

## Punjabi and its Future in Pakistan

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### Abstract

*When the largest community of Pakistan, the Punjabis, are abandoning their language, this paper aims to explore the maximum range of factors upon which the speakers of this language, who are worried about its dismal scenario, can cater to hopes for the survival of their mother tongue. Factors such as the stigmatization of Punjabi as a foul language at many of our educational institutions and having a little number of academic careers and job opportunities in private and public sectors make the future of Punjabi in Pakistan very grim. However, the future of Punjabi is not as dismal as it is propagated. This article investigates the future of Punjabi in the opinion of professionals. The researcher conducted interviews, as data, from five heads of the Punjabi Departments at public sector universities. The participants point out various hurdles in Punjabi and its establishment/ acknowledgment as a national language. Still, at the same time, they point out factors that give strength to this language and upon which its disappointed speakers can pave ways for its spread at a national level. The findings show that the demise of Punjab is nothing more than a misleading rumor. Due to time constraints, the researcher collected data from 5 heads of departments. Furthermore, the topic can be explored by probing businessmen, parents, and laymen to get a wider perspective.*

**Keywords:** Future, Language, Punjabi, National, Survival

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### Introduction

Pakistan is a home of 59 small and six major languages (Rehman, 2011). Most of its minor languages are on the verge of extinction. Major

languages such as Sindhi, Balochi, Saraiki Pashtu, and Punjabi are also experiencing potential threats from Urdu and English. In this era of globalization, both the youth and their parents in Pakistan are leaving their

native languages. Particularly, much stigma and shame have been attached to the Punjabi language. Arshad (2016) holds Punjabi has been banned at many educational institutions in Punjab because it is considered foul language. The government of Punjab has not taken any legal action against this.

Punjabi has a very rich cultural heritage as an Indo-Aryan language; its 33 million and 109 million speakers are present in India and Pakistan respectively. It has the status of the tenth largest language of the world; in the eleventh century, it was given the status of an autonomous language; it is mostly influenced by the Perso-Arabic sources. In India, it was influenced by Sanskrit and considered as the sister language of Hindi. Moreover, it has various dialects, such as Pothohari, Multani, Lehandi, and all its dialects are largely different in sound and vocabulary.

According to Zaidi (2010), Punjabi has become the victim of linguistic schizophrenia as the Punjabis are the most literate community in the country. Still, at the same time, they are highly illiterate in their mother tongue. It is because its speakers, instead of taking pride in the country's largest language, consider it a derogatory

language that should be spoken only in informal discussions. Zaidi (2010) further states that in the whole country, only 2% population is literate in Punjabi. This attitude of the Punjabi speakers is because of the language policies of Pakistan such as the language policy of 1973, 1989, 2007, and 2009 which promoted only Urdu and English.

Various studies show that little has been done on the part of Punjabi people to uplift the educational value of their mother language in Pakistan; we cannot see even a single school in the whole country where Punjabi is promoted (Rahman, 2005). Moreover, there is not even a single newspaper in Punjabi in the country, and if started, no one can guarantee the success of any journalistic endeavor (Zaidi, 2010). In this grim situation, some Punjabi speakers feel grieved and fear that their cultural language will become endangered over time.

By looking at the situation mentioned above, the researcher of this article aimed to investigate the future of Punjabi in Pakistan, which does not see as horrible as is propagated by some elements, for some organizations are working for the uplift of its status; several movies are produced in

Punjabi; Particularly in Indian Punjab, the Sikh community is concerned about Punjabi, and they have not attached any shame with their mother tongue; hence, they take pride in speaking and promoting Punjabi not only in India but all over the world as in 2019, the foundation stone of a Punjabi University was laid down in Nankana Sahib in Pakistan.

### **Literature Review**

Various studies show that the Punjabi language started becoming the victim of marginalization in British India. As soon as the English came into power in Subcontinent, they started promoting their language. Immediately after taking hold of the government, they abolished Persian as the language of the court. All high-level posts were to be filled by those who were proficient in English, and English also became the medium of instruction for the elite class. Only menial posts were given to the Urdu speakers (Rahman, 2011). Later, with the passage of time, English and Urdu became the medium of instruction at all higher education universities and colleges (Basu, 1952).

Consequently, the Hindi activists started propaganda against Urdu, which led to a 40.5 times increase

in Hindi magazines and newspapers (Bhatnagar, 1947). Hence, Punjabi and all the other regional languages of the subcontinent started to be dominated by English, Hindi, and Urdu. Similarly, after the creation of Pakistan, the government of Pakistan formulated policies that only favored Urdu and English (Zaidi, 2010 Rahman, 2011).

Liudmila (2014) contends that the Punjabis in Pakistan is, by all means, a community with a shared ethnicity, territory, culture, language, and geography, and most importantly, they are a community employing their language Punjabi. Liudmila (2014) further states that in today's Pakistan, the Punjabi speakers have become a highly disadvantaged group because the country's elite class is mainly comprised of Punjabi landlords who run the affairs of the government. The Punjabi middle class is a major workforce of the country, particularly the armed forces of Pakistan are mainly comprised of the Punjabis. But the mother tongue of the largest community does not find any institutional support in the country. Moreover, all community professional, cultural, and intellectual activities are conducted in Urdu and English.

In the same way, Rahman (2011) stated the number of Pashto-medium schools in KPK is 10,731, and Sindhi-medium schools are 36,750. In Sindh and KPK, Sindhi and Pashto are taught as compulsory subjects. But on the other hand, we do not see any school in the Punjab where the Punjabi language is compulsory. Only at the university level, a few students opt for Punjabi as an optional subject. Similarly, only a few TV and radio channels feature Punjabi films and programs with a limited audience.

Rahman (2002) and Mansoor (1993) contend that the two census' reports show a glaring reality about the decrease in Punjabi speakers; for example, in the census report of 1981, the number of Punjabi Speakers was 48.27%, but that percentage decreased to 44.15% in the census of 1998. The reason behind this is the speakers of Punjabi have started to identify themselves as speakers of the Urdu Language. They consider Punjabi as a stigma, and they feel embarrassed by speaking Punjabi.

Similarly, Rahman (1996) and Zaidi (2010) state that the main reason behind the deterioration of the status of Punjabi is the coalition of Punjabis with the Muhajirs at the name of national

solidarity after the creation of Pakistan despite many middle-class Punjabi speakers were against the marginalization of their mother tongue. The country's ruling class promoted Urdu on the pretext of political, religious, and cultural unity. Some Punjabi activists opposed that move and established the Pak Punjabi League 1951, which strongly demanded Punjabi as a medium of instruction at schools and colleges. Similarly, some other organizations also demanded the use of Punjabi in government services and schools. However, their demand was heeded by only making Punjabi an optional subject at the graduation level. Zaidi (2010) also states that some intellectuals and politicians demanded that Punjabi be made official. Still, there was no serious attempt on their part for the status uplift of the Punjabi Language. Regretfully, the official status was not accorded on Punjabi. On the other hand, in the Indian Punjab, Punjabi has achieved official status, along with other 22 regional languages (Ghai & Singh, 2013).

Rahman (2002) unveils that after the partition of the subcontinent, the strength of Bengalis in Pakistan was 55.6%, they were the largest ethnic group, and they demanded the

supremacy of their language; hence Urdu-Bengali conflict started at the expense of the Punjabi. Similarly, after the separation of East Pakistan, the Punjabi Landlords wanted the supremacy of Urdu again at the expense of all the remaining regional languages of the country. Moreover, Mehdi (1994) holds that the ruling class had the view that after the separation of Bangladesh, the other provinces will also demand their language rights. When the provinces demanded language rights, strict laws were enacted to crush any move against national unity. For example, in 1977, the military government and media labeled all the language activists as criminals against the state, and they were crushed with iron hands (Afzal 1986).

Shackle (2007) and Ayres (2003) say that only during Zulifqar Ali Bhutto's government a few language rights were conferred on the provinces. Still, the later regime of Zia ul Haq termed all the language movements as political. Hence, in the subsequent history of Pakistan, Punjabi greatly suffered, and many studies show that a lot of cultural shams have been attached to Punjabi.

Nazir, Aftab, and Saeed (2013) conducted a study on Punjabi in the

District of Sargodha, Pakistan, to find out the social processes that threaten the existence of Punjabi in the whole country. The study reveals that the Punjabis are not loyal to their language; consequently, the language is deteriorating with time, and this is because they have started identifying themselves with Urdu. A similar investigation was done by Gilani and Mahmood (2014). And their findings were further validated by the study conducted by Akram and Yasmeen (2011) and Nazir et al. (2013). These studies further exposed that the shift from Punjabi to Urdu shows that the speakers tolerate their language instead of promoting it. However, John (2015), in his Ph.D. study, found rather mixed views that some Punjabi speakers still claim Punjabi the part of their identity and hold it in good esteem. Still, as most of the studies showed, some feel cultural shame in speaking Punjabi, lowering the status of their native language.

### **Research Methodology**

The nature of the current study is qualitative, and interviews as a research tool have been conducted to collect data from the participants. Hence, semi-structured interviews were prepared, containing the

questions about the academic value of Punjabi, job opportunities for Punjabi graduates in Pakistan, its importance, the attitude of Punjabi speakers towards Punjabi, the reaction of parents and other authorities about its use, the influence of other languages on Punjabi, issues of its maintenance, the future of Punjabi and the factors upon which the speaker of Punjabi can pin hopes for the uplift of its status. The experts validated the research instrument of this study. A panel of four socio linguists completed validation. The interview protocol was finalized after carefully analyzing and incorporating the suggestions of the experts. To investigate the future of Punjabi in Pakistan, special interviews were constructed. Because the study was limited only to the opinion of the professionals in the Punjabi language, the standard for the participant's inclusion was that only the heads of the Punjabi departments of Public sector universities have considerable experience in teaching Punjabi were selected. The researcher selected a sample of five participants from five Public sector universities. The researcher personally administered the data. Only those participants were selected who were the native speaker of the language. Each interview was

transcribed before conducting the next interview to note that what remained unquestioned or missed could be covered in the next interview. For this purpose, transcribed interviews were read carefully and several times by the researchers. The interpretive phenomenological approach was used to analyze transcribed data, validate each interview's meaning, and explore themes; the triangulation method was used.

### **Results**

In the semi-structured interviews, the participants expressed their opinion to various questions about Punjabi; all the questions were related to the job and educational value of Punjabi language, the barriers in its preservation and maintenance, linguistic influences on it, perception of different people about the speakers of Punjabi, and its future.

The participants' answers to the questions related to the academic value of Punjabi and job opportunities for Punjabi graduates were not affirmative. They opined that Punjabi has very little academic value in the whole province of Punjab; there is no single educational institution where the medium of instruction is Punjabi. Even in their departments, the teachers during and



after the lectures speak Urdu with their students. The strength of the students opting Punjabi is decreasing gradually, and those who opt for it are not very brilliant academically, and their responses were as under:

“Academically, Punjabi has little value; it is not taught at schools; only at public sector universities students take Punjabi as an optional subject.”

"The number of students doing Ph.D. is decreasing gradually, and even those who opt for Punjabi as an optional subject take it as a last choice because it is easy to pass as compared to other subjects.”

“Many people in Punjab learn Punjabi not for reading books or preserving their cultural language but to communicate with their parents and grandparents, and for this, they do not have to join any institution, but they learn it informally.”

They seemed to be disappointed about very promising careers for the Punjabi graduates. The Punjabi graduates do not find jobs related to their degree. Rather, they have to do menial jobs, which greatly hampers students from pursuing their

careers in Punjabi. Following were their opinion.

“There are very fewer job opportunities for the Punjabi graduates. Only a few of them either become university lecturers or translators.”

“Those who do master in Punjabi have to do an extra master in order to strengthen their CV for a job; otherwise, employers prefer science graduates to degree holders in Punjabi.”

"Even the Ph.D. scholars in Punjabi have to strive hard to find a good job related to their degree"

Similarly, when they were asked about publications in Punjabi, their response was the number of publications in the largest language of Pakistan is almost non-existent. They said as under:

“The number of new Punjabi books is decreasing every year. The publishers are hesitant to take any Punjabi book, and this bars the writers from writing in Punjabi.”

“Research papers in Punjabi as compared to Urdu and English are very few every year. Mostly the lecturers in Punjabi publish some papers in Punjabi to get a promotion.”

The interviewees were positive about the importance of Punjabi; they opined that every language has its importance as far as the identity, culture, and traditions of a community are concerned. Similarly, according to them, Punjabi is the identity of the people of Punjab; it is the cultural language of Punjab; it has a very long history and tradition. Their opinion was as under:

“Punjabi has a history of about three thousand years; the people of Indian and Pakistani Punjab have been speaking it for centuries.”

Punjabi is the language of very famous poets, such as Baba Fareed, Baba Bhulay Shah, and Mian Muhammad Bakhsh; very rich literature has been produced in it; particularly, Punjabi poetry is famous all over the subcontinent.”

“The culture, folklore, and tradition of Punjabi people are very rich; a vast majority of Punjabis strictly follow their culture and tradition and consider Punjabi the part of their community. One cannot understand Punjabi culture without understanding the Punjabi language.”

The reaction of parents, according to respondents, was not

commendable for the use of Punjabi. Similarly, the authorities at schools do not allow children to speak Punjabi, and all the official correspondence takes place in Urdu and English in Pakistan. In cities, those who speak Punjabi are considered illiterate. The answers were as under:

“The parents in Punjab do not allow their children to speak Punjabi at home or outside the home. Even some parents admonish their children for speaking Punjabi.”

“This is ironical that parents speak Punjabi with their parents, grandparents, and servants, but they strictly allow their children's conversation either in English or in Urdu.”

“At educational institutions and in the classes, students are not allowed to converse in Punjabi. In the educational environment, Punjabi has no more than the status of sigma or foul language.”

“Even there are some schools which issued notices that those who were caught using Punjabi in the school premises would be fined.”

“The level of cultural shame has reached to a point that the Punjabis feel



sham using their own language; otherwise, they are branded as Pandoos (the illiterate from villages)."

"Punjabi has become an orphan language, its own speakers are leaving it. It has not been given the status of official language. In all offices, the use of Punjabi is strictly prohibited."

"In the offices, Punjabi is used only informally to crack jokes. Even the officers use it in informal discussions."

When the professionals were asked about the influence of other languages, they opined that in history, Punjabi had survived the influence of many languages, such as Hindi, Persian, and Arabic. And now it is under great dominance of Urdu and English. Their views were as under:

"Hindi is thought to be the sister language of Punjabi, and it survived centuries with Hindi, and Persian was the court language of the Mughal kings but it could not replace Punjabi in the subcontinent. But Punjabi has a lot of words of Hindi and Persian."

"The speakers of other languages in Pakistan do not feel any difference between Punjabi and Urdu because both languages share a big portion of their morphology, syntax,

and pronunciation with each other."

"Due to a huge similarity between Urdu and Punjabi, some activists of Punjabi consider that one day Urdu will completely replace Punjabi."

"Even the most illiterate people of the Punjabi language have started using the word of English language, so Punjabi is under great pressure from Urdu and English."

About the maintenance of Punjabi, the participants highlighted issues, such as lower language prestige, no international use, no official use, Urdu Punjabi controversy, no patronage from the government, and no promotion of language by the Punjabis themselves. About these issues following were their views:

"The governing elite which is mostly the landlords of Punjab does not use Punjabi; their children get an education at English-medium schools, so they do not take any step for the promotion of Punjabi language."

"The Punjabi landlords still consider Punjabi a hurdle in the way of national unity, so they promote Urdu as a national language instead of taking any step for the uplift of Punjabi."

“It is the common perception in the people of Punjab that Punjabi does not have any international use; hence there will not be any economic benefit of promoting Punjabi.”

“The number of activists and the organizations who work for the survival of Punjabi is very low; otherwise, most of the Punjabis do not see any advantage in promoting their mother tongue, and they consider any effort regarding it useless.”

“When the speakers of a language start feeling shame about the use of their own language and stop their new generation from using, the future of that language comes under jeopardy.”

When the professionals were asked about the future of Punjabi in Pakistan, they said that Punjabi is far from being called an endangered language due to several reasons but they also expressed a number of cautions regarding it. They said that Punjabi is the tenth largest language of the world, and it has more than 140 million speakers; particularly in Indian Punjab, the Punjabi Sikh community is very concerned about it, and all over the world, organizations are working for the uplift of all the languages which are

facing potential threats. In the same way, the educated youth of Punjab is also concerned about their language. They expressed their opinion in the following ways:

“The speakers of Punjabi are the tenth largest community of the world with speakers in India, Pakistan, and in some western countries. There is a large Sikh community in Canada who loves Punjabi as their mother tongue.”

“The Sikh community in Indian Punjab considers Punjabi the part of their identity and culture; hence, Punjabi has given the status of official language in India. Similarly, Indian Punjabi movies which promote centuries-old Punjabi culture and language are becoming popular all over the world.”

“There are many languages in the world which are on the verge of extinction, but there are many organizations in the world which are working for all the endangered languages of the world, and they have also documented a lot of dead languages; hence, it cannot be propagated that the Punjabi will become extinct in the world one day.”

"The educated middle class of Punjab, despite the fact they did not get their education in Punjabi, is concerned about the deteriorating status of their mother tongue, so they have started raising their voices for the protection of their language."

"When some schools issued notices to ban Punjabi in school premises, many Punjabis protested against that move."

Moreover, they also stated that there are also some hopes from the government side to promote regional languages in Pakistan; they said that the government of Pakistan has also started taking initiatives to promote Punjabi. In this regard, they emphasized constitutional guarantee, the eighteenth amendment, and the latest foundation stone of a Punjabi university.

"The constitution of Pakistan clearly states that the national language of the country will be Urdu, but the provinces will take steps for the promotion of regional languages."

"After the passage of the eighteenth amendment, the provinces have been given maximum autonomy; now provinces can easily promote their languages and culture through

education; otherwise before that only Urdu was promoted on the pretext of national unity."

"Recently, the government of Pakistan laid down the foundation stone of a Punjabi university, Baba Guru Nanak University, in the district of Nankana Sahib in Pakistani Punjab to boost the promotion of Punjabi culture and language."

Based on their years of language teaching experience, the study participants were asked to give suggestions to promote Punjabi in Pakistan. First, they laid down responsibility on the shoulders of Punjabi speakers that they should not feel any shame on the use of their culture language; they should hold seminars to make people aware of the worth of their regional language; it should be given the status of an official language. Moreover, the participants also emphasized that the role of media in this regard is also highly crucial. Their suggestions were as under:

"The Punjabi people like the Sikh community should love their language, and should not feel any shame for speaking their mother tongue rather they should feel proud that Punjabi is their cultural identity."

“India along with many other regional languages has given Punjabi the status of an official language. Similarly, in Pakistani Punjab, it should also be made an official language along with Urdu.”

"The government of Punjab should give incentives to the people who are working for the cause of Punjabi. Similarly, those who publish books in Punjabi they should be encouraged by giving financial incentives."

“For the promotion of Punjabi, seminars should be organized where people should be made aware of the worth of Punjabi as a cultural heritage and the identity of all the Punjabi community of the world.”

“Punjabi movies and dramas enjoyed a lot of fame in the history of Pakistan, and now the production of Punjabi films has become very low. So, Punjabi cinema should be promoted both by the government and the people of Punjab."

“The media of Pakistan is playing a vibrant role in highlighting different issues; in the same way, it should also play a constructive role for the promotion of regional languages of

the country, and particularly it should dispel the cultural shame attached to the Punjabi language"

### **Discussion**

The findings of the current study suggested that according to the professionals in Punjabi, Punjabi has very little academic value in the whole province of Punjab; there is not even a single educational institution where the medium of instruction is Punjabi as it was concluded that Punjabi is not enjoying such level of prestige in Pakistan as English (Naqvi, Nadeem, & Rahman, 2021). Even in the departments, the teachers during and after the lectures speak Urdu with their students, which is very demotivating for the students to take Punjabi as a language which they can use with confidence among peers, which was following the findings of the study conducted by Abbas, and Iqbal (2018) which concluded that speaking the English language is the connection to the sense of superiority among youth whereas speaking Punjabi is linked with integrative motivation. The strength of the students opting Punjabi as a subject is decreasing gradually, and those who opt for it are not very brilliant academically.

It reported their disappointment about the promising careers for the Punjabi graduates. The Punjabi graduates do not find jobs related to their degree. Rather they have to do menial jobs, which greatly hampers students from pursuing their careers in Punjabi. The research area in Punjabi is almost negligible and deprived of attention. Negligible research publications were reported by the respondents, which is a visible sign of the lack of interest of students in Punjabi and great damage to the reputation of Punjabi.

As every language has its importance and identity, the study explored that the Punjabi language has its importance as far as the identity, culture, and traditions of a community are concerned as it is the identity of the people of Punjab which is contributing to secure and maintain the heritage of Punjabi culture. Punjabi is the language of very famous poets, such as Baba Fareed, Baba Bhulay Shah, and Mian Muhammad Bakhsh; very rich literature has been produced in it; particularly, Punjabi poetry is famous all over the subcontinent. Liudmila (2014) contends that the Punjabis in Pakistan is, by all means, a community with a shared ethnicity, territory,

culture, language, and geography, and most importantly, they are a community employing their language Punjabi.

But the most damaging aspects of Punjabi heritage as language are lower language prestige, no international use, no official use, Urdu Punjabi controversy, no patronage from the government, and no language promotion by the Punjabis themselves. It was also reported that now the government of Pakistan has also started taking initiatives to promote Punjabi. In this regard, they emphasized constitutional guarantee, the eighteenth amendment, and the latest foundation stone of a Punjabi university.

Based on their years of language teaching experience, the participants of a study suggested that to promote Punjabi in Pakistan; every Punjabi has the responsibility to speak Punjabi with confidence as they speak English or Urdu and admire others who speak Punjabi rather than stigmatizing others. It was reported that to save Punjabi from social death, it should be taught in schools as well (Naqvi, Nadeem, & Rahman, 2021). Seminars should be conducted to promote the Punjabi language and to save the Punjabi heritage. Punjabi should be

given the official language status for which media can play a potential role in highlighting the endangering language, i.e. Punjabi in Pakistan. According to Zaidi (2010), some intellectuals and politicians demanded that Punjabi be made official. Still, there was no serious attempt on their part for the status uplift of the Punjabi Language. Regretfully, the official status was not accorded on Punjabi, which is hindering the development of Punjabi. Contrary to that in the Indian Punjab, Punjabi has achieved official status and other 22 regional languages (Ghai & Singh, 2013), which the Pakistani government should notice.

### **Conclusions**

After detailed discussion and analysis, the researcher of this study concluded that the current status of Punjabi is in a dismal state. Still, some factors show that Punjabi cannot be easily termed as an endangered language in the coming future. No doubt much cultural shame has been attached to the use of Punjabi at certain places like in the official environment and schools. Those who speak it at these places are called illiterate people from villages, and this is because both its speakers and the government of Pakistan did not take any step to

promote the Punjabi language. Punjabi has no educational value; those who pursue their career in Punjabi cannot find good jobs. However, the foundation of a university for the promotion of Punjabi and the increasing awareness of the educated Punjabi middle class shows that hopes for the survival of Punjabi are not dying at all. Punjabi is the cultural identity of more than 140 million people around the world, and it is very rich in culture, tradition, and literature; hence, it needs to be preserved. It can be preserved by uplifting its status through a media campaign, organizing seminars, giving incentives to Punjabi writers, and giving it official status. Due to time constraints, the sample selection population is limited to only five heads of departments. Heads of departments can only speak about the language's academic aspect, which is a limitation to the study. In the future, businessmen, parents, and laymen can be interviewed to dig into the abovementioned issues.

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