

Exploring Linguistic and Cultural Ideologies: Urdu's Acceptance in Islamabad's Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri Communities

Rizwan Ahmad¹, Roshan Jadoon², Zeeshan Ahmad³, Wasifa Khan⁴, Ameer ul Mulk⁵

Abstract

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Pakistan is a linguistically and culturally diverse nation in which Urdu functions as a central unifying language among numerous ethnic groups. However, the degree to which Urdu is accepted as an official and national language varies across communities, largely due to the linguistic and cultural ideologies held by Pashtuns, Punjabis, and Kashmiris residing in Islamabad. This qualitative study explores how such ideologies shape attitudes toward Urdu's official status. Using language ideology as the guiding theoretical framework, data were collected from thirty participants—ten from each community—through purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews. The findings reaffirm Urdu's significant role as a symbol of national cohesion, yet also reveal concerns regarding the marginalisation of regional languages within media, education, and public discourse. The results underscore the need for more inclusive and culturally sensitive language policies that safeguard Pakistan's multilingual heritage and promote equitable linguistic representation.

Keywords: Linguistics ideologies, Culture ideologies, Multilingualism, National language, Official language, ethnic groups



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¹ MPhil Scholar, COMSAT University, Islamabad

² MPhil Scholar, COMSAT University, Islamabad

³ MPhil Scholar, COMSAT University, Islamabad

⁴ MPhil Scholar, COMSAT University, Islamabad

⁵ MPhil Scholar, COMSAT University, Islamabad

INTRODUCTION

Islamabad, Pakistan's federal capital, stands as a testament to the country's remarkable linguistic and cultural diversity. Situated against the scenic backdrop of the Margalla Hills, the city functions as a multicultural and multilingual hub where various ethnicities, languages, and identities interact daily. Among these groups, the Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri communities hold prominent cultural significance. Each possesses distinct linguistic traditions, cultural values, and historical experiences that shape their perspectives on Urdu's role as the national and official language.

The Pashtun community, originating primarily from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, considers Pashto not merely a means of communication but a central cultural symbol closely tied to its history and collective identity. Although many Pashtuns are proficient in Urdu, their acceptance of it as an official language is filtered through longstanding cultural ideologies and strong ethnic pride.

Similarly, native Punjabi speakers—the largest ethnolinguistic group in Pakistan—attach considerable importance to Punjabi as a marker of cultural heritage and ancestral lineage. Despite their fluency in Urdu and its widespread use in education and administration, many Punjabis continue to view their mother tongue as an essential repository of cultural meaning.

The Kashmiri community, originating from the historically contested region of Kashmir, maintains distinct linguistic practices centred on the Kashmiri and Pahari languages. Their perceptions of Urdu are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and cultural factors that influence how they negotiate identity within a multilingual context such as Islamabad.

Understanding whether these communities support or resist Urdu's designation as the national language requires a deeper investigation into their linguistic ideologies and cultural beliefs. Examining these attitudes not only sheds light on language acceptance patterns but also contributes to broader discussions on identity, nationalism, and linguistic pluralism in Pakistan.

Historical Context of Language Ideologies in Pakistan

Understanding contemporary language ideologies in Pakistan requires an appreciation of their historical roots. When Pakistan was established in 1947, Urdu was declared the national language—a decision shaped by the linguistic politics of pre-partition India. Urdu had come to symbolise Muslim identity, unity, and cultural distinction, and leaders viewed it as a force capable of integrating diverse Muslim-majority regions. However, this decision was met with resistance from groups with strong regional identities, most notably in East Pakistan.

The imposition of Urdu led to political unrest, particularly the Bengali Language Movement, which demanded recognition of Bengali as a national language. These developments eventually contributed to a federal language policy embedded in the 1973 Constitution, recognising the importance of regional languages while still maintaining Urdu's national status.

Although Urdu functions as the official language across government, education, and media, linguistic attitudes continue to differ across regions and communities. In Islamabad—where Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri populations coexist—these ideological tensions shape perceptions

of Urdu's legitimacy, symbolic power, and cultural relevance. Examining Urdu's acceptance in this context therefore reveals ongoing negotiations between national identity and regional linguistic heritage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islamabad's linguistic landscape reflects Pakistan's broader multilingual character. The city hosts communities such as Pashtuns, Punjabis, and Kashmiris, each of whom maintains strong cultural and linguistic attachments. While Urdu and English dominate national institutions, regional languages continue to play critical roles in identity formation and community cohesion.

A growing body of scholarship examines language ideologies, linguistic hierarchies, and identity politics in Pakistan. Khan and Zaki (2022), employing Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis, demonstrate how national education policy documents from 2000–2020 marginalise indigenous languages in favour of Urdu and English. Their findings highlight a monoglossic orientation that privileges national and global languages over regional linguistic diversity.

Ansari et al. (2016) investigate communication practices within Pakistani universities, illustrating how English, Urdu, and regional languages interact within academic spaces. Their findings reveal complex sociolinguistic dynamics shaped by class, institutional culture, and language socialisation, underscoring the importance of nuanced language policies in multilingual environments.

Syed (2019) explores Urdu's influence on Pakistani English, documenting how lexical borrowing, code-switching, and neologism formation reflect processes of cultural integration. His findings align with earlier scholarship emphasising Urdu's symbolic power in shaping linguistic norms across Pakistan.

Studies on Pakistan's linguistic landscape (Jamil & Kausar, 2021; Afzal et al., 2022) highlight the dominance of Urdu and English in public signage, often at the expense of regional language visibility. These works reveal how linguistic hierarchies manifest in public spaces, reflecting deeper ideological preferences and institutional priorities.

Research on linguistic imperialism (Saeed et al., 2023; Ali Khan, 2023; Sadiq, 2015) demonstrates how the prestige associated with English has reshaped linguistic attitudes across Pakistan, sometimes undermining the status of Urdu and regional languages. These scholars argue that linguistic inequalities are embedded within educational, social, and economic systems.

Studies on constitutional and media ideologies (Jabeen & Shehzad, 2018; J. Syed, 2008) highlight how linguistic narratives within policy and media reshape identity, power, and cultural representation. These works show that dominant ideologies often overshadow minority cultures while reinforcing nationalistic discourse.

Research on language shift (Ibrahim, n.d.; Abbasi, 2021) documents how younger generations increasingly prefer Urdu and English in urban areas, contributing to the gradual erosion of local

languages despite persistent cultural attachments. These shifts reflect broader trends of urbanisation, class mobility, and changing linguistic aspirations.

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that while Urdu remains essential for national cohesion, regional languages embody cultural identity and heritage. Despite extensive research on linguistic diversity in Pakistan, limited scholarship examines how Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri communities in Islamabad negotiate competing language ideologies—highlighting the need for the present study.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do linguistic ideologies impact the acceptance of Urdu as the official language among the Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri communities residing in Islamabad, Pakistan?
2. How do cultural ideologies impact the acceptance of Urdu as the official language among the Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri communities residing in Islamabad, Pakistan?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study employs purposive sampling to gather rich, contextually grounded insights from thirty participants representing Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri communities in Islamabad. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed accounts of participants' experiences, language attitudes, and perceptions of Urdu's official role. Guided by language ideology as the primary theoretical framework, the study examines how beliefs about identity, status, and cultural belonging influence acceptance of Urdu. This framework enables a critical understanding of how linguistic practices intersect with power, history, and social hierarchy. Thematic analysis was used to code and interpret interview data, facilitating the identification of recurring patterns, emerging themes, and cross-community comparisons.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Punjabi Community

1. *Theme: Recognition of Urdu as the national language but an acknowledgement of the importance of Punjabi at home.*

According to most Punjabi participants, recognising Urdu as the national language does not diminish the significance of Punjabi in their daily lives. Participants appreciated Urdu's utility in educational and official domains, acknowledging that it facilitates wider communication. However, they emphasised that Punjabi remains deeply valued in familial contexts, where it enables emotional expression and cultural continuity. Participant 1 stated: "Urdu as a national language doesn't overshadow Punjabi. As Urdu is the national language, we use it mostly at our educational institutes, but at home, we use our native language, Punjabi."

2. *Recognition of societal attitudes towards the Punjabi language and its perceived stigma.*

While Urdu serves as the national language, it does not eliminate the cultural value of Punjabi. Participants highlighted that multilingualism is a strength, as Punjabi connects individuals to their

historical and cultural roots. However, several noted a prevailing stigma, where Punjabi is sometimes associated with backwardness or lack of refinement. This perception has contributed to hesitation among speakers in publicly using their mother tongue. Participant 4 observed: "It doesn't matter if Urdu overshadows Punjabi or not, as most Punjabis themselves don't own their language because they feel shameful of owning it as they associate it with backwardness and being uncivilised... we must contribute to celebrating this lovely language and safeguard its prosperity for future generations."

3. Theme: acceptance of Urdu in educational settings for its accessibility to diverse cultures.

Participants expressed acceptance of Urdu as the medium of instruction, noting its widespread comprehension and practical role in promoting accessibility among diverse student groups. At the same time, they stressed the importance of establishing dedicated platforms to promote Punjabi culture and language. This dual perspective reflects an understanding of Urdu's functional necessity and the cultural imperative of preserving Punjabi heritage. Participant 4 remarked: "It's good that Urdu is shown as the medium of instruction... but still there should be channels especially for cultural influences, where Punjabi language and culture should be the central mainstream."

4. Theme: Reluctance among Punjabi youth in Islamabad to use Punjabi due to societal pressures and a lack of confidence.

A recurring theme among participants was the reluctance of Punjabi youth in Islamabad to use Punjabi, even among fellow speakers. This pattern indicates the influence of societal pressures, urban social norms, and concerns about perceived prestige. Participant 8 stated: "I only use Urdu with my parents most of the time; even my friends who are Punjabi don't feel confident or comfortable enough to speak Punjabi here in Islamabad." This reflects an emerging linguistic shift linked to identity negotiation in urban spaces.

5. Theme: Desire for multilingual education to promote cultural diversity and inclusivity.

Punjabi participants expressed strong support for multilingual education as a means of promoting inclusivity and cultural recognition. They argued that an education system reflecting Pakistan's linguistic diversity would validate all communities, including minority groups. Participant 7 expressed: "I anticipate providing multilingual education to students in the future, to promote all minor cultures."

6. Theme: Advocacy for multilingual policies to raise awareness about the importance of preserving Punjabi language and culture.

Participants widely supported the introduction of multilingual policies aimed at raising awareness regarding cultural and linguistic heritage. They argued that education and policy-driven initiatives are essential for preserving linguistic diversity. Participant 10 stated: "I think there should be multilingual policies or programmes to educate people regarding the importance of their language and culture." Such perspectives highlight a desire for institutional recognition of Punjabi identity.

Pashtun community

1. Theme: Recognition of Urdu's unifying role but concern about its marginalisation of Pashto and other regional languages.

Participants acknowledged Urdu's historical and functional role as a unifying language across Pakistan. However, they expressed concerns that insufficient governmental initiatives for regional languages contribute to the marginalisation of Pashto and other linguistic identities. Participant 3 noted: "Urdu is a symbol of national unity because it's a common medium of communication..."

however, the lack of initiatives by the government to promote regional languages has significantly resulted in the overshadowing and marginalisation of different ethnicities.”

2. Theme: The enduring fondness and embrace of the Pashtun language among the community remain persistent, unaffected by the acknowledgement of Urdu as the official language.

This theme highlights the strong emotional, cultural, and historical connection Pashtuns maintain with their language. Participants emphasised that Urdu’s official status does not weaken their pride or loyalty to Pashto. Participant 8 stated: “We own our language profoundly, no matter where we are. Whenever we see someone from our community, we immediately shift to our language. Indeed, Pashto is our pride and prestige.” This illustrates the resilience of linguistic identity within the Pashtun community.

3. Theme: Positive changes in Pashto language attitudes attributed to interaction with diverse speakers.

Exposure to Islamabad’s multilingual environment has contributed to linguistic adaptability among Pashto speakers. Participants described how living in a culturally diverse city enabled them to broaden their communicative practices while also reinforcing awareness of dialectal and regional variations within Pashto. Participant 5 explained the linguistic shifts they observed in themselves after long-term exposure to speakers from different provinces.

4. Theme: Distorted Depictions of Pashtun Culture in Mainstream Media

Participants expressed concern regarding the misrepresentation of Pashtuns in Urdu-language mainstream media, where portrayals often depict stereotypes such as aggression or lack of education. Such portrayals contribute to cultural marginalisation and inaccurate public perceptions. Participant 9 noted: “Being a Pashtun, our culture is not represented well in mainstream media... Pashtuns are always shown as aggressive, uneducated... However, some educational institutions have contributed to promoting Pashtun culture.”

5. Theme: Advocacy for the Preservation of Pashto Culture

Participants highlighted the importance of preserving Pashto language and culture through community education and multilingual awareness. They emphasised that safeguarding Pashto requires countering societal pressures and promoting positive linguistic identities. Participant 3 expressed concern for both preservation and promotion, describing Pashto as an integral component of cultural belonging.

6. Theme: Desire for inclusive language policies supporting regional languages alongside Urdu and English in Islamabad.

Participants expressed hope for the implementation of inclusive language policies in Islamabad that support regional languages alongside Urdu and English. They viewed such policies as crucial for recognising linguistic diversity and ensuring equitable representation in public and institutional spaces. Participant 2 expressed optimism regarding future policy reforms.

Kashmiri Community

1. Theme: Urdu as a Symbol of Unity and Cultural Exchange

Participants described Urdu as a cohesive national language that facilitates communication among Pakistan’s diverse linguistic communities. They noted that while Urdu enables interethnic understanding, it does not diminish the cultural identities tied to regional languages. Participant 4 stated: “Pakistan has rich linguistic diversity... Urdu is just a mode of communication among different ethnicities.”

2. ***Theme: Marginalisation of Kashmiri Culture and Language in Urdu-Dominant Media***

Participants highlighted the underrepresentation of Kashmiri language and culture in Urdu-dominated media platforms. Despite Urdu's widespread use, they noted a significant lack of content that reflects Kashmir's cultural heritage. Participant 6 emphasised that Kashmiri culture remains largely invisible in media portrayals, even when other regional cultures receive some representation.

3. ***Theme: Neglect of Pahari Language in Islamabad***

Participants noted that Pahari is seldom used or acknowledged in Islamabad's public interactions, resulting in ongoing linguistic marginalisation. They expressed concern over the absence of institutional efforts to promote or preserve the language. Participant 7 commented that even local speakers do not actively engage in preservation efforts.

4. ***Theme: Language Dynamics and Comfort in Multilingual Interaction***

Participants described how multilingual contexts influence their language choices, with Urdu used most frequently for comfort and convenience. Even when interacting with other Kashmiris, some noted that Urdu feels more natural in urban environments. Participant 8 shared: "While living in Islamabad... I use Urdu because I feel comfortable talking in Urdu." This highlights the interplay between linguistic environment and personal preference.

5. ***Theme: Shift from Pahari to Urdu: Influence of Social Class and Media***

Participants reported a visible shift among Kashmiri communities from Pahari to Urdu, largely driven by class aspirations and media exposure. They viewed this shift as reflective of broader sociolinguistic transitions within urban Pakistan. Participant 9 attributed the shift primarily to socioeconomic mobility and changing cultural norms.

6. ***Theme: Absence of Language Promotion Policies in Islamabad***

Participants noted a lack of policy initiatives aimed at supporting linguistic diversity in Islamabad. They expressed concerns that without institutional support, minority languages may continue to decline. Participant 3 stated that they were unaware of any existing or forthcoming language-promotion policies.

Recommendation

Considering the multifarious ethnic composition of Islamabad, encompassing Pashtuns, Punjabis, and Kashmiris/Paharis, the following amended recommendations are proposed:

Policy Advocacy

This proposal aims to advocate for the establishment and execution of comprehensive language promotion policies in Islamabad that acknowledge and endorse the linguistic variety of all ethnic groups. These policies should encompass the safeguarding and advancement of languages such as Pashto, Punjabi, and Kashmiri/Pahari.

Community Engagement

Foster community-led activities among diverse ethnic groups to promote the use of their unique languages and cultures. These initiatives may include language classes, cultural festivals, and media campaigns, which serve to enhance awareness and cultivate a sense of pride in linguistic heritage.

Educational Initiatives

Implement language programmes for Pashto, Punjabi, and Kashmiri/Pahari in educational institutions in Islamabad, offering pupils from a young age the chance to acquire and develop an understanding of these languages.

Media Representation

Promote the inclusion of a wider range of media representation that faithfully represents the linguistic and cultural diversity of Islamabad. This includes ensuring that major media platforms authentically depict Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri/Pahari cultures and languages.

Research and Documentation

Assist in research and documentation endeavours aimed at safeguarding the linguistic and cultural legacy of the Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri/Pahari people in Islamabad. This includes the documentation of oral histories, literary works, and customary rituals.

Promotion of Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Facilitate the establishment of collaborative efforts among linguists, educators, policymakers, community leaders, and media professionals hailing from Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri/Pahari backgrounds. The objective is to devise comprehensive strategies aimed at the promotion and preservation of their respective languages and cultures within the context of Islamabad.

Enhancing Capacity

Offer assistance and resources to local organisations and community groups who advocate for the Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri/Pahari communities in their endeavours to promote and preserve their languages. This assistance may include the provision of training programmes, financing possibilities, and networking events.

Public awareness campaigns should be initiated to commemorate the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri/Pahari communities in Islamabad. These campaigns should emphasise the significance of safeguarding and advancing their languages and cultures, to enhance the social fabric of the city.

These ideas seek to promote inclusivity and appreciation for the linguistic diversity of Islamabad by taking into account the needs and viewpoints of the Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri/Pahari groups.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reaffirm Urdu's critical role as a unifying national language while also highlighting the persistent marginalisation of regional languages such as Pashto, Punjabi, and Pahari/Kashmiri within Islamabad's media, educational institutions, and official domains. Participants frequently expressed appreciation for Urdu's communicative utility, yet also voiced concerns regarding diminishing cultural representation and language shift within their communities.

The research demonstrates that linguistic acceptance is shaped by factors such as historical identity, socioeconomic class, media portrayal, and political context. It underscores the urgent need for inclusive and equitable language policies that safeguard Pakistan's linguistic diversity while respecting the cultural rights of minority groups.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that Pashtun, Punjabi, and Kashmiri communities negotiate Urdu's dominance differently—affirming national unity on one hand while resisting cultural erasure on the other. This dynamic highlights the importance of multilingual policy development, community engagement, and institutional reform aimed at sustaining linguistic heritage in urban, multicultural spaces such as Islamabad.

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