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Article: **Language Shift and Maintenance: The Case of Dhatki and Marwari Speaking Youth**

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# Language Shift and Maintenance: The Case of Dhatki and Marwari Speaking Youth

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## Abstract

Many languages are endangered or facing extinction in this rapidly globalized world. A major cause of language death across the world is language shift (Dweik & Al-Refai, 2015; Campbell, 1994). Pakistan is home to various ethnicities and languages. Many indigenous languages are spoken in Pakistan; however, with English being the official language and Urdu being the national language, many minority languages face the risk of extinction, as language shift towards the more dominant languages occurs in the indigenous communities of the country. This paper aims to investigate the process of language shift and language maintenance among Dhatki and Marwari speaking youth living in Hyderabad, Pakistan. The participants were students and recent graduates of the University of Sindh, Jamshoro. A total of 10 Dhatki speakers and 10 Marwari speakers were interviewed for this study. Semi-structured interviews were administered to collect in-depth information about their language proficiency, language use in various domains, language representation and language attitude. The findings of the study revealed that Dhatki and Marwari languages are used in home settings for various functions. These indigenous languages, however, are not used in educational institutions. Moreover, traditional and digital media representation of these languages is quite limited. Dhatki and Marwari speaking youth, nonetheless, are proud of their ethnic and linguistic heritage and continue to make efforts to maintain their language in various domains.

**Keywords:** Dhatki, language maintenance, language shift, Marwari, youth

## Introduction

It is inevitable that the rising rate of globalization negatively affects linguistic diversity. Approximately 5000 to 6000 languages are spoken

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around the globe (Grenoble & Whaley, [1998](#)). Half of these languages have disappeared over the last 500 years Janse ([2003](#)), while the rest are estimated to be lost by the end of this century (Dalby, [2003](#)). Additionally, it has been predicted that every other week, an indigenous language dies (Dalby, [2003](#)). Language is undoubtedly the cultural heritage of any speech community, and its extinction is an irreversible loss of culture (De Swaan, [2004](#)). Therefore, language shift, which can lead to language death (Dweik & Al-Refa, [2015](#), Campbell, [1994](#)), must be controlled.

Language shift is a process in which a speech community gradually gives up a language in favour of another (Fasold, [1984](#); Ravindranath, [2009](#)). It refers to the choice made by a society to use either their own language or the other dominant language in certain domains and for certain functions (Grimes, [2000](#)). Language shift occurs when two languages come into contact (Mufwene, [2001](#)). Afterwards, language shift and maintenance occurs due to many social and cultural factors (Agyekum, [2009](#)). Language shift takes place in a locale where a local, less prestigious language and a dominant language coexist (Wendel & Heinrich, [2012](#)). In such a place, people will eventually have to make a difficult choice and choose a language that must be spoken in various domains (Dweik & Al-Refa'i, [2015](#)). Usually, communities become bilingual and start using the dominant language in various public and private domains. Eventually, they use only the dominant language and completely give up on the less prestigious local language (Romaine, [2000](#)).

Several studies have tried to identify and analyze the reasons behind the occurrence of a language shift in various communities. One of the biggest reasons behind the occurrence of a language shift in families is when they migrate to another country. The sociopolitical situations of the host country tend to influence the language practices of immigrant populations (Edwards, [1984](#)). The children usually shift towards and prefer the dominant and environmental language. In this regard, Saltarelli and Susan ([1977](#)) argue that by the third generation of a family, who has undergone a language shift, a wide range of differences in language proficiencies can be seen. The interplay of language shift and language maintenance across generations among many immigrant communities has been studied by various scholars. Sevinç ([2016](#)), in a comparative study, analyzed the

phenomenon of language shift and maintenance in Turkish immigrants living in the Netherlands. The study examined the language choices of three generations of Turkish-Dutch bilinguals in various domains, such as school and work to show a language shift away from Turkish to the Dutch language. The need to shift from Turkish to Dutch for utilitarian purposes has put a strain on the social and linguistic homogeneity of the Turkish community.

There are many cases of language shift and maintenance in Pakistan since it is home to many languages. According to Ethnologue (2021), the established number of languages in Pakistan is 76, out of which 67 are indigenous languages. After independence in 1947, Pakistan adopted a tripartite language policy. According to this policy, Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, would be taught along with English, the official language of Pakistan, and regional/provincial languages (Mahboob & Jain, 2016; Rahman, 2004). Urdu was chosen as the national language of the country since it is native to around 11 million people living in Pakistan; it is also spoken as the second language by 105 million people of Pakistan (Rahman, 2004). Urdu is the native language of only 8% of Pakistanis (The World Factbook, 2021). Urdu became the national language of Pakistan because it was spoken by very powerful elites (Muhajirs).

Even though Article 251 of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 paved way for Urdu to become the official language of Pakistan by the next fifteen years, English was already firmly rooted in the domains of power, such as educational institutions and media, in the country (Rahman, 2004). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, English was also on its way to become a global language due to its use in various sectors, such as world bureaucracy, media, commerce, and research (Crystal, 2003, Graddol, 1998). Hence, it is only natural that at present, English is the most spoken language in the many powerful sectors of Pakistan such as the governance sector (bureaucracy, judiciary, and armed forces) Rahman (2005) and educational sector (schools, colleges and universities) Nawab (2012). The institutionalization of English was argued to be practical because it serves as a medium through which international communication takes place; however, as an official language, it provides exclusive privileges to Pakistani elites Akram and Mahmood (2007) since it is a gateway to many lucrative employment opportunities

available in the country (Rahman, [2019](#)). The elite schools, where English is used as a medium of instruction, are only accessible to the powerful sections of the country (Haidar et al., [2019](#)).

According to the Constitution of Pakistan, the use of provincial languages will be promoted in almost all institutions of Pakistan (Rahman, [2004](#)). Unfortunately, Sindhi is the only provincial language that is used in the education sector and lower judiciary; Pashto is also used in some schools. Except for the limited use of these provincial languages in a few domains of power, other provincial languages, such as Punjabi and Balochi, and other indigenous languages, such as Dhatki and Marwari, are not used in academic and government sectors. For this reason, native speakers of indigenous languages are required to learn another language in order to study in educational institutions and apply for government jobs. The lack of cultural capital of these indigenous languages causes its users to shift to other more powerful languages.

Nevertheless, considering that numerous indigenous languages are spoken in Pakistan, not much research has been carried out on the subject of language shift and maintenance in the country. Only a handful of studies have explored the occurrence of language shift and maintenance in indigenous language communities. For instance, Kiani et al. ([2020](#)) conducted a study on Hindko and Kashmiri families living in Muzaffarabad, Pakistan to explore the language shift towards Urdu. The language shift away from Hindko and Kashmiri was found to be due to Urdu being a mode of communication in educational institutions and electronic media. Similarly, the study conducted by Abbasi and Aftab ([2020](#)) on Dhatki speaking urban youth showed reduced use of Dhatki in the home domain. Little to no studies have investigated the aspects and the factors of language shift and maintenance in many indigenous language communities of the country. The current study aimed to fill the research gap by investigating instances of language shift and maintenance among the youth living in Dhatki and Marwari communities of Sindh, Pakistan. The study focused on the level of language shift occurring in these communities. It also identified and investigated the resistance against this language shift. Finally, in order to gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, the

study analyzed the extent to which the identity of Dhatki and Marwari speaking youth is dependent upon their indigenous languages.

### **Research Rationale**

Dhatki, also called Thari, is a South-Asian language belonging to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family. It is mainly spoken in the Sanghar and Tharparkar districts of the Sindh province of Pakistan. Marwari, also called Rajasthani, is also a South-Asian language belonging to the Indo-Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family. It is mainly spoken in the Rahim Yar Khan district of Sindh province of Pakistan. Speakers of these languages, especially the young population, migrate to cities for better educational and economic opportunities. The youth of these communities need to learn many dominant languages, namely Sindhi, Urdu, and English, in order to survive in urban settings. The study conducted by Abbasi and Aftab (2020) on Dhatki speaking youth living in Karachi showed that language shift is evident in various domains. No study has examined the language shift and maintenance of Marwari speaking youth in general and Dhatki speaking youth living in Hyderabad. This study aimed to fill in the research gap by exploring the following objectives:

- I. To explore the language preferences of Dhatki and Marwari speakers in different domains.
- II. To investigate the extent to which the identity of Dhatki and Marwari speakers is shaped by their mother tongue.
- III. To examine the language maintenance efforts taken by Dhatki and Marwari speaking youth.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Method and Instruments**

The method employed in this study is a qualitative research method. Semi-structured interviews were taken from the participants. The interviews lasted for 20-40 minutes. Demographic information, information regarding their language choice in different domains, information regarding participants' proficiency in Dhatki and Marwari along with other dominant languages, namely Sindhi, Urdu and English, information about their

linguistic identity, data regarding the representation of their languages in various digital and traditional media, among other information, were collected from participants. The interviews were conducted through Zoom App. Interviews were taken in Sindhi language. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study before the start of the interview. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The thematic analysis was run on the data.

### Research Site

The research site chosen for this study is the University of Sindh, Jamshoro, where participants of this study are enrolled in various departments and disciplines.

### Sampling

Random sampling was used as the sampling method for this study. Dhatki and Marwani speaking students from the University of Sindh, Jamshoro were randomly selected for the interview.

**Table 1**

*Dhatki and Marwani Speaking Students from the University of Sindh*

Participants	Number
Dhatki speakers	10
Marwani speakers	10
Total	20

Dhatki and Marwari speakers get enrolled in various public and private universities after completing their secondary education. They live in cities for the completion of their degrees. The participants that were chosen for this study have been living in Hyderabad for a minimum of four years. 10 Dhatki speakers (D1-D10) and 10 Marwari speakers (M1-M10) were chosen as participants of this study. Majority of the participants have been living in Hyderabad since the beginning of their university education. Some have been living in Hyderabad a few years before the university admission as well. Some participants prepared for medical and engineering admission

tests in Hyderabad, while others lived in the city during summer vacations. Only one participant has been living in Hyderabad with family, while others have been living in Hyderabad as bachelors. Since the families of participants still live in their hometowns, they regularly visit their villages on weekends or between semesters. The participants were chosen randomly.

### Results

In this section, results extracted from the thematic analysis of semi-constructed interviews are reported.

#### Language Spoken at Home

Native languages were spoken at the homes of each of the participants. They reported that they only witnessed their native language being used in their homes during their childhood. They claimed that only Dhatki was spoken in Dhatki-speaking households. The participants spoke in Dhatki to talk with parents or siblings outside of their home. Similarly, families of the Marwari speaking youth were also found to only speak the Marwari language at home. They used Marwari to communicate with siblings, parents, and other relatives outside of the boundaries of home as well.

*“I have never seen anyone in my house speak any language other than Dhatki” (D1).*

All participants reported that they were competent users of the Sindhi language; however, they never used it in their homes.

*“We never speak Sindhi at home, even though all my family members can speak Sindhi language” (M3).*

Similarly, other languages, such as Urdu and English, were also not used in the households of both Dhatki and Marwari speaking participants. Participants of this study claimed that their ancestral legacy and heritage were linked to their native languages, and efforts are made at a familial level to ensure intergenerational transmission of language. Some argued that the marginalized status of their native language motivates them to use their languages at home. Participants also reported that locally funded seminars and public awareness programs were conducted to raise awareness about the importance of the survival of their languages.



## Self-reported Proficiency in Languages

Dhatki and Marwari speakers claimed to be proficient users of their respective native languages. All respondents claimed that they use their native languages daily. Majority of the participants also reported having high-level proficiency in the Sindhi language. Only a few participants were competent users of the Urdu language. They learnt and spoke the Urdu language while living in Hyderabad; even though the environmental language in their hometown has always been Sindhi. They argued that they were offered more opportunities to learn and use the Sindhi language.

*“I was able to learn Sindhi in the third year of my schooling... the first two years of school were difficult since I did not understand the language teacher was teaching in.... I am a proficient user of Sindhi language now” (M4).*

## Linguistic Similarity between Dhatki and Marwari

From the analysis of semi-constructed interviews, one theme that emerged was the similarity and differences between Dhatki and Marwari languages. Interestingly, some speakers of Dhatki considered both languages, Dhatki and Marwari, to be dialects of the same language. One participant argued that the differences between these languages are only evident on a phonetic level. Conversely, speakers of Marwari claimed that the linguistic systems of both languages are completely different. While Marwari speakers admitted that some mutual comprehensibility exists between Dhatki and Marwari languages, they still considered their language to be completely different from Dhatki.

## Domains of Language Use

Dhatki speakers reported that they communicate only in Dhatki with people who share that language with them. They reported that they felt no shame in speaking in Dhatki with people who share their native language. They frequently use Dhatki to communicate with their relatives and friends who can speak Dhatki. They use Dhatki with them in shared public places, such as markets and public places. Marwari speakers also reported that they use their native language when they communicate with people who comprehend Marwari. Many Marwari speaking participants claimed that

they only communicate in Marwari in their rented house, which they share with their fellow villagers. They also, much like Dhatki speakers, communicate with their friends and relatives in Marwari in shared public spots.

*“Only Marwari is used to speaking in our rented house as we all come from the same village and can communicate in Marwari” (M7).*

*“I feel more comfortable speaking Dhatki language, therefore, I only speak in Dhatki with friends that understand Dhatki” (D7).*

Conversely, in educational institutions, participants reported using dominant languages to communicate with friends who could easily understand their native languages. Similarly, only dominant languages are claimed to be used by participants inside classrooms and with their teachers. Participants also claimed that they always used dominant languages in primary and secondary schools.

*“I never speak in Dhatki on campus ..... We only used to speak in Sindhi in schools” (D1).*

*“In my opinion, there is not likely any opportunity in the near future that Dhatki can be part of academic studies, be it in teaching, curriculum designing or as a medium of instruction” (D7).*

Some participants impugned that Dhatki or Marwari can never be used as a medium of instruction for university education or for formal educational procedures since students from various linguistic and ethnic backgrounds come to study in these educational institutions. For this reason, the native language can only be used in primary schools located in their respective hometowns. Unfortunately, Sindhi is promoted in these schools as well.

Participants used Sindhi, Urdu, and English when they spoke with non-speakers of Dhatki or Marwari languages. They preferred to use these languages in group conversations in order to facilitate the participants who could not speak their native languages. In such cases, Dhatki and Marwari speakers reported to often communicate in Sindhi, and sometimes in Urdu. In classrooms, they mostly used English.

## Language Representation in Literature, Radio, Television, or Mainstream Media

The participants of this study claimed that literature in their languages was very limited. Not many newspapers, books, or novels were written in Dhatki or Marwari. Furthermore, they claimed that these two languages were also not represented in any television program. Some radio programs were reported to be telecasted in Dhatki language; however, these programs were limited to Tharparkar. Dhatki participants argued that all of these programs are funded by the locals of Tharparkar, and no public funding is allocated for the restoration of their language. Folk literature, traditional myths, and songs were considered parts of their rich culture.

*“There is a range of folk literature in my language (Dhatki), .... I used to watch one Dhatki drama serial that aired on Sindh TV (one mainstream channel of Pakistan television).” (D2).*

*“There are many radio broadcasting programs in Dhatki language on FM radio, as “DhatiMhanjaDhol” is one of the most famous radio programs.” (D5).*

Some participants were fearful of the fact that their language might die in the near future since there is little to no written work documented or published in these languages. They argued that their language has survived so far only due to the efforts taken by the locals, and no effort has been made by the government to televise or document their folk literature.

### Dhatki and Marwari Languages as Identity-marker

The participants of the study proudly considered themselves part of their communities. Hence, languages spoken in their communities were seen as their identity marker. They proudly called themselves Dhatki speakers or Marwari speakers. Some speakers considered Marwari or Dhatki as their primary identity marker, while few others considered themselves *“Sindhi first, [and] Marwari/Dhatki speaker second”*.

*“Dhatki is my mother tongue and I am proud of my own language. I own it wholeheartedly. I proudly speak it regardless of stereotypes. We, the Thari people, are better known as Dhati for the very reason of our mother tongue.” (D10).*

Majority of the participants, however, also claimed that they sometimes communicate in Sindhi among themselves so they are not alienated by others. Even though they were proud of their languages and social and racial backgrounds, they still communicated in Sindhi or Urdu in novel situations. They believed Dhatki and Marwari speakers do not enjoy the same freedom in the society.

*“Sometimes, we code-switch to Sindhi or Urdu, otherwise, people look unfavorably towards us.” (M10).*

*“In order to ensure no prior judgment of my character, religion and social background, I usually introduce myself as a Sindhi-speaker.” (M3).*

### **Stereotyping**

We deduced that participants were aware of the stereotypes regarding their language. Some of them claimed that their languages were considered backwards because they are mostly spoken in villages. They are often considered uneducated due to their language use. They claimed that people living in urban areas of Pakistan and mainstream media stereotype the use of Dhatki and Marwari as negative. Other participants of the study reported having faced little to no language stereotyping.

*“The people who speak other dialects or languages call thari people and their language as one of people who are ignorant and backward. Stereotyping is mostly done by mainstream language speakers who reside in urban areas.” (D4).*

### **Urbanization and Survival of Dhatki and Marwari**

Even though Dhatki and Marwari do not get any explicit support from the government of Pakistan, speakers of these languages have kept their languages in use. However, with educated people migrating to cities, these languages are seldom used in many domains and face the risk of subsequent extinction. The participants of the study were aware of the risks attached to urbanization. Many participants argued that the survival of Dhatki and Marwari is contingent upon the physical closeness of the community. They claimed that Dhatki or Marwari people who migrate to cities rarely transmit their native language to the younger generation. Since the participants of

the study were students and recent graduates, they planned to live in cities due to many economic factors. They were determined to pass on their languages to the next generation to ensure the survival of Dhatki and Marwari.

*“There is a huge change in people's inclination and preference as the majority of people belonging to rural areas are lately migrating to urban cities in large numbers, but it does not affect the survival of Dhatki since the people either living in urban or rural keep speaking in native dhatki language. Hence, apparently, there is no visible threat to language as far as urban migration is concerned.” (D2).*

*“I will unhesitatingly pass on Dhatki to my children first, since the legacy of my own mother tongue is what something I hold a lot of regard for.” (D4).*

*“Many people migrate to urban cities for education or jobs... It affects the Survival of the Dhatki language because the children of families who migrate to urban cities acquire the language which is common in their surroundings, and they don't speak the language their parents used to speak ... which creates a negative impact on the Dhatki language... I will teach my kids to speak Dhatki language at first attempt because I won't want my kids to not be familiar with their local language and culture related to it.” (D10).*

### Discussion

Given the limited data sample of this study, the interpretations regarding language shift and language maintenance should be treated with caution. Despite the limitations, the findings shed light on the language shift or rather the lack of it in Dhatki and Marwari communities. The results revealed how the use of Dhatki and Marwari languages is maintained in various domains at familial as well as at a social level. The findings of this study also disclosed that Dhatki and Marwari speakers use their languages in various domains, such as their home and social gatherings. The shift was noted in similar studies of (Kiani et al., [2020](#); Abbasi & Aftab, [2020](#)) where dominant languages were replacing indigenous languages in home settings was not found in this study.

Majority of the participants of the current study reported having no opportunities to use their language in educational institutions, where dominant languages such as Sindhi, Urdu, or English are used for all correspondences. Dhatki and Marwari are also not used in primary schools of the country. The tripartite language policy of Pakistan (see Mahboob & Jain, [2016](#); Rahman, [2004](#)) makes it harder for the youth belonging to indigenous communities of Pakistan to hold onto their languages. According to the findings of the study, Dhatki and Marwari speaking youth were not content with little to no use of their native languages in the educational institutions. Despite such status of their languages in the educational sector of Pakistan and extremely limited representation of their folk literature in print or digital media, participants of the study claimed to consume content in their languages, due to the efforts taken by locals. They also prefer to speak in Dhatki or Marwari with those speakers who can understand these languages in order to hold onto their languages.

Since Dhatki and Marwari are still passed on to the next generations and are used in various domains, the participants of the study reported having a high level of competence in their languages. The findings of Abbasi & Aftab's ([2020](#)) study on Dhatki speakers living in Karachi were not replicated in this study, since participants of their study considered themselves less proficient users of Dhatki language compared to their proficiency of Sindhi, Urdu, and English. Use of Dhatki and Marwani was maintained due to the fact that youth of these communities considered their indigenous languages highly attached to their identity. Even though few participants considered "Sindhi" as their primary identity marker, they were still proud of their linguistic heritage. Identity is an important factor and an intrinsic motivator for individuals to resist language shift (Siebenhütter, [2020](#)). It must also be noted that the language shift tends to be slower among communities where a minority language is highly valued (Holmes, [2017](#)). Hence, the youth using these language groups resist the language shift since they highly value their native languages. A major part of the population of this study, for instance, reported using their native languages in spite of the negative stereotypes attached to them.

## Conclusion

The current study was carried out to identify the causes of the language shift emerging in the Dhatki and Marwari speaking communities. The study further aimed to investigate the language maintenance efforts taken by the mentioned communities. The findings of the study showed that the aboriginal languages continue to be used in various domains; however, Dhatki and Marwari are not spoken among the native speakers in educational institutions. Negative stereotypes were also reported to be associated with these languages. These languages are also not represented in traditional and digital media. Despite the marginal status of their native languages, participants were proud of their linguistic and ethnic heritage and wished to continue passing it on to the next generation. The scope of the current study was limited to Dhatki and Marwari speaking youth living in cities. For this reason, a wide-scale analysis of language shift and maintenance in minority communities is needed to carefully evaluate the status of minority languages in Pakistan.

## Recommendations

- Minor languages should be promoted in traditional as well as digital media.
- Minor languages should be promoted in educational institutions.

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