MEGA INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Journal of Arts and Linguistics Studies
ISSN Print 2959-0957 ISSN Online 2959-0965
Volume 4 Issue 1 2026
Pages 253-263
Open Access

Language Displacement and the Status of Urdu in Baloch-Dominated Areas of Balochistan, Pakistan

Publication Details
Paper Received:
November 29, 2025
Paper Accepted:
Janurary 28, 2026
Paper Published:
Janurary 30, 2026

Dr. Durdana Khosa
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Humanities
Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University, Quetta, Pakistan

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.71281/jals.v4i1.617

Abstract
This study investigates the status and use of Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, amidst the regional conflict in Mastung and Kalat, the Baloch majority areas of Balochistan. The study used an exploratory mixed-method approach to achieve its objective of observing language patterns within Baloch and Brahvi communities across familial, social, commercial, and institutional contexts. To answer the research questions, a sample of 100 participants (50 educated and 50 uneducated) were asked to fill a questionnaire. Furthermore, 20 semi-structured ethnographic interviews and participant and non-participant observations in classroom and market settings were also conducted. The study reveals Brahvi has replaced Urdu as the main language in the places where Baloch reside. People from all walks of life (home, school, public) choose to speak Brahvi. The study shows that the limited usage of Urdu is not chiefly caused by anti-Urdu sentiment but by growing preference for Brahvi and Balochi as emblems of regional identity, further intensified by the on-going fifth insurgency in Balochistan. The research also highlights how Punjabi community left Mastung and Kalat after targeted killings, which eliminated the presence of historically significant Punjabi and Urdu-speaking business community and made the national language even less used. The study suggests a new language policy that supports and takes into account regional languages together with Urdu.

Keywords: language displacement lingua franca, Urdu, Brahvi, Baloch, Balochistan, insurgency, language domains, language policy, Pakistan

Published by MIARD. Copyright: © the author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY NC) license (https:// creativecommons.org/licenses/by/ 4.0/).

1. Introduction

Language is seldom a politically neutral concept. In multi-ethnic states, establishing a national language and favouring certain languages in administration, education, and public life greatly influences inter-group exchanges, minority grievances, and the status of regional languages. After independence, Pakistan declared Urdu the national language and English was made the official language which caused incessant problems for Pakistan. For instance, the Bengali language struggle in 1952, the Sindhi language upheaval in the 1970s, and the ethnic issues in Balochistan at present.

Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province by area which has been in conflict with the state of Pakistan since the country's inception. The language situation there is also problematic, as it is home to various ethnic groups each claiming there right to the resources of the province. There are three main ethnic groups: Baloch, the Pashtun, and the Brahvi who have been living together since ages. There are also smaller groups of people who also speak three or more languages. The disputes in Balochistan aren't mostly about language rights, compared to Bengali or Sindhi language movements. In contrast, the major challenges have been insufficient funding, governing existing resources, and calls for provincial dominance. The province has had five uprisings in a row, the most current one started after Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti's killing in August 2006, and gained motion in 2023 (Shazadi & Fazail, 2023). These unrests have changed the manner the Baloch people recognize and talk about language in significant ways, specifically vis- a -vis the national language Urdu. However, there hasn't been ample research on the way this has changed Urdu's position in the Baloch dominated areas.

This research fills this gap in the existing literature on status of Urdu by presenting empirical evidence from Mastung and Kalat, two cities in Balochistan

considered as nucleus of Baloch nationalism. The present study focuses on the following:

1) What is the current state of Urdu in the regions dominated by Baloch?
2) How the change in the way people use language affected important areas of society?
3) How has the ethnic conflict in the region affected the use of Urdu?

The paper brings to light relevant literature on language, ethnicity, and conflict in Pakistan. It focuses on language use across domains and its implications. Lastly, it concludes with policy recommendations for peaceful co-existence of languages spoken in the region.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language, Ethnicity, and Conflict

Researchers in the domains of ethnicity and nationalism have time and again acknowledged a strong relationship between language and collective identity. According to Edwards (1985) and Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), language helps with the representation and creation of social identities; it acts both as a dividing line between group boundaries and an underlying medium for in-group coordination. In multi-ethnic states, promoting one group's language to national status above others usually generates acrimony among marginalised groups, leading them to accentuate their linguistic practices as measures of resistance or culture preservation (Brass, 1991; Horowitz, 1985). The linguistic situation in Pakistan is no exception as all other regional languages felt marginalized when Urdu was given a higher status in the country, resulting in the development of anti-Urdu sentiments.

Mahboob (2003) and Rahman (1997, 2012) have examined the process by which Urdu attained the status of Pakistan's official language. Both researchers noted that the founders' perception of Urdu as a symbol of Muslim unity

apparently obscured the indigenous languages of Sindh, Balochistan and Bengal, giving rise to anti-Urdu sentiments that led to continuous ethno-linguistic tensions in the country. Similarly, Ayers (2009) presents a comparative outlook, stressing that countries like Indonesia have accomplished national unity while maintaining linguistic diversity, in comparison to Pakistan's inflexible approach. Rahman (2012) reports that Baloch nationalists originally accepted Urdu as a lingua franca to counter Pashtun authority in the province, but this acceptance has gradually diminished with the onset of the fifth insurgency.

2.2. Balochistan's Linguistic and Political Context

The historical course of insurgencies in Balochistan is documented by Khan (2009), Iqbal (2008), Kupecs (2012), Khosa et al. (2025) and Khosa (2026). According to these researches, the primary nationalist complaints include internal colonisation by the federal government, uneven distribution of resources, military operations and initiation of development projects in the province without the Baloch involvement. Many people consider the 2006 assassination of Nawab Bugti to be a turning point that radicalised nationalist sentiment and strengthened the political and cultural ties between the Baloch and Brahvi communities, which had previously been separate ethnic groups (Rahman, 2012, Khosa et al, 2025, Khosa, 2026).

Volcan's (2006) Psycho-Dynamic Approach to Social Identity and Ashmore et al. (2004) Organising Framework for Collective Identity provide a sociological theory for this alliance. Volcan's framework elucidates how inter-group threats compel individuals to prioritise group identity over personal identity, resulting in the sharing of 'chosen traumas and glories' and the projection of negative stereotypes onto out-groups. Ashmore et al. (2004) elucidate the significance of language as a fundamental aspect of 'behavioural involvement' in ethnic group affiliation, emphasising that linguistic practices serve as principal means by which

individuals convey belonging and attain acceptance within a community. This study incorporates aspects from both frameworks to evaluate the language choices, ideologies and status of Urdu through a questionnaire and interview data.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present research uses an exploratory mixed-methods framework, combining quantitative questionnaire data with qualitative ethnographic methods. A two-phase sequential approach was adopted: the first phase included the gathering and statistical analysis of close-ended questionnaire data; the next phase consisted of semi-structured interviews and observations planned to supporting and substantiating the quantitative findings. This design suited the study given the objective of the study was not only assessing linguistic attitudes and behaviours across the community but also understanding the primary causes and implications.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

A total of 100 participants were chosen through a purposive sampling from the cities of Mastung and Kalat. The sample was equally divided between educated (college and above) and uneducated (elementary education and below) groups. This was done to get an overall view of the linguistic situation in both cities. Male and female participants from both groups belonged to different professions. The educated participants were medical professionals, engineers, teachers, pupils, and housewives, whereas the uneducated participants were household staff, labourers, maids, and drivers. The semi structured interviews were conducted from 20 people, again ensuring that the group was equally divided between educated and uneducated males and females The researcher's connection with the target group made it easy to reach out and build trust.

3.3. Instruments

The questionnaire was divided into four parts: family and tribal background;

language background (mother tongue and regional language); use of language in different places (friends, relatives, a market); and language choices and attitudes, which encompassed queries on how often people shift between languages and what is their opinion about regional language policy. Since the security situation was unstable, sensitive political queries were asked in a roundabout way. The researcher used a core set of open-ended questions for semi-structured interviews and let the conversations flow naturally. Seven schools and two colleges in both cities were used for participant observation, and market places and a hospital were used for non-participant observation. A trusted local acquaintance did the latter because of cultural limitations on women's access to public spaces where men are in charge.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Language Background: The Dominance of Brahvi

Information from surveys from both educated and uneducated respondents confirmed that Brahvi is predominantly the mother languages and native language of the Mastung-Kalat area. 56% percent of educated participants said that Brahvi was the only regional language in the area, and 66% percent said it was their first language. The uneducated group had an even stronger concentration of Brahvi: 66% said it was the native tongue and 70% said it was their mother tongue. Balochi, while symbolically significant as the language most linked to Baloch identity, was asserted as the exclusive mother tongue by a mere minority—around 10% of educated individuals and 14% of uneducated individuals. One percent of the total sample spoke Balochi as their first language, but everyone in the group was proud of Balochi and wanted to learn it.

This is an important finding: Brahvi, not Balochi, is the main language spoken in the area. The Brahvi speakers in Mastung and Kalat mostly call themselves Baloch. The interviews demonstrate that this is because they have an

identical way of life, history, and political trajectory, not because they communicate in the same language (Khosa, 2026). This has major impacts on how we understand language as a marker of identity in the region— cultural and political associations are more significant than linguistic ties when it comes to the formation of Baloch identity.

4.2. Domain-by-Domain Language Use

The most common language was Brahvi that was spoken in family, friend, and market settings. In comparison, Urdu was used but not very frequently. In the home domain, 52% of both literate and illiterate participants mainly used Brahvi, whereas Urdu was spoken by 6% of literate participants and 2% of illiterate participants together with other languages. In the friends' domain, 16% of educated participants only spoke Urdu, and 56% used it in combination with Brahvi. This suggests that Urdu is still used as an intermediary language in informal inter-ethnic social connections among educated people. In this area, people who didn't go to school were less interested in Urdu and preferred Brahvi (46%) and Brahvi-Urdu combination (24%).

Brahvi was once again the most popular language in the market, with 40% of educated and 46% of illiterate participants saying they used it. Urdu came in second, with 34% of educated and 38% of uneducated people saying they used it. The market's long history as a place where people of many ethnicities interact is why Urdu is still used in business transactions: Historically, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Hindu merchants utilised Urdu as a trading lingua franca. But the Urdu-speaking business sector has shrunk a lot because Punjabi settlers left after targeted assassinations. Brahvi has stepped in to fill the void more and more. These tendencies were confirmed by what was seen in classrooms and markets: Brahvi was the main language spoken in public settings, whereas Urdu was mostly used in formal college classes and conversations with those who were thought to be

outsiders.

4.3. Urdu's Decline: Insurgency, Identity, and Departure of Settlers

There are two factors that are distinct but also somehow related that caused Urdu to lose its status as a common language in Mastung and Kalat. The first is that insurgency has made people use more Brahvi and Balochi as markers of ethnic identity. The interview results indicated pronounced in-group inclination: Baloch and Brahvi participants consistently labelled Punjabi speakers and the federal government as out-groups, linking Urdu to the language of an authoritative, dominant state. This symbolic link, which was observed through Volcan's features of "projection" and "chosen traumas," has made some people to distance themselves from Urdu, although open resentment was not common.

The second process, which is perhaps more noticeable, is demographic: following the target killings, almost all of the Punjabi settlers migrated from Mastung and Kalat. In the past, these immigrants were the leading Urdu-speaking business and government population in the two cities. As a result, Brahvi filled the place that was left vacant by the Urdu speakers. It was observed that shopkeepers and consumers mostly used Brahvi, and Urdu was only used for short conversations between people from different ethnic groups. The few Sindhi and Hindu people who were still there had learned to speak Brahvi and used local caste titles, which helped them fit in with the Brahvi-speaking population.

4.4. The Role of Education: Brahvi as Medium of Instruction

One of the most interesting things that came out of the classroom observations was that Brahvi had taken over as the main language of education in primary and secondary schools instead of Urdu. Teachers said that most of the kids, who came from remote locations and didn't know much Urdu, were at ease learning in Brahvi. The researcher's observations corroborated this: educators generally talked in Brahvi among themselves and with pupils, resorting to Urdu solely for formal

education at the collegiate level or when engaging with considered outsiders. It is important to note that the researcher, who was initially dealt with in Urdu as an imagined outsider, was quickly converted to Brahvi once it was shown that she was from the area. This shows how language choice may be used to keep people out of social groups.

Observations also recorded a trend of symbolic de-nationalisation in educational institutions: images of Pakistan's founding fathers were absent from numerous school locations, the Pakistani flag was less commonly exhibited, and in certain establishments, the national song was substituted with an Iqbal prayer. These changes can't be directly linked to language policy, but they do show how national symbols are losing their importance and how Baloch identity is becoming more important in the region's institutions.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This research offers empirical evidence of a notable linguistic transition in Baloch-dominated regions of Balochistan: Brahvi has supplanted Urdu as the lingua franca in familial, public, and educational spheres in Mastung and Kalat. The displacement is chiefly influenced by the increasing devotion of the Baloch and Brahvi populations to their regional languages as symbols of identity under the fifth insurgency, exacerbated by the demographic exodus of Punjabi and Urdu-speaking settler populations. The findings demonstrate how strongly language politics in Balochistan is associated to the bigger issues of provincial rights, ethnic unity and economic issues.

The study indicates the subsequent policy alterations. Firstly, Pakistan's language policy requires to do more than just giving Urdu special status. It should also start recognising and strongly promoting regional languages like Brahvi and Balochi by making them compulsory in primary schools in the places where they are spoken. Secondly, translating key books and cultural works from Urdu to the

indigenous dialects of Balochistan and vice versa would be beneficial to build bridges. Thirdly, these languages should be promoted on electronic media through entertainment shows and documentaries, so that the speakers of these languages may feel visible. Lastly, teacher training programs in regional languages are needed right away to cope with the change in the language that is happening in the classroom at present. To sum up, it is not simply an issue of cultural equality to help people of Balochistan with language problems, but a matter of long-term political solution in the region.

References

Ashmore, R. D., Deaux, K., & Volpe, T. (2004). An organizing framework for collective identity. *Psychological Bulletin, 130*(1), 80–114.

Ayres, A. (2009). *Speaking like a state: Language and nationalism in Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press.

Brass, P. R. (1991). *Ethnicity and nationalism*: *Theory and comparison*. Sage.

Edwards, J. (1985). *Language, society and identity*. Blackwell.

Horowitz, D. L. (1985). *Ethnic groups in conflict*. University of California Press.

Iqbal, A. (2008). *Conflict and insurgency in Balochistan*. Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.

Khan, A. (2009). Baloch nationalism and the genesis of Balochistan package. *Pakistan Vision, 10*(1), 1–32.

Khosa, D. (2026). Ethnic identity, in-group cohesion, and linguistic resistance: The Baloch-Brahvi coalition in Mastung and Kalat, Balochistan, Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal and Humanities Review, 10*(1), 269-276. https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2026(10-I)24

Khosa, M., Ying, H.J., Hassan, H. B., & Khosa, D. (2025). Baloch naming practices in the wake of ethnic conflict: A socio-onomastic study of Balochi names in Pakistan. *Onoma 60,* 225–246.

Kupecs, M. (2012). The Baloch insurgency and its implications for Pakistan. *CTC Sentinel, 5*(3), 14–17.

Le Page, R. B., & Tabouret-Keller, A. (1985). *Acts of identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Mahboob, A. (2003). The English language in Pakistan: A brief overview of its history and linguistics. *Pakistan journal of language, 4*(1), 1-28.

Rahman, T. (1997). *Language and politics in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.

Rahman, T. (2012). *Language policy, multilingualism and language vitality in Pakistan*. Quaid-i-Azam University.

Shahzadi, A. I., & Fazail, A. (2023). A historical examination of Raw's funding of Baloch insurgents and its representation in Pakistani media. *Journal of Law & Social Studies (JLSS) 5*(3), 397–408.

Volcan, V. (2006). *Killing in the name of identity*. Pitchstone Publishing.