

Sociolinguistic Analysis of Lexical Attrition of Pashto in Northwestern Pakistan

Maria Rehman

National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan

Salma Naz Khattak

National University of Medical Sciences, Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Hazrat Umar

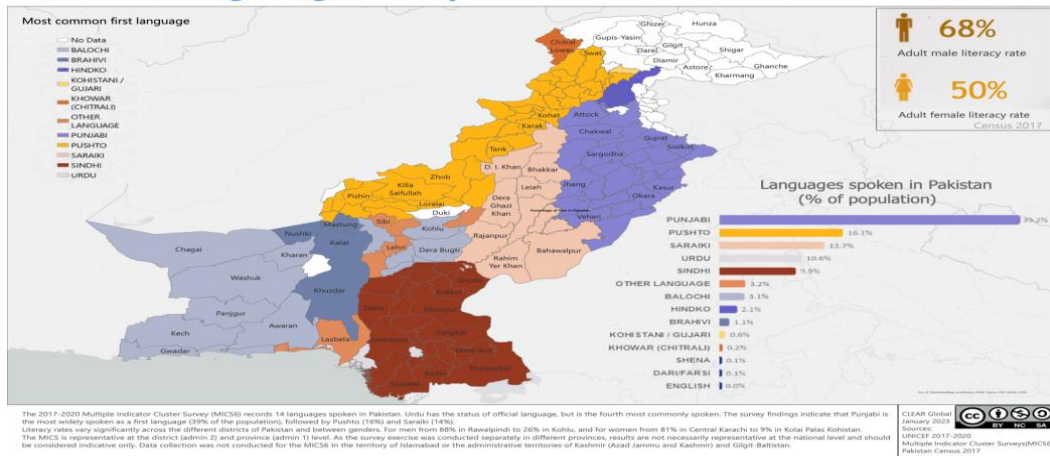
National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan

The surge of globalisation, urbanisation, and state language policies have significantly transformed linguistic hierarchies, elevating the prestige of a few dominant languages while further marginalising many others. The present study explores the sociolinguistics factors driving the lexical attrition of Pashto, a regional language spoken by the Pashtuns in northwestern Pakistan. The data for the study have been collected through questionnaires and wordlist elicitation, with additional insights from informal observations. The findings of the study indicate significant attrition in the Pashto language, with many Pashto speakers reporting reduced proficiency and usage of their native language, specifically among the younger population. The study also identifies several factors that contribute to language attrition, including exposure to the two dominant languages, Urdu (the national language) and English (the official language), the capital associated with these two dominant languages, and migration to urban areas.

Keywords: urbanisation, globalisation, lexical attrition, language loss, pashto language.

Linguistic diversity has been greatly affected by the surge in modernisation and globalisation, which has led to the decline of several regional and minority languages. Another reason of this decline of linguistic diversity is the dominance of the high prestige languages as well. This has a direct impact on an individual's L1 proficiency, which declines due to insufficient linguistic input or exposure to their mother tongue (Moorcraft & Gardener, 1987). Hegemonic languages often eclipse local or regional languages reducing their domains of use and intergenerational transmission as people adopt languages which guarantee social and technological advancement. In order to benefit from better educational and economic prospects, younger generations are increasingly reducing the use of their native tongues in favour of dominant languages. This practice poses an existential threat to many regional languages, leading to their gradual displacement. While some argue that language loss, like species extinction, is an unavoidable outcome of the constantly changing world, others contend that it is a result of social, political, and economic factors that can be challenged. This study hypothesizes that urbanisation and modernisation significantly triggers lexical attrition in Pashto language, which is further intensified due to the continued contact with the dominant languages in the region, i.e., Urdu and English. This also accelerates the phenomenon of language shift amongst the youngsters, which not only contributes to the lexical loss in the Pashto language but also acts as an early indicator of the long-term language decline. This study proposes that a person living in a bilingual environment can experience a significant decline in their L1 competence due to the frequent use and dominance of their second language.

Language map of Pakistan



(Pakistan Map 2023, 2023)

Languages typically disappear due to the extinction of their native speakers, but in Pakistan, the situation is different as the primary threat to local languages stems from the dominance of Urdu and English. The primary objective of attending English-medium schools and pursuing quality education is to secure lucrative employment and sustain a higher standard of living. It has become a widespread fallacy in Pakistan that the use of regional languages might impede community cohesion and, as a result, it might slow down overall progress. Despite being well-educated and knowledgeable, parents generally choose to prevent their children from speaking their native tongue. As a result, children mistakenly believe that English or Urdu is superior to all local languages, including Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Saraiki, and others (Nazir N. , 2019). This study attempts to explore the impact of the dominance of English and Urdu on Pashto.

Pashto is one of the major languages of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), a north-western province of Pakistan. Process of modernisation and growing urbanisation have resulted in profound sociocultural transformations within the Pashtun community, driven by improved access to education, enhanced employment opportunities, and greater exposure to other cultural influences. As a result, the Pashto language faces a number of difficulties, as the community struggles with the effects of linguistic interaction, shifting communication patterns, and the expanding influence of capitalism.

According to UNESCO (2016), due to the different sociocultural and sociopolitical factors many of the world languages are either extinct or on the verge of extinction. This alarming linguistic situation demands urgent steps to protect and preserve the endangered languages and to prevent any further linguistic loss. Keeping this in view, the present study focuses on the lexical attrition of the Pashto language in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Specifically, it investigates the gradual loss of Pashto lexical items because of the dominance of Urdu and English. This study underscores the significance of documenting and addressing language attrition to safeguard linguistic diversity and cultural heritage by examining the processes and factors contributing to lexical loss in Pashto.

The purpose of this study is to explore how urbanisation, modernisation and the inevitable influence of capitalism and nationalism impact the Pashto language. Furthermore, this study also aims to examine the factors contributing to lexical attrition in Pashto language in Northwestern Pakistan with a focus on the changing linguistic landscape and the nuanced relationship between language and societal change.

Literature Review

Krauss (1992) predicts that at least half of the 6000 languages currently spoken will disappear within the next century. Only 600 languages, or 10%, with at least 100,000 speakers in the "safe" category are protected from extinction. Around 6000 languages are spoken worldwide today, witnessing a reduction from at least 7000 languages spoken around 1500 AD. It only represents the beginning of the 15% decline in linguistic variety, with the rate increasing over the last few decades. Hundreds of languages have vanished, with many on the

verge of extinction, due to mortality of the language speakers, disrupted intergenerational transmission or due to other factors (Bernard, 1996).

Language attrition has always been a matter of significant discussion and value in multiple disciplines like “psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and sociolinguistics” (Gurel, 2004). Each of these disciplines approach the issue of language attrition with differing lens and offer distinct insights about the phenomenon. Language attrition arises from various reasons, such as sustained contact with dominant languages, the gradual erosion of a language within communities, and the loss of proficiency at the individual level “in both pathological and non-pathological settings” (Bardori-Harlig & Stringer, 2010). This gradual process occurs over a significant period in which a speaker of L1 loses linguistic competence. The signs of language loss are most significant in the form of lexical attrition. Lexical attrition is the starting point of the whole process, ultimately leading to language loss as a whole. Language loss has always been a major concern for linguists. Language loss does not happen only on the societal level but also on the “personal or familial level” (Haynes, 2010).

Language attrition, may be assumed to be linked with L2 as it is generally believed that the language learned as a second language is more prone to be lost than a native language. According to Cook (2003), language attrition is more common in bilingual speakers who prefer one language to the other. The reasons for such preference vary based on individual choices and societal norms. A lot of research has been done on the topic of lexical attrition and language loss but most of this research has looked into the matter as migration-driven attrition in the migrant communities or individual (Schmid, 2011). Intranational language attrition remains a less researched area where speakers experience lexical or language attrition even though they are still geographically rooted in the same linguistic community. In such cases, the attrition is triggered by other factors like state language policies, globalisation, nationalism, urbanisation or due to socio-economic pressures.

Pakistan is viewed both locally and internationally as a country with rich linguistic diversity. It is also known as the "Land of Many Languages" and a variety of languages, including Punjabi, Saraiki, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, Kashmiri, Hindko, Brahhui, Shina, Balti, Khowar, Dhatki, Haryanvi, Marwari, Wakhi, and Burushaski are spoken here (AGENCY, 2018). However, many regional languages are in danger of extinction in Pakistan like many other languages around the world. The issue of language attrition goes beyond the loss of the language itself. Nazir et al., (2013) point out that consistent patterns of language choice have long-term collective effects that include language maintenance and shift. Punjabi, the second most spoken language in Pakistan, is currently experiencing a decline in its number of speakers due to the influence of more dominant languages like Urdu.

Along with globalisation and modernisation, Pakistan’s state-driven nationalism has also contributed significantly to marginalising the regional languages. After independence, Urdu was selected as the national language as a symbol to reinforce national and linguistic unity; however, it was done at the cost of damaging regional languages like Pashto, Sindhi, Punjabi and many others (Rahman, 2002). Sociopolitical and socioeconomic pressures are key factors in causing speakers of different languages to switch or shift their mother tongue. Usually, they prefer adopting Urdu or English because of the utility and prestige linked with these languages (Fishman, 1991). As a result, they forego their mother tongues in this process, a process known as subtractive bilingualism, which means learning a new language at the expense of the first language. (Hornberger, 2008). Social structures, attitudes, and objectives have changed because of the rise of capitalism and the Pashtun community's subsequent integration into international markets.

Many studies have been conducted in Paksitan to observe or identify language attrition but most of these studies remain focused on the macro-level analysis like policy analysis or attitudinal surveys. There has been less focus on the empirical measurement of the language attrition across generations or regions (Rahman, 2002). Moreover, research on Pashto has primarily been centred on language policy and identity, leaving lexical attrition as a measurable linguistic phenomenon underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by comparing rural and urban speakers across generational lines. The study will significantly contribute in understanding how lexical attrition occurs in non-migrant communities due to factors like globalisation or modernisation through empirical evidence.

Research Questions

This study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level of Pashto language attrition in the younger and older populations of rural and urban areas of KPK, Pakistan?
2. What factors are responsible for the lexical loss in the Pashto language?

Method

Research Design and Procedure

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, qualitative and quantitative analysis, to investigate the underlying causes and contributing factors of language attrition in the Pashto language. Due to the exploratory nature and feasibility consideration of the research, two primary tools were employed: a vocabulary elicitation task and a structured survey. These instruments were helpful in diagnosing the patterns of lexical attrition and language use among the native Pashto speakers.

The respondents' vocabulary loss, loss of semantic distinction and reduced native linguistic performance, which are key linguistic features of language attrition, was assessed through word elicitation tasks. They were invited to complete the task either in written form or orally, depending on their preference and literacy level and they could register their response in any major Pashto dialect. Picture prompts were used to support comprehension, where it was required. The final judgments were made through consensus among three native-speaking researchers representing different dialects.

In addition to the vocabulary test, a survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire to gather insights into speakers' language choices and perceptions of language decline. The questionnaire comprised three sections: general information (demographics), language practices and choices of native Pashto speakers with 10 closed-ended items, and factors of language attrition, including two open-ended items inviting participants to reflect on perceived causes of decline in Pashto proficiency and changing attitudes toward the language. Responses to the open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively to uncover deeper sociolinguistic insights into language shift and attrition dynamics within the Pashto-speaking community.

Sampling

Six regions of KPK i.e., Bannu, Lakki Marwat, Buner (rural areas) and Peshawar, Mardan, and Newshehra (urban areas) were selected as the sample for the study. The rationale behind choosing this sample was that these areas are Pashto dominated, thereby facilitating the collection of more authentic data. Non-probability sampling techniques was employed in selecting the sample with a combination of purposive and snow-ball sampling. Personal and professional networks were used to approach the participants through direct contact on online platforms like WhatsApp. In some cases, these participants also referred others within their communities who met the study criteria. The study uses anonymized participant data. Anonymization procedures were implemented without any distortion of meaning or analytic claims.

Vocabulary Test

The vocabulary test comprised both basic and advanced vocabulary items to capture varying degrees of lexical vulnerability. Basic vocabulary (e.g., hot, throw, beautiful) consisted of high-frequency, concrete words typically acquired during early childhood and reinforced through everyday use, making them more resistant to attrition. In contrast, advanced vocabulary (e.g., aeroplane, appreciate, vision) included low-frequency and more abstract terms that are often learned through formal education or encountered in specialised discourse domains, and are therefore more susceptible to forgetting (Kopke & Schmid, 2004; Schmid, 2011). The selected vocabulary was further categorised by grammatical class, which includes nouns, verbs, and adjectives, since research suggests that verbs, in particular, tend to be more prone to attrition due to their syntactic complexity and lower activation in casual speech (De Bot & Weltens, 1991).

To reflect the sociolinguistic realities of Pakistan, each item in the test was presented in English along with its Urdu translation, as these are the dominant languages in the country. It may be noted that natives in

rural areas are more familiar with Urdu as compared to English due to less exposure while individuals in urban areas have significant exposure to both English and Urdu. That is why inclusion of Urdu provided an accessible reference point for respondents, facilitating lexical retrieval and minimising comprehension barriers. This trilingual format enabled participants to translate or recall Pashto equivalents from dominant-language cues, revealing patterns of lexical replacement, interference, or retrieval difficulty. The vocabulary test is provided in Appendix A.

The vocabulary test was taken by 60 native Pashto speakers. Out of these 60 participants, 30 were selected from the rural areas (Bannu, Lakki Marwat and Buner) and 30 were from urban areas (Peshawar, Mardan, Newshehra). Each group of 30 was further divided into two groups on the basis of age i.e., the younger group (15–40 years) and the older group (41 years and above). This stratified sampling approach allowed for providing insights into the potential effects of age and environment on lexical attrition in Pashto through comparisons across both geographical (rural vs. urban) and generational (younger vs. older) lines.

Survey

Although the sampling method was non-random, survey participants were stratified during analysis into four groups based on the demographic information provided in the questionnaire: urban younger, urban older, rural younger, and rural older. The purpose behind this was to enable meaningful comparisons across age and regional backgrounds. The survey questionnaire was distributed to a total of 200 native Pashto speakers from selected rural and urban areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. 118 respondents completed the survey out of the 200 and only these were included in the final analysis. Table 1 presents the distribution of the sample population used in the study.

Table 1
Sample of the Study

	Age Group	Demographics	No of Participants	
			Each Group	Total
Vocabulary Test	15 above and 40 below	Rural	15	60
		Urban	20	
	41 and above	Rural	10	
		Urban	15	
Survey	15 above and 40 below	Rural	40	118
		Urban	42	
	41 and above	Rural	21	
		Urban	15	

Justification of Research Procedure

Since lexical attrition is a difficult process to identify that is why mixed method research design was utilised. The quantitative tools helped in the examining the patterns and the extent of the lexical loss. Meanwhile, qualitative analysis was helpful in digging deeper in to the phenomenon to analyse the factors which contribute to the lexical loss in Pashto. According to many research scholars, lexical attrition is the first step towards language loss (De Bot & Weltens, 1999). Keeping that in mind, vocabulary elicitation task was utilised as core instrument as it allows to measure the lexical differences across speaker groups in a controlled manner and reduces subjective self-assessment that may act as a hurdle in measuring linguistic competence. The vocabulary task was further complemented by conducting a structured survey which was helpful in examining linguistic practices across different social domains. This combination of vocabulary task and survey also helped in the validation of the findings by identifying differences between linguistic practices of the different age groups with respect to their language attitudes and language performance.

Results

Vocabulary test

Lexicon and grammar are closely interconnected, as many grammatical rules are encoded within lexical items. Consequently, lexical loss can impair the application of combinatorial rules, leading to disruptions in grammatical accuracy and overall language structure (Paradis, 2004). Moreover, limited lexical access may contribute to a decline in the mental lexicon, affecting word retrieval, fluency, and grammatical processing (Köpke & Schmid, 2004).

The vocabulary test required participants to produce the correct Pashto equivalent for each vocabulary item. Their responses were considered regardless of dialectal variation, provided they reflected authentic usage. The accuracy of responses was determined through consensus among the three native Pashto speaker researchers representing different Pashto dialects. This collaborative evaluation ensured linguistic inclusivity and dialectal sensitivity in assessing lexical retention, for example, for the noun ‘garlic’, the Pashto translations ‘ooga’ and ‘ozha’ or ‘weezha’, variants from different Pashto dialects, were considered correct. The test score was calculated by taking the average percentage for each group. Table 2 presents the score of each group, and Figure 1 displays the results in a stacked bar graph.

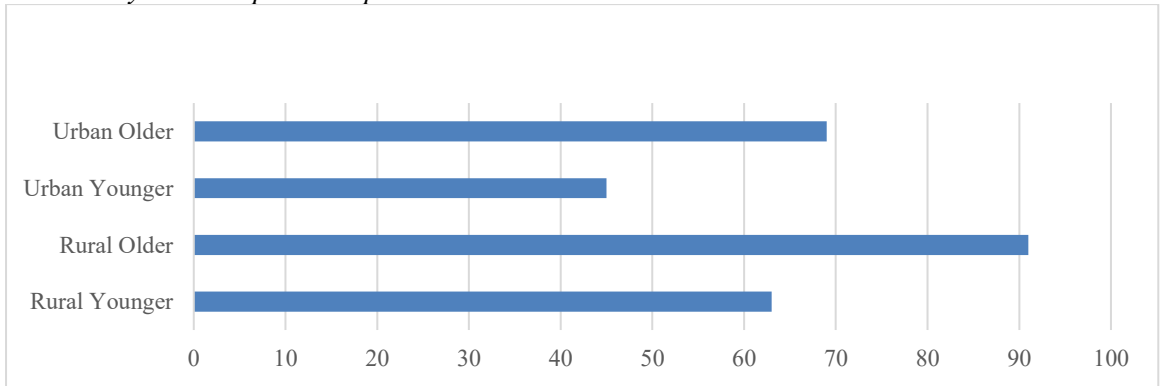
Table 2

Vocabulary Test Score

Pashto Speaker Group		Vocabulary Test Score
Rural	Younger	63%
	Older	91%
Urban	Younger	45%
	Older	69%

Figure 1

Vocabulary Test Graphical Representation



The highest score on the graph is the older rural population which demonstrates that lexical loss is lowest in this group as they are less exposed to other languages due to their location, and their major social circle is largely restricted to Pashto speakers only. The lowest performance in the vocabulary test was recorded among the urban younger population, which appear the most vulnerable group and exhibit the greatest lexical loss. There may be different reasons but apparently, this group would be soon at the helm of affairs. Interestingly, the urban older participants performed better than the rural younger participants, demonstrating the impact of other languages on the language attrition of the younger generation of the rural population probably through social and main media. The results support the argument that lexical loss arises from language shift, leading to progressive language change which, if left unaddressed, may ultimately culminate in language death.

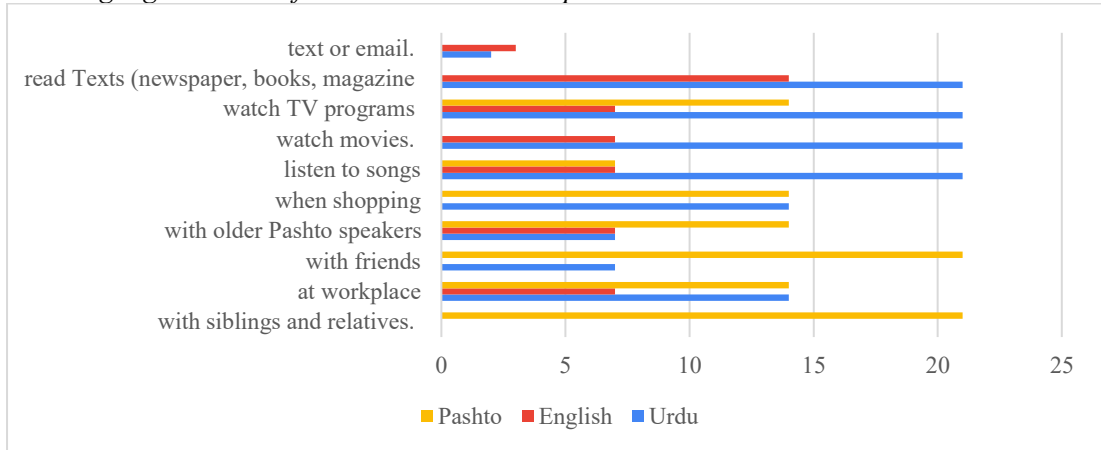
Survey

To quantify the responses obtained through the questionnaire, they are illustrated in the stacked bar graph under a separate heading for each group. In all the given four graphical charts the horizontal axis shows the number of speakers and the vertical axis shows the choice of language for different communicative purposes.

The Language Choices of the Older Rural Pashto Speakers

The quantification of the responses from the respondents of this age group is presented graphically in Figure 2. The linguistic system of these speakers was shown to be dominated mainly by English and Urdu. A general picture of the linguistic choices of these speakers can be observed in Figure 2.

Figure 2
The Language Choices of Older Rural Pashto Speakers



The graphical representation of the responses in Figure 2 clearly illustrates that Urdu and English along with Pashto are the most significant languages in the lives of the older rural generation of Pashto speakers. This group seems to prefer Pashto in most contexts due to their older age and rural living conditions both of which provide greater exposure to the Pashto language. In this group of Pashto speakers, the Pashto language is more prominent in communication with siblings, relatives, and friends. 100% of the respondents have confirmed using Pashto with siblings, relatives, and friends. Additionally, 66.6 % of the respondents primarily speak Pashto with older Pashto natives. The same percentage of the respondents use Pashto for communication while shopping in the marketplace, and prefer watching Pashto TV programs. This percentage plunges to 0% in case of reading Pashto texts or watching Pashto movies. All of the respondents also confirmed that if involved in communicative events that include communication technologies like texting or emails they preferred English or Urdu.

The Language Choices of the Younger Rural Pashto Speakers

The responses of this group were significantly different from the rural older generation, confirming the influence of age on language preferences. The graphical representation of the responses of this group is given in Figure 3.

Figure 3
The Language Choices of Younger Rural Pashto Population

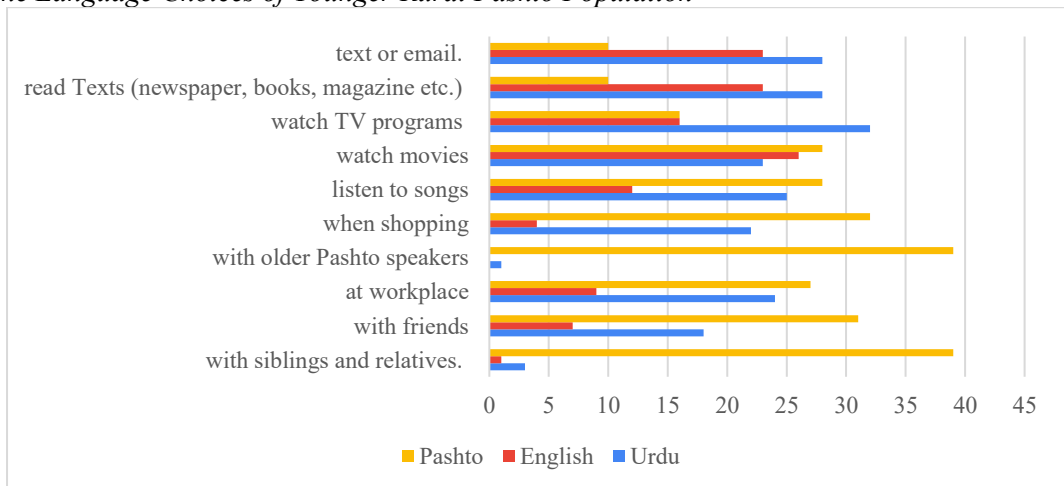


Figure 3 demonstrates that the rural younger generation of Pashto prefers to opt for Pashto in most settings. A significant number (95%) of the participants prefer using Pashto when interacting with older Pashto speakers, siblings, and relatives. Further, 82% use Pashto for shopping, and 80% choose it for communicating with friends. 67% listen to Pashto songs and watch Pashto movies and 65% use Pashto in the workplace. This

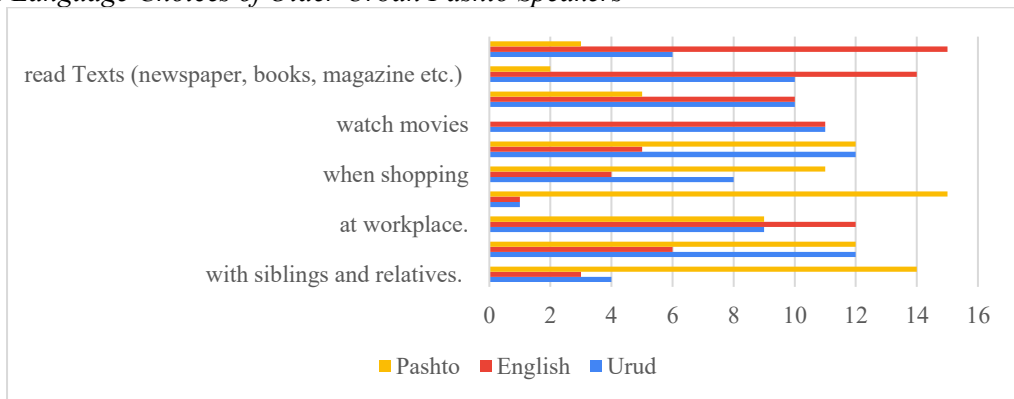
group of Pashto speakers preferred English and Urdu while watching TV programs, reading newspapers, books, and magazines, or texting and email. This group's linguistics choices indicate their preference for Pashto whenever possible, however, when other languages are chosen it is often due to the scarcity of resources in the Pashto language in TV programs, newspapers, books, and the dominance of English in communication technology.

The Language Choices of the Older Urban Pashto Speakers

This group's responses were significant for the study as these speakers live in language communities where multiple languages are commonly spoken. Despite this exposure, their responses depict their clear preference for the Pashto language. English is the second preferred language based on the overall data. The responses of the older urban population are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4

The Language Choices of Older Urban Pashto Speakers



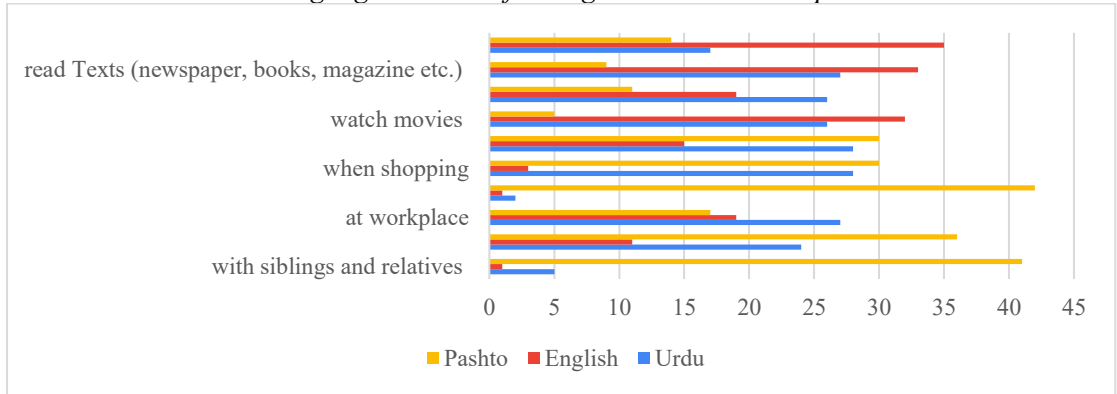
All the respondents (100%) of older urban Pashto speaker community choose Pashto to speak with older Pashto speakers and 93% prefer using it with siblings and relatives. 80% opt for Pashto to communicate with friends and listen to Pashto songs. 73% use Pashto in the market place and 60% communicate in Pashto in the workplace. From top to bottom the first three bars (watching TV programs, reading newspapers, books, magazines, or text and email) show that Pashto is not the dominant language of choice for this group. Their first preference is English followed by Urdu in such communicative events.

The Language Choices of the Younger Urban Pashto Speakers

The data obtained from this group is particularly noteworthy because younger speakers are often assumed to be more vulnerable to language attrition in Pashto. Contrary to this assumption, the survey responses did not reflect the expected level of attrition. However, the vocabulary test results challenge this pattern, as this group performed the poorest compared to all other groups. This discrepancy between self-reported responses and actual vocabulary performance highlights the need for further validation to generalize the findings. The responses of younger urban Pashto speakers are illustrated in the bar graph (Figure 5).

Figure 5

The Language Choices of Younger Pashto Urban Speakers



Like the other three groups, 100% of the respondents confirmed using the Pashto language with older Pashto speakers. 97% speak Pashto with siblings and relatives and 86% with friends. 79% listen to Pashto songs and choose to speak in Pashto when shopping. However, in the rest of the five contexts, including speaking in Pashto at the workplace, watching Pashto movies and Pashto programs, reading Pashto texts (newspaper, books, and magazines), and texting or email, English and Urdu languages dominated Pashto, with English even dominating Urdu in four of the five contexts. This shows the frequency with which the Pashto language, as a communication tool among speakers, is shrinking across the generations.

Factors Identified for Language Attrition by the Respondents

In the survey, Pashto speakers were asked to identify the factors they think contribute to the attrition of the Pashto language. The responses highlighted several factors contributing to the lexical attrition in Pashto. 55% of the participants claimed high proficiency in their native tongue, 32% categorised their proficiency level as good and 12% considered their proficiency level only sufficient enough to communicate. This shows that half of the selected native speakers lacked the confidence to rate their proficiency as very good.

The speakers cited several major reasons for the decline in their proficiency. Of the participants, 41% identified relocation as major reason for L1 decline. While 39% blamed media for using a different language other than Pashto, 33% of the respondents attributed the decline in their L1 proficiency to the absence of Pashto in the school curriculum. Additionally, they noted that their preference for speaking their peers’ language (15%), changes in household language (15%), and family changes (11%) also impacted their proficiency in Pashto. More than half (60%) of the participants mentioned that English has become a major lingua franca in the workplace communication, and Pashto is no longer taught in educational institutions as there are no job prospects associated with the Pashto language. Further, the native speakers identified that their peers avoid speaking in Pashto on public forums, as most of the people in the surroundings do not understand this language. Besides, they also feel that Pashto and its speakers are undervalued in society. In other words, it is not the preferred language for those who are status-conscious and associate prestige with the English Language. The provincial government has also not taken significant measures, particularly in the educational institutions to promote the Pashto language. Further, it does not promote the Pashto language through cultural events, broadcasting TV shows, dramas, or movies to protect it. Parents also often overlook that to use a language other than Pashto at home can lead to the language attrition over time.

The participants also mentioned that erosion of literacy skills (reading and writing) is the biggest threat to Pashto. Moreover, attrition is also caused by commercialization as people are less likely to study Pashto if it does not offer them a secure career path. The mainstream media as well as the private schools have played a pivotal role in disturbing the social fabric of the Pashto medium. The decline in hujra (social gathering forum) and the lack of a joint family system is another cause of language attrition in Pashto. People cannot understand Pashto maxims (*matalis*) because the younger generation avoids sitting with the elders. Urbanization, modernization, and materialism are also the reasons for the attrition of the Pashto language, as they keep people constantly occupied and make them unable to spend time with their families. Furthermore, the participants also

stated that the native speakers have stopped taking pride in their native language and do not associate covert prestige to it.

Discussion

The performance of the older urban Pashtun was much better as compared to both urban and rural younger Pashtuns. This indicates that younger generation is more tending towards language decay because of the major inspirations from modernization. These findings align with the existing literature as the same trends were noted by Rahman (2002) by studying how Punjabi speakers were leaving their language and internalising Urdu. According to Mansoor (2004), plurilingual societies often observe language shift because of better social and economic aspects offered by the high esteemed languages. There is a strong opposition to linguistic shift in more culturally embedded societies as social identity play important role in language perseverance (Fishman, 1991).

Language attrition in Pashto, however, must also be observed through interrelated viewpoints of nationalism and global integration. Although modernization and the impact of global languages like English substantially contribute to language shift, the institutional approval of Urdu as a manifestation of national unity has further marginalised regional languages such as Pashto. In urban environments, where Urdu and English dominate in education, media and professional interactions, younger Pashtuns feel increased pressure to comply to language standards considered more revered or financially beneficial. This explains for their relatively greater level of vocabulary loss. The lack of official endorsement for Pashto, proved by its negligible occurrence in educational courses, official setups, or media representations, deteriorate the issue further. Accordingly, the drifting away from Pashto in cities signifies not just global economic influences but also national language strategies that have prioritised Urdu over other languages.

When enquired about the language they would prioritise in different social contexts, majority of the participants (95% to 100%) leaned towards Pashto with family, relatives, friends and elders. Although, this inclination substantially dropped to 60%-82% in workplace communications. Merely the older rural population prioritised Pashto TV media, while the other Pashtun fractions liked Urdu or English TV media. The prevailing ruling existence of Urdu as national and English as international language in media industry is sidelining regional languages like Pashto. The Pashto entertainment industry lacks development because of meagre sponsorship, which eventually leads to poor production quality and lose appeal to urban and modernised Pashtun population. As a result, they prefer Urdu and English entertainment TV programmes and films. These observations resonate with research by Fishman (1991), who endorsed that the influence of dominant languages on regional language usage in media industry affects linguistic decline of the regional languages. Also, the limited use of regional languages in few avenues and its insignificance in social, economic and political requirements of routine endeavours has also caused language decay. Moreover, Hornberger (2002) emphasised that how prioritising dominant languages in formal and official settings resulted language drift and degeneration of regional languages. Spolsky (2002) also endorses this by arguing the influence of language policies on the degeneration and sidelining of regional languages.

Due to a lack of comprehension in Pashto script, all groups overwhelmingly preferred English and Urdu for emails and texts when communicating electronically. Although Pashto is quite an important component of their ethnic identity, especially when it comes to oral communication, it was not preferred in formal schooling settings and was not useful in terms of employability (Ullah, 2020). This change was exacerbated by English-focused policies in Pakistani schools, which reduced Pashto's literacy value and relegated it to oral usage (Ullah, 2020). The results of Tollefson and Tsui (2004), who address how language regulations can deprive linguistic groups of their socioeconomic rights, are in line with these observations. Urbanization (41%), underrepresentation in the media (39%), and a lack of academic activities in schools (33%) were the most common issues cited by respondents as having an impact on their Pashto proficiency. Significant reasons were also identified as the preference for speaking Pashto with peers (15%), the transition from joint to nuclear family structure (11%), and the change in family language habits from Pashto to Urdu and English (15%). The findings of Pauwels (2016), which showed that languages with little media presence are more vulnerable to attrition, are in line with Pashto's underrepresentation in the media.

According to De Houwer (2019) and Guardado (2020) peer pressure and social networks are crucial for language maintenance. Although the desire to speak Pashto with peers suggests that language use has a social component, this preference is inadequate to offset larger socioeconomic pressures. According to King et al., (2008), language transmission is greatly influenced by family language practices. Language shift is more likely when nuclear family structures replace joint family structures because there are fewer options for language transmission across generations.

According to Sardaraz (2021), lexical expressions in Pashto have their foundations in deep cultural behaviors. For instance, in Pashto language, 'the past' can be talked about as 'at the front' and the future as 'behind'. This is clearly in stark contrast to how English language would represent the concept of time. Vocabulary from more dominant languages like Urdu/English translated into Pashto would not necessarily replace the lexical expressions in Pashto but also their culturally ingrained meanings or structure. Hence, the rising incidence of lexical attrition observed in Pashto speaking regions underpins a fundamental restructuring. Once the culturally embedded indigenous lexical terms or phrases fade away because of their lack of use, the cultural background behind those terms would also cease. This would suggest a complete cultural shift or transformation. Lexical attrition can, therefore, signal a restructuring of social and cultural foundations.

Due to the nature of the current study, which examined the causes and contributing variables of language attrition in the Pashto language, the qualitative portion was quite brief, even though the survey fully addressed the research questions. This conciseness can be viewed as a limitation of the study. Nevertheless, it offers a chance for future research to conduct in-person, semi-structured interviews or focus groups to thoroughly examine the relevant field. Additionally, future research in the field may need to carefully examine additional socioeconomic characteristics, such as respondents' academic and professional backgrounds and gender.

Conclusion

Pashto language attrition and language shift are determined by urbanization, modernization, and dominant languages, indicating global patterns of language endangerment. However, language disintegration is more than just a linguistic problem; it is the loss of worldview, identity, memory, and culture. Therefore, this study has both practical and theoretical value. On an operational scale, this study emphasizes the urgent need to shift from preservation as a sentimental act to framing Pashto as a social, cultural, and economic resource for future generations. A comprehensive plan needs to be devised to save Pashto from any threat of extinction in future, for instance, providing early education to Pashtuns in Pashto, providing job opportunities for those having Pashto skills, investing resources to educate Pashtuns to take pride in their heritage language through workshops and seminars, and by offering them financial incentives such as scholarships for Pashto studies. Language in education policies promoting additive bilingualism may also allow Pashto speakers to thrive in global contexts while sustaining their heritage.

Theoretically speaking, this study expands the field of language attrition by widening its focus beyond migration contexts, which have historically been the focus of the majority of research, to intranational settings influenced by modernization, urbanization, and the predominance of national and international languages. The results reinforce the bigger debate on language shift by highlighting the intricacies of several social factors, such as acculturation, assimilation, and feelings of alienation, which accelerate attrition. Fundamentally, preserving Pashto is about rethinking cultural sustainability in a globalized world, not just about preserving a language.

References

- Pakistan Map 2023*. (2023, Feb 02). Retrieved July 02, 2024, from Translators Without Borders: <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/language-data-for-pakistan/pakistan-map-2023/>
- AGENCY, A. (2018, March 10). *Pakistan: A land of many languages*. Retrieved July 02, 2024, from Daily Sabah: <https://www.dailysabah.com/travel/2018/03/10/pakistan-a-land-of-many-languages>

- Ahmed, A., & Hafeez, M. R. (2007). Third Language through First Language-Shifting the Paradigm. *i-manager's Journal on School Educational Technology*, 3(2).
- Atifnigar, H., Safari, M. Z., & Rafat, A. H. (2021). Exploring the Causes of Language Death: A Review Paper. *International Journal of Arts and Social Science*, 180-186.
- Bardori-Harlig, K., & Stringer, D. (2010). Variables in Second Language Attrition: Advancing the State of the Art. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 32, 1-45.
- Bari, S., Ahmed, S., & Tabassum, S. (2020). Diminishing local Languages in the Era of Globalization: A Case Study of Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*.
- Bernard, H. R. (1996). Language Preservation and Publishing. In N. H. Hornberger, *Indigenous Literacies in the Americas; Language Planning from the Bottom Up*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Cook, V. J. (2003). *Effects of the Second Language on the First*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Dastgoshadeh, A., & Jalilzadeh, K. (2011). Language loss, Identity, and English as an International Language. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 659-665.
- De Bot, K., & Weltens, B. (1991). Recapitulation, regression, and language loss. In H. W. Seliger & R. M. Vago (Eds.), *First Language Attrition* (pp. 31–52). Cambridge University Press.
- De Houwer, A. (2019). *Bilingual Development in Childhood*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Multilingual Matters.
- Fuller, M. J. (2009). Teaching & learning guide for: Multilingualism in educational contexts. *Language and Linguistics Compass Teaching & Learning Guide*, 1374-1378.
- Guardado, M. (2020). *Discourse, Ideology and Heritage Language Socialization: Micro and Macro Perspectives*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- Gurel, A. (2004). Selectivity in L2-induced L1 attrition: A psycholinguistic account. *Journal of Neurolinguistics*, 17, 53-78.
- Hameed, A. (2022). Mother, Mother Tongue, and Language Endangerment Process: An Exploratory Study. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 726-735.
- Haynes, E. (2010). *Heritage Briefs*. Retrieved Feb 16, 2022, from Heritage Languages in America: <https://www.cal.org/heritage/pdfs/briefs/what-is-language-loss.pdf>
- Hornberger, N. H. (2008). *Continua of Bilinguality: An Ecological Framework for Educational Policy, Research, and Practice in Multilingual Settings*. Multilingual Matters.
- Huang, Y.-W. (2024). Language loss and translingual identities near the Navajo land. *International Journal of Language Studies*, 18(2), 113.
- King, K. A., Fogle, L., & Logan-Terry, A. (2008). Family Language Policy. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 2(5), 907-922.
- Köpke, B., & Schmid, M. S. (2004). Language attrition: The next phase. In M. S. Schmid, B. Köpke, M. Keijzer & L. Weilemar (Eds.), *First Language Attrition: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Methodological Issues* (pp. 1–43). John Benjamins.
- Krauss, M. (1992). The world's languages in crisis. *Language*, 68(1).
- Mansoor, S. (2004). The Status and Role of Regional Languages in Higher Education in Pakistan. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25(4), 333–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630408666536>
- Moorcraft, R., & Gardener, R. (1987). Linguistic Factors in Language Loss. *Language Learning*, 327-340.
- Nazir, B., Aftab, U., & Saeed, A. (2013). Language Shift – The Case of Punjabi in Sargodha Region of Pakistan. *Acta Linguistica Asiatica*, 41-60.
- Nazir, N. (2019, May 3). *Local Languages of Pakistan on the Verge of Extinction*. Retrieved from UMT BLOGS: <https://blogs.umt.edu.pk/blog/local-languages-of-pakistan-on-the-verge-of-extinction/>
- Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity, and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 409-427.
- Nuwer, R. (2014, June 5th). *Languages: Why we must save dying tongues*. Retrieved from BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20140606-why-we-must-save-dying-languages>
- Paradis, M. (2004). *A Neurolinguistic Theory of Bilingualism*. John Benjamins.
- Pauwels, A. (2016). *Language Maintenance and Shift*. Cambridge University Press.

- Rahman, T. (2002). *Language, ideology and power: Language learning among the Muslims of Pakistan and North India*. Oxford University Press.
- Riaz, M., Gill, A., & Shahbaz, S. (2021). Language Attrition and its Impact on Culture – A Case of Saraiki in Dera Ghazi Khan. *Global Language Review*, 56-64.
- Sardaraz, K.(2021) ‘Conceptualization of time in Pashto language’, *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, 15(4). Available at: <https://ojs.sbbwu.edu.pk/fwu-journal/index.php/ojss/article/view/699>
- Schmid, M. (2011). *Language Attrition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spolsky, B. (2022). *Language Policy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tollefson, J. W., & Tsui, A. B. M. (Eds.). (2004). *Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ullah, I. (2020). *The Impact of Language Policy on Language Shift and Language Loss: A Study of Pashto in Pakistan*. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 41(1), 45-57.
- UNESCO. (2016, July 7). *Towards World Atlas of Languages*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/towards-world-atlas-languages>
- Unganer, T. (2014). First language loss; why should we care? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 351-355.
- Tollefson, J. W., & Tsui, A. B. M. (Eds.). (2004). *Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

APPENDIX A
VOCABULARY TEST

Respondent Name _____ (Optional)
Age: 16-40 41 & Above
Residing Area: Rural Urban

	Basic Vocabulary			Advanced Vocabulary		
	English	Urdu	Pashto	English	Urdu	Pashto
Noun	Corner	گوشه		threat	دھمکی	
	Smoke	دھواں		Nomads	بدوش خانہ	
	thorn	کانٹا		riddle	پہیلی	
	arrival	آمد		vision	بینائی	
	garlic	لہسن		aeroplane	ہوائی جہاز	
Verbs	Throw	پھینکنا		appreciate	کرنا تعریف	
	steal	کرنا چوری		germinate	اگانا	
	insult	کرنا توہین		Dig	کھودنا	
	escape	ھونا فرار		plough	چلنا ھل ہ	
	shout	چیخنا		hope	کرنا امید	
Adjectives	Beautiful	خوبصورت		Direct	براہ راست	
	Hot	گرم		Brave	بہادر	
	Ugly	بدصورت		Twenty-Three	تئیس	
	long	طویل		Host	میزبان	
	under	نیچے		Talkative	باتونی	