culturally dominating part of Nepal. Most of the migrated Sherpa

have been living in different areas of Kathmandu valley mainly at Chabahil, Bauddha, Jorpati, Kapan, Mandikhatar and Gongabu areas.

Table 1.2: Sherpa Population in Kathmandu valley

SN	Districts	2001			2011			Increment percentage
		Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	
1	Kathmandu	20133	10048	10065	23460	11684	11776	7.6%
2	Lalitpur	748	340	408	1020	481	539	15.38%
3	Bhakatapur	183	91	92	298	149	149	23.90%
Grand Total		21064	10479	11097	24748	12314	12434	8.04%

Table 1.2 indicates that the migration of Sherpa in Kathmandu for the last two decades. In Kathmandu 7.6% Sherpa population has been increased during 10 years whereas 15.38% has been increased in Lalitpur and 23.90% in Bhaktapur district. The average increment ratio is only 8.04%. One interesting feature is that female migration is higher than male in Sherpa community. Multilingualism and language contact in Kathmandu valley is very complex comparing the contact situations in the other places in the world.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the data collected on the questionnaires which were developed in 2014 by the researcher in DDL, University of Lyon 2, France and their pilot testing was done in 2015 in Kathmandu. The questionnaires were translated in Nepali and administered to the concerned informants. Moreover, this paper is also based on some existing literatures related to language contact and language ideologies while describing and analyzing the data. The collected data will be analyzed by following the mixed method i.e. quantitative and qualitative.

A. Tools for the Study

I. Survey Questionnaires

There were 45 questionnaires altogether containing metadata information and questions for language use and attitude. The collected data is analyzed by following the recent developments of language contact, ideology and sociolinguistic studies.

II. Focus Group Discussions(FGD)

There were 4 FGDs in 4 different research sites in this research. One FGD were conducted for each of the Linguistic/speech communities involved. There were about 5-7 members in each of the FGD. Members were purposively selected from sex, age, occupation and education strata.

III. Interview:

At least 8 individual interview were conducted in order to meet the need and objective of the research focusing on the language attitude and ideology in in multilingual context.

A. Selection of informants

The data was collected mainly from the people of Sherpa language communities like Housewives, Teacher/academician/monks, Politician/language activist, Businessman/Shop keeper, Trekking Guide/Worker/Vendor, Students All the informants were selected on A1, A2 and A3 group classifying into male/female, literate/illiterate when possible. A1 belongs to the age between 15-30, A2 belongs to 31-55 and A3 belongs to 56 and above. Figure 1.1 shows the brief information about the informants.

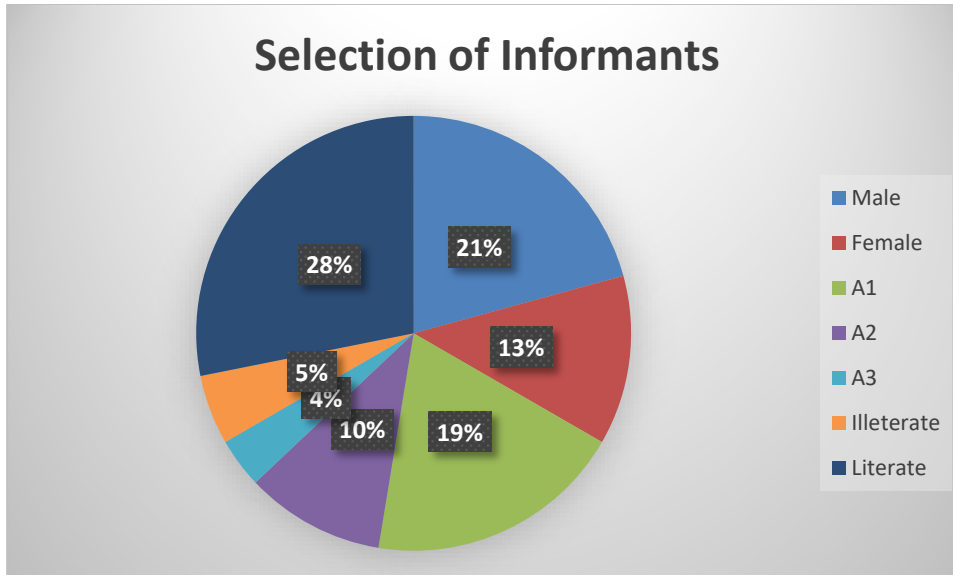


Figure 1.1: Selection of informants

B. Data Collection:

The primary data was collected with the help of questionnaire and recording FGD and interviews. Questionnaire was used for language use and attitudes and FGD and interview for sociolinguistic analysis of language contact in Sherpa. The source of data was based on researcher's informal field study like social talking, business talking, debate and conversations etc. rather than written sources. The secondary data were collected from different libraries and sources available.

4. Patterns of Language Shift in Sherpa

This section mainly deals with the trends of language shift focusing on the diverse domains of language use and attitudes among the Sherpa language speakers living in Kathmandu valley. The researchers administered altogether 45 questionnaires in different 5 focal areas of Kathmandu valley including some FGD and informal interviews. The patterns of language shift observed in the Sherpa speech community are discussed in the following sub-sections:

4.1. Informal situations

Informal situations are those situations in which people do various activities informally without being conscious and caring about the outer community. The informal situations in this speech community comprises two types of activities: behavioral and personal. They are briefly discussed as follows:

(a) Behavioral activities:

Behavioral activities in this research means those activities which indicate the different psychological behavior of the informants. They include the activities like making friends,

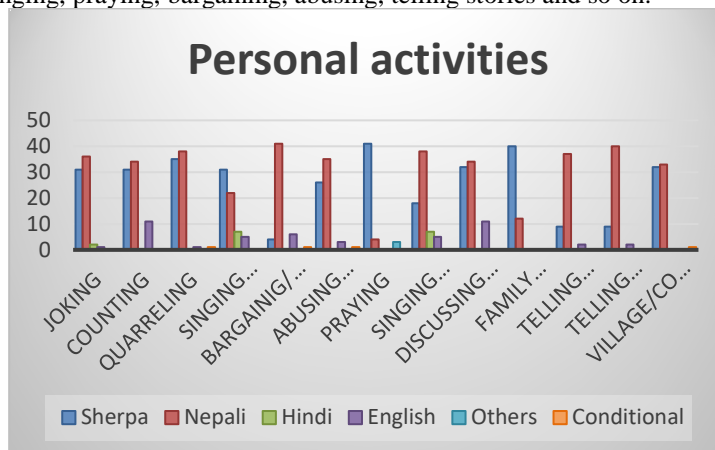
different reading and writing activities, making telephone calls, talking with different people, shopping, passing exams and so on. The patterns of language use in different behavioral activities are presented in table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Patterns of language use in behavioral activities (N=45)

	Activities	Languages					
		Sherpa	Nepali	English	Hindi	Others	Conditional
1.	Making friends	57.77%	84.44%	28.88%	11.11%	8.88%	6.66%
2.	Shopping	6.66%	100%	13.33%	4.44%	4.445	2.22%
3.	Making telephone calls	66.66%	95.55%	20%	4.44%	-	-
4.	Talking with workers	20%	93.33%	17.77%	4.44%	6.66%	-
5.	Talking with teachers/ professors	6.66%	73.33%	28.88%	2.22%	-	2.22%
6.	Talking with academicians	11.11%	80%	26.66%	2.22%	4.44%	2.22%
7.	Getting a job	2.22%	64.44%	35.55%	-	2.22%	2.22%
8.	Reading and writing	2.22%	77.77%	46.66%	-	4.44%	-
9.	Passing exams	4.44%	55.55%	44.44%	-	-	-

Table 1.3 shows that Sherpa use Nepali language highly in almost all the behavioral activities rather than their mother tongue and other languages. The use of Sherpa is highly influential in making friends and making telephone calls while English is used much in reading and writing, passing exams. One important notice that we can see the use of Nepali by 100% dependences in shopping. Hindi language is not very important among Sherpa in these activities.

(a) Personal activities: Personal activities in this research means those activities which are connected to the personal and interpersonal activities of the informants. They include activities like joking, singing, praying, bargaining, abusing, telling stories and so on.



(b) Figure 1.2: Personal activities

Figure 1.2 shows that that Sherpa and Nepali languages are used in most of the domains in comparison to Hindi, English and others. The influence of English is much higher than that of Hindi because of education, globalization and tourism connected to Sherpa people.

4.2. Family and Friends

Family and friends indicate those all the people who are related to culture and day to day activities with whom we share our feelings and opinions through language. In Maithili speaking community living in Kathmandu valley, different pattern of language use can be observed.

Table 1.4 demonstrates the use of various languages among Sherpa mother tongue speakers while communicating with family and friends.

Table 1.4: Patterns of language use in family and friends(N=45)

persons		Languages				
		Sherpa	More Sherpa Less Nepali	More Nepali less Sherpa	Nepali	Nepali and English
1.	Father	38	2	4	2	-
2.	Mother	38	2	4	2	-
3.	Brother/ Sister	32	4	6	3	-
4.	Spouse	25	3	2	3	-
5.	Friends at home	15	11	12	6	1
6.	Friends outside	2	17	2	18	6
7.	Neighbours at home	5	11	5	24	-
8.	Neighbours outside	3	14	1	27	-

Field study 2016

4.3 Religious and Cultural Activities

Religious and cultural activities are those which are observed and performed by Sherpa people in order to show and preserve their religious and cultural values. These activities include birth ceremonies, marriage ceremonies and religious and cultural festivals.

The Sherpa community in the Kathmandu Valley presents a different pattern of use of mother tongue and Nepali in different activities related to culture and religion. Figure 1.3 presents the pattern of language use in different cultural and religious festivals and ceremonies. In this community, Nepali is noticeably used in cultural programs and festivals. English is also used in religious festivals; however, it is not significant at all.

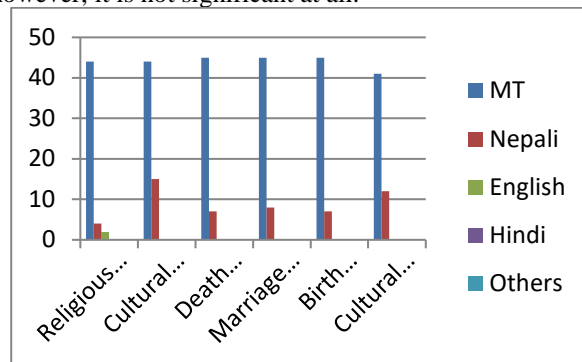


Figure 1.3: Religious and cultural festivals and ceremonies

The figure shows the high frequency of Sherpa language and its use in various religious and cultural activities where we could observe that the shifting of Nepali language is moving high in cultural programs and festivals rather than other activities.

4.4. Official and Public Activities

The Sherpas in the Kathmandu valley present an interesting pattern of languages use in the domains of official and public domains like office and workplace, political and social gathering, fun fair and public activities, administration and with strangers. Table 1.5 presents the pattern of language use in domains of official and public domains.

Table 1.5: Patterns of language use in official and public domains (N=45)

	Situations	Language use			
		Sherpa	Nepali	English	Hindi
1.	Office/ Workplace	7(15.5%)	35(7.8%)	15(33.3%)	8(17.8%)
2.	Political/ Social gathering	1(2.2%)	33(7.3%)	5(11.1%)	-
3.	Public activities/ Fun fair	10(22.22%)	32(7.1%)	6(12.33%)	2 (4.4%)
4.	Administration	-	42(93.3%)	4(8.9%)	-
5.	Strangers	1(2.22%)	43(95.5%)	7(15.5%)	2(4.4%)

Table 1.5 shows the use of multiple languages and multiple activities. Nepali and English are dominantly used in almost all the official and public activities. Sherpa is not very much used in these domains because of its use and impact. Both Nepali and English are official as well as contact languages for national and international relations.

4.5. Language Use in Media Related Activities

The community also presents an interesting pattern of language use in the domains media related activities. Such activities include watching movies and serial in TV, watching news, listening news and programs in radio, reading newspaper, reading horoscope etc. This situation of language use among the Sherpa community in the Kathmandu Valley is clearly presented in Figure 1.4 as follows:

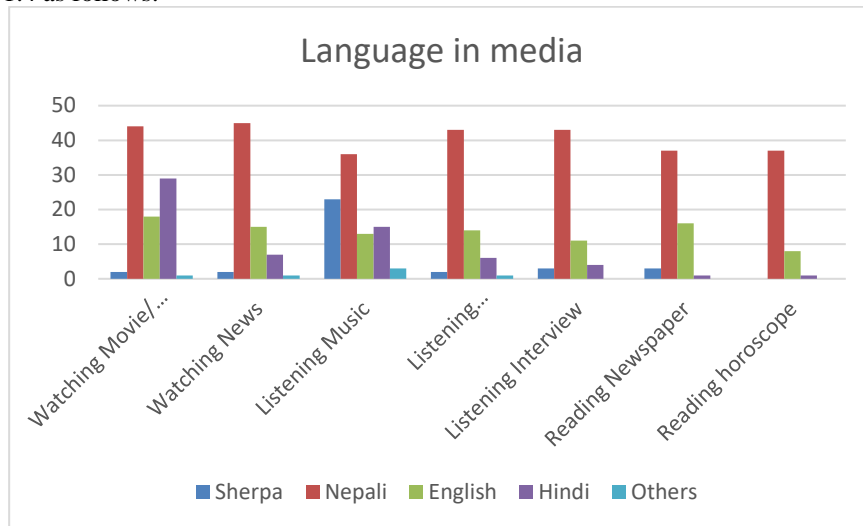


Figure 1.4: Patterns of language use in Media related activities

Figure 1.4 shows that Nepali language is dominantly used in almost all the activities related to media and entertainment. We could see the use of English and Hindi developing slowly which indicates the shifting from mother tongue in these activities.

5. Language Contact and Intergenerational Shift

Language shift is the process by which a speech community in a contact situation (i.e. consisting of bi/multilingual speakers) gradually stops using one of its two languages in favour of the other. The causal factors of language shift are generally considered to be social. This study has been focused on speakers' attitudes (both explicit and unstated) towards language and domains of language use in the community. In addition, research has focused on the effects of language shift in Nepalese context.

Language shift, sometimes referred to as language transfer or language replacement or assimilation, is the process whereby a speech community of a language shifts to speak another language, usually over an extended period of time. The language shift may have different effect on language community. There may be cultural shift along with language shift; and some different language can emerge. Language shift is one of the effects of globalization. Nepal's labour migration and market force have their effect on language shift. Nepal's labours working in different countries are acquainted with the languages used in those countries. As a result, there is language shift. There might be communication problem as well among the speakers of the same language if they are of different languages and reside in different places.

One significant concern in the study of language contact is related to how people are choosing to use one or other language/s from one generation to the next. In this regard, it would be relevant to see whether (and how far) the speakers of new generation are adopting their mother tongue or using another/additional language/s. Regarding the pattern of intergenerational shift of this kind, though all the domains of language use are not analyzed here, the domain of personal activities has been considered for a brief analysis.

Some indications of language shift can be noted in a couple of personal activities. For instance, use of Sherpa mother tongue was not found in the age group of 15-25 years in the activity of telling stories to children, singing inside and outside, though the speakers of older generations are found using Sherpa for the same activity.

More interesting is the case of language use in the activity of counting – applicable in Sherpa, In this regard, absence of the use of Sherpa is noticed at the age group of 15-25, though it is present in older generations. However, in the case of Sherpa languages, the younger generation people (15-25 years) were found using the mother tongue in all the personal activities covered by this study. Sherpa speakers living in Kathmandu use their mother tongue in the domains of cultural, religious and some of the formal situations as well. However, data indicates that the younger generation of mother tongue speakers are being gradually motivated to other 'dominant' languages under the influence of current globalization, education, migration, business and communication, and technologies and the media.

In Kathmandu Valley, language is intricately linked to the sociocultural and political transformations that we have briefly outlined above. As we know, language is transformed by and transforms changing social realities. The multilingualism in vernaculars, lingua francas, and colonial and national languages that characterize many multilingual communities is a clear product of contact. What happens to linguistic structures, practices, and values mirrors, reinforces, and sometimes changes presuppositions about social relations and social relations themselves (Silverstein 1998:223).

6. Summary

The data presented above in various questionnaires show that mother tongue is highly used in cultural and religious activities. Nepali is dominantly used in social, official, ceremonial and

media related activities. English and Hindi languages are used in media, ceremonial and official activities. The influence of English is much higher than Hindi which indicates that Sherpas are motivated towards globalization and western traditions. Sherpas have been directly involved in tourism and trekking and the contact with many foreigners motivates them towards English rather than other languages.

Towns and cities are very important factors in achieving language dominance, particularly capital cities and trade and commercial centers, towns tend to dominate the surrounding rural areas and their influence radiates out those areas. A shift in a language often brings about a shift in identity and there may be resistance to adopting a new language. The new language and the new identity may be actively promoted or persuaded. Migrated Sherpas living in the capital city have been influenced directly and indirectly by the globalization and international linkage and communication. Moreover, they have been involved in various social, cultural and ceremonial activities with the new mixed society which motivates them to shift into new target languages from the ancestral source language. In this context, this study is connected with the socio-political factors/variables where different language communities/speakers share different contexts and situations. So the multilingualism in Kathmandu valley has become an obligatory part of people living in this city. Existing political, social and economic factors contribute to language use and attitude. Nepali being the dominant language in the capital city, the lingua franca of the country and English being the international language of various purposes is becoming more valuable and influencing in Sherpa community which is the indication of language shift and endangerment.

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