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FROM COURTROOM TO COURTYARD: THE DECLINING DOMAINS OF USE OF BALTI AND SHINA IN BALTISTAN

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Abstract

Balti and Shina are widely used across Baltistan; however, they are gradually receding from their traditional domains of use and are contracting to a few informal settings. This study primarily examines their use in the following domains – family and friends, education, workplace, administration, religion, and digital communication –while considering the implications for the vitality of these languages amid changing trends among their speakers. Fishman's Domain Theory provides the analytical framework for the current study, and Lewis and Simons' Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) helps interpret the results to assess the vitality of these two languages in the Baltistan region. The study follows a mixed-methods approach, i.e., an Explanatory Sequential Design, drawing data from questionnaire responses from 1286 respondents, followed by semi-structured interviews and field observations. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings show no uniform decline in Balti and Shina use among native speakers across all domains. They are still used among friends and family, especially in communicative events involving people from older generations. However, younger generations are gradually reducing their use in day-to-day communication, preferring Urdu and English, especially in education, administration, formal settings, and on social media platforms. Although native speakers of Balti and Shina express positive feelings toward their mother tongues, these attitudes do not translate into regular use in real-life communication. The mismatch between attitude and actual use suggests that these languages are valued as symbols of identity but are losing some of the most important functions that sustain them. Taken together, these findings indicate that these languages are at level 6b of EGIDS. This classification is an evidence-based interpretation and should not be treated as a definitive assessment of every Balti or Shina community in the Baltistan region. The study suggests that Balti and Shina vitality depends not only on positive attitudes toward them, but also on their transmission and regular use across family, education, administration, and other important and effective domains of language use.

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1. Introduction

Languages are like different organic species; they flourish if their ecosystem remains intact, supportive, and vibrant. Similarly, they thrive as their domains of use sustain and expand, i.e., when speakers use them in both formal and informal settings (Romaine, 2006). One of the most influential factors contributing to this phenomenon is urbanization. Urbanization has occurred throughout human history; however, the 20th century saw an unprecedented acceleration in this demographic trend. Better communication networks, improved transportation facilities, and education in the dominant language(s) have all contributed to it and, in turn, brought different languages into contact, promoting multilingualism (Batibo, 2009; Bromham et al., 2022; Holmes, 2013). The contact setting promotes the dominant language(s) in its new host community, transforming users of minoritized language(s) into bilingual or multilingual speakers, which is the first step toward language attrition and shift (Lewis & Simons, 2016; Romaine, 2007). In a contact situation where the two languages do not share equal status in the community of practice, the phenomenon of subtractive bilingualism takes place, which promotes the dominant language(s) at the expense of the minoritized ones, and this phenomenon is quite prevalent, especially in educational institutions (García & Wei, 2015).

Compared with the past, the means of language contact are more numerous and more influential today. With the advent of advanced telecommunication facilities, a dominant language does not need to come into face-to-face contact to exert its influence on minoritized languages spoken anywhere in the world; rather, language contact through digital media, aided by globalization, proves to be more effective and long-lasting than its counterparts in the past (Lewis et al., 2017). Thus, a great majority of the world's traditional languages, almost 90% of them, are at risk of disappearance (Bradley & Bradley, 2019; Krauss, 1992). The minoritized languages spoken in Pakistan are no exception.

In Pakistan, about 77 languages are currently spoken (Eberhard et al., 2020), and most of them are losing their domains of use at an increasing pace. In addition to the provincial languages, Urdu and English are the two main languages in Pakistan. Urdu is the national language, and English was imposed during colonial times and successfully transplanted to this part of the world, where it serves educational, national, and international purposes (Phillipson, 1992). These dominant languages are subtly encroaching on the space of minoritized languages, even within their native linguistic ecosystems in the country (Rahman, 2006). According to Ethnologue (2021), Balti and Shina, spoken by an estimated population of 10,000 to 1,000,000 in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, face similar threats from contact with Urdu and English. According to Khan (2016), "some 28 regional languages, including Hindko, Kashmiri, Torwali, Khowar, Shina, Burushaski, Balti, Wakhi, Pahari, Hazaragi, etc., are in extreme danger of extinction" (p. 1). The language contact scenario juxtaposes two or more languages with different roles and domains of use in the communicative setting, such as Urdu, English, Balti, and Shina in the Baltistan region (Fishman, 2001). Thus, for several reasons, most languages spoken around the globe today, like Balti and Shina, are receding from their previous domains of use to a few informal or family domains in their native lands. Moreover, through this reversal, these languages greatly dwindle and lose their strength and capacity for growth (Romaine, 2006).

Balti and Shina have been losing most of their previously held domains of language use. Today, these languages are largely absent from more instrumental and pragmatic domains: education, media, digital communication, and official communication (Hussain & Gill, 2023; Issa et al., 2023). English-medium education, followed by social media platforms, has largely marginalized Baltistan's local languages, even within their own linguistic ecosystem. They are gradually disappearing from most of their domains of use. Across the globe, languages have their particular social spaces or domains of use where each domain designates a particular location, topic, and participant to contribute; however, if the language loses its uses and its

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users, then, in those particular domains, it starts to erode, and it leads to language shift (Lewis & Simons, 2010; Romaine, 2010; Fishman, 1991). Loss of domains of use is a gradual process where speakers of the weaker languages, unintentionally or sometimes intentionally, prefer relexification, where they usually borrow the terminologies used for colors, kinship, body parts, etc. in the stronger languages, which consequently paves the way to language shift, which brings the waning languages to their end (Fishman, 2001). Currently, Balti and Shina face the same situation in the Baltistan region. Although evidence shows shifts in language use and preferences for Balti and Shina across many important social domains, it remains difficult to assess the long-term impact on the maintenance and vitality of these languages, as well as the implications of these declining domains.

2. Losing the Ecosystem

Fishman first proposed the concept of domains of language use in his seminal work, *The Sociology of Language*, published in 1965. It is also known as Fishman's Domain Theory, which focuses on how people select languages or language varieties across social settings. His theory is mainly based on three factors: the participants, the setting, and the topic (Fishman, 1972). Maintaining a language across many important social domains ensures its vitality; however, losing instrumental domains such as education, religion, home, and media erodes native speakers' linguistic knowledge and consequently leads to language change and language shift (Phillipson, 1992).

When these dying languages continue to erode for a generation or more, they cease to serve the purposes and functions they once did, a process known as 'language shift' (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). "Language shift is the conventional term for the gradual or sudden move from the use of one language to another (either by an individual or by a group)" (Crystal, 2000, p. 17). Communities shift to other languages for many reasons. Romaine captures the phenomenon well in the following line: "language shift and death occur as responses to pressures of various types (social, cultural, economic, and even military) on a community" (Romaine, 2010, p. 320). These pressures push the minoritized languages out of important, instrumental, and formal domains of language use. Thus, the disappearance of the minoritized languages from these domains compels them to retreat to informal domains of use. Their absence in day-to-day usage causes speakers to forget their lexicon first and their grammatical features later. When this treatment continues for a longer period of time, the "speakers of an endangered language … gradually lose the capacity to fully communicate in the language and fully understand it" (Aikhenvald, 2020, p. 241), and the very phenomenon could be termed 'encroaching diglossia', i.e., the minoritized or dominated language(s) is situated in a bilingual setting (Dimmendaal, 1992, p. 131), where "…two languages are not at parity; it is usually the members of the linguistic minority group who are bilingual (in the minority and the majority language) whilst the members of the majority group are commonly monolingual" (Plaza-Pust, 2016, p. 8). Consequently, this particular phenomenon promotes language endangerment.

Maintaining domains across social spheres helps a minoritized language remain vibrant; however, without support from its speakers and institutions, it is likely to go extinct. In the current discussion, Balti and Shina receive no support from either their speakers or institutions (Hussain & Gill, 2023; Issa et al., 2023). Institutional support is a key indicator of a language's chances of survival and growth. When different institutions use a language as their medium of communication and in daily transactions, the language flourishes in both formal and informal domains. That is, the language should be used in formal institutions such as religious services, government, and trade (Bouhania, 2014; Box, 2019). Institutional support can be especially helpful for minoritized languages, and it can also help counter the negative attitudes and ideologies associated with them. Consequently, "institutional support positively affects language ideologies by increasing feelings of usefulness and legitimacy, and the hegemonic influence from these institutions does influence perceptions of the

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language through the dissemination of ideas about the language" (Box, 2019, p. 7). Support from institutions such as law, education, religion, media, and administration can assist a minoritized language to grow and flourish (Holmes, 2013). However, in the case of Balti and Shina, neither their native speakers nor institutions support them.

Some of the most prominent factors marginalizing these local languages in Baltistan's linguistic ecosystem are native attitudes, the instrumentality of English, English education, urbanization, and media, especially social media platforms. A language's instrumentality can carve out a place for it even in an alien setting, as with English in Baltistan. As an exotic language, locals have accepted it and made it part of most formal domains of use because of its instrumentality and usefulness (Fishman, 1991; Lewis & Simons, 2016; Phillipson, 1992; Romaine, 2010). English in education persuades natives of minoritized language(s) to use English words and phrases, if not sentences, when communicating with community members as a mark of fashion, education, excellence, refinement, and sophistication. This association with English convinces locals to adopt the dominant language and promote it in everyday communication (Winters, 2015). Research shows that using English and other dominant languages in education is considered culturally and economically valuable. However, in a bilingual educational setting, using a minoritized language is equated with poverty and seen as a threat to national cohesion (Coleman, 2015; Romaine, 2012; Bondarenko et al., 2018). The association of instrumentality with the English language creates a gap between the natives and their mother tongue(s), which consequently infuses a feeling of contempt among the natives toward their mother tongue(s), and they consider their local language(s) to be unimportant, backward, and a hindrance to prosperity (Abbas & Iqbal, 2018; Ahmed, 2017). Beyond education, urbanization plays a major role in displacing minoritized languages from their established domains of use. Urbanization favors linguistic homogenization over diversity and gradually reduces linguistic diversity worldwide. The people living in rural areas speaking small languages tend to move to the urban centers where the 'nationally dominant languages prevail' (Harbert, 2011). Urbanization brings people together in the same manner, where media, especially social media platforms, connect people around the world, making it a global village (Hogan-Brun & O'Rourke, 2019). Shreds of evidence show that social media platforms will accelerate the pace of language contact and change, as the number of natives of this region who are shifting from electronic media to social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc., is growing quite fast (Hjarvard, 2004; Hussain & Gill, 2023; Lewis & Simons, 2016). Local languages are rarely found on these social media platforms. They have already lost these instrumental and more powerful domains of language use to the dominant languages before they could even enter the race (Fishman, 1968).

Balti and Shina, spoken in the Baltistan region, have experienced this phenomenon for the past couple of decades, with the pace accelerating day by day. These languages have lost most of their previous domains of use, even in their own locality, and are steadily retreating to use only within the family domain. Previous studies have focused on language change and shift; however, little attention has been paid to systematically examining declining functional domains among native speakers of Balti and Shina in Baltistan. Thus, to study the loss of functional domains of language use for Balti and Shina, this study uses Fishman's Domain Theory (1965; 1972) and EGIDS by Lewis and Simons (2010; 2015) as guides.

The current study is conceptually grounded in Fishman's Domain Theory (1965; 1972). It explains choices among languages or language varieties by the domain of language use, such as family, friends, marketplace, workplace, education, and religion. Following this theory, the study examines the use of Balti and Shina across these domains in Baltistan, and a reduction in their use in any domain is considered evidence of declining domains of use. The continuous loss of these domains in everyday communication among native speakers

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of Balti and Shina, in favor of dominant languages such as Urdu or English, is equated with language shift. The implications of reduced use of the local languages across these domains, or a shift in language priorities in certain domains, are interpreted through the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) proposed by Lewis and Simons (2010; 2016). The EGIDS provides a framework for examining language vitality based on its functional use in real-life contexts. Together, these two frameworks guide the current study in systematically examining how reductions in language-use domains contribute to changes in the vitality status of Balti and Shina in Baltistan.

3. Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to examine the decline in Balti and Shina language use in the Baltistan region. To guide the study, we have used an Explanatory Sequential Design. This research design ". . . implies collecting and analyzing quantitative and then qualitative data in two consecutive phases within one study" (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 3). The terms used to describe this design are thematic, as it "...is considered explanatory because the initial quantitative data results are explained further with the qualitative data. It is considered sequential because the initial quantitative phase is followed by the qualitative phase" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 28). The inclusion of both forms of data, i.e., quantitative and qualitative, helped us encompass the views of the majority and the minority simultaneously in the study, as "the quantitative data and results provide[d] a general picture of the research problem; more analysis, specifically through qualitative data collection, ... [was] needed to refine, extend, or explain the general picture" (Creswell, 2012, p. 542). The main reason "...for mixing both kinds of data within one study is grounded in the fact that neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are sufficient, by themselves, to capture the trends and details of a situation" (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 3). Thus, the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches helped us collect quantitative data from 1284 participants and qualitative data from 12 participants belonging to different age groups, i.e., children, youth, adults, middle-aged, and elderly, including both natives of Balti and Shina residing in the Baltistan region of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

This study follows mixed-methods research norms; thus, it collected quantitative and qualitative data to examine the phenomenon under discussion. Given the nature of the research problem, the current study collected data through questionnaires and observations, followed by semi-structured interviews. This research uses data triangulation, which, according to several scholars, involves using more than one method and source of data collection and analysis in research (Berg, 2001; Cohen et al., 2007). We analyzed the data using different techniques based on their nature. Thus, we analyzed the quantitative data collected through the questionnaire using SPSS for frequency statistics. For the qualitative data, collected through an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire, observations, and semi-structured interviews, we first transcribed the interviews and reviewed the field notes alongside the audio recordings. We then coded the data into categories and themes and analyzed the themes accordingly. While describing the qualitative results extracted from the interviewees, instead of the respondents' names, the interviewees have been classified into two categories, i.e., *outliers* and *language researchers*. We abbreviated these as O (outlier) and LR (language researcher) when quoting them during data analysis to maintain anonymity and avoid repetition. Most interviews were conducted in Urdu. Thus, author 01 translated them into English, and to meet international qualitative research standards, we used *Member Checking* to confirm the verbatim translation of the interviews.

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5. Results and Discussion

Table 01. Domains of language use

S.No	Statements	S. Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	S. Agree	Mean	SD
01.	My mother tongue is used as an official language in my province.	66.2	21.9	6.5	3.5	1.9	1.53	0.90
02.	The language is commonly used in digital media outlets, such as radio, television, newspapers, and at online platforms.	36.5	31.2	21.3	8.9	2.0	2.08	1.05
03.	The language is used as a lingua franca (a common language used by speakers of different languages) in professional settings, i.e., businesses, workplaces, and organizations.	32.1	27.0	24.4	11.9	4.6	2.30	1.17
04.	The language is used in religious, cultural, and social events	7.9	11.0	15.8	37.0	28.4	3.67	1.22
05.	Community members use the language for their day-to-day communication among themselves.	3.6	3.5	9.1	36.2	47.7	4.21	0.99
06.	Whenever I get a chance, I prefer to read and write in my mother tongue.	24.5	32.7	18.3	17.8	6.8	2.50	1.23

Table 01 primarily addresses language use; thus, its first statement asked whether respondents' mother tongues were used as official languages in their province. Most disagreed, with 21.9% disagreeing and 66.2% strongly disagreeing. However, few respondents favored it: 3.5% agreed, and 1.9% strongly agreed. Additionally, 6.5% of respondents preferred to remain neutral. Thus, the mean score for this statement, reflecting general disagreement, was 1.53 (SD = 0.90), indicating moderate variation among responses.

Questionnaire item 02 asked whether respondents' mother tongues were used in digital media outlets, such as radio, television, newspapers, and online platforms. In response, 36.5% of respondents strongly disagreed, and 31.2% disagreed. However, only 8.9% agreed, and 2% strongly agreed. A significant number of respondents (21.3%) remained neutral. The overall mean score for this item was 2.08 (SD = 1.05).

The next statement in the questionnaire addressed the use of respondents' mother

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tongues as a lingua franca, especially in professional settings. Here, the majority (32.1%) again opposed the notion mentioned in statement number 03, strongly disagreeing, and a sizeable number of respondents (27%) also disagreed. However, respondents in favor of it were in the minority: 11.9% agreed, and 4.6% strongly agreed that their mother tongues were used as a lingua franca. However, a reasonable number of the sample, i.e., 24.4%, remained neutral. Overall, responses show general disagreement with this item, with a mean score of 2.30 (SD = 1.17) and relatively widespread responses.

The next statement in the table concerned the use of Balti and Shina in religious, cultural, and social events. Most respondents (37%) agreed with this questionnaire item, and 28.4% strongly agreed. However, 11% disagreed, and 7.9% strongly disagreed. 15.8% of respondents remained neutral. The overall mean score for this item was 3.67 (SD = 1.22).

Under the Domains of Language Use, the next item was "community members use the language for their day-to-day communication among themselves". This statement yielded more favorable responses: 36.2% of respondents agreed, and 47.7% strongly agreed. However, a minority of respondents (3.5% and 3.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, respectively. Among respondents, 9.1% preferred to remain neutral. Overall, respondents generally agreed, with a mean score of 4.21 (SD=0.99) and relatively moderate variation among responses.

The last statement in the table, i.e., statement 06, assessed whether respondents preferred to read and write in their mother tongues. In response to this statement, a large majority of respondents (32.7% and 24.5%) disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively. However, 17.8% agreed, and 6.8% strongly agreed. However, a sizeable number of respondents (18.3%) remained neutral. The overall mean score for this item was 2.50 (SD = 1.23).

The quantitative results demonstrate that Balti and Shina were neither used as the official language of Gilgit-Baltistan nor on digital media platforms such as television, newspapers, and online platforms. Furthermore, they had no space in the region's professional arena; that is, they were not used as the lingua franca in offices, professional settings, workplaces, or other organizations. However, they used them in religious, cultural, and social events, and community members used them in day-to-day communication. Yet more than half of the respondents did not use their mother tongues for reading and writing in their daily transactions.

Qualitative findings not only support the quantitative results but also explain, clarify, and expand on the reasons for the declining use of Balti and Shina across different domains of language use in Baltistan. Balti and Shina have seen a drastic decline in their use among their native speakers, whether in formal or informal domains. According to data gathered during the current study, these languages are used only in the "family domain and a limited friends' domain." O-E shared this with an air of regret when asked about these languages' domains of use. One of the language researchers, LR-C, described the glorious past of Balti, when it was used in all the formal domains available in the region:

Balti's domains of use have shrunk. In the past, it was used in many domains, such as gatherings, majalis, and Friday sermons, but it is not today. When an application was written for the government, it was written in Balti; in courtrooms, evidence was provided in Balti and translated; and in hospitals, interpreters or translators used to be with the doctors.

In addition to courtrooms, it was the language of the government, used in Raja's court, and the main medium of communication among the masses. However, the situation is completely different today. LR-B provided an account of it in the following paragraph:

In earlier days in the Raja's Court, people used the Balti language, but today, if the deputy commissioner of your region speaks Balti and you go to him, you still do not use Balti with him. In the offices, people also do not use Balti.

One of the language researchers, i.e., LR-E, alleges that language contact and borrowing from the dominant languages are the core reason for the reduction in the domains of use for Balti:

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Domains of use have decreased compared to the past. This decline is due to the inclusion of Urdu and English in Balti; pure Balti no longer exists. At the village level, it exists in some form, but not in the city. There are categories, like when I meet with my peers, we talk in pure Balti, but the current generation mixes words from other languages while speaking Balti.

At times, the causes behind the decrease in domains of use vary depending on the dynamics of the particular region. For instance, O-F associated the reduction in the domains of use of Shina with the heterogeneity of society:

The domains of use have been reduced significantly. In my area or community, we used to prefer our local language, but when people from different regions arrived, it was no longer feasible to use it in community meetings. Now, people are compelled to shift from local languages to other languages even in small meetings. Local languages are used very little in our community meetings and in other domains today.

Thus, these languages have lost most of their previous domains of use to the dominant languages, influenced by different factors and locality. Now, in most cases, they are "confined to the home domain only," as LR-F revealed. In the Baltistan region, Balti and Shina, especially Balti, were the languages of religious poetry and religious gatherings, but today they seem to be losing this domain as well, owing to pressure from dominant languages.

The role that religion played in supporting local languages in the past is quite remarkable, especially for Balti. However, things have changed, and the support religion once gave these languages seems to have been withdrawn and redirected toward the region's dominant languages. Though people give due credit to religion for sustaining these languages, especially Balti, they protest the shift in the language chosen for religious ceremonies in the region. O-B shared his views in this regard:

I think if Balti is alive today, it is only because of religion, because we have done nothing beyond it. The majority of the literature we have today is religious. But now we can see a shift there too, toward the national language.

One reason the natives of Balti and Shina associate this change in role with the shift in the language of instruction for clerical education is that earlier they did not need to travel to foreign lands for religious education. Then, some decades ago, the trend shifted:

In the past, people who studied here delivered their sermons and majalis in Shina. Now, religious clerics study in other cities and countries, either in Iran or Saudi Arabia, so they use Urdu as the medium for their sermons and majalis. They deliver their Jumma sermons and majalis in Urdu, though listeners are usually semiliterate or illiterate. (O-A)

The heterogeneity of society is considered one factor that leads religion to adopt a language of wider communication, providing an inclusive platform for all worshipers. Considering the community's diversity, O-F reasoned that the use of a lingua franca in religious ceremonies, he explained:

Earlier, people from the same speech community gathered at religious sites. However, the practitioners are now more diverse. The practice of preaching in mosques has shifted from local languages to Urdu. Even in religious gatherings, other languages have replaced local ones because the influx of people has compelled the host community to use a language of wider communication.

Population diversity has brought numerous changes to the region, and data from the current study show two schools of thought on the role of religion in promoting and undermining local languages.

One group favors religion and sees it as a supportive agent; however, the other argues that religion has excluded local languages not only from the religious domain but also from other domains of use. Moreover, they hold religion and religious clerics accountable for the attrition of local languages. LR-C claimed:

It has played a role in demoting Balti, not promoting it. We have only noha, marsia, and qasida, but no other forms in Balti. According to Islamic scholars, almost 40% of their communication consists of Arabic and Persian words, and common Balti speakers use them as well.

Words from Arabic and Persian have crept into the local languages, and the locals have accepted them and made them part of their day-to-day transactions because of their use in religion and religious practices. The element of reverence is a completely different matter, but on the other

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hand, the sacred languages of the locals, i.e., Arabic and Persian, have weakened the native tongues. LR-D perceived this phenomenon and argued for the role of religion in the region:

Not to say how much we like Islam, but its impact has been quite negative. It never encouraged Balti, and there is no room for Balti in our religious practices. Preaching should be in Balti, but that again depends on where Islamic scholars get their education. They receive it in another language and cannot translate it into another, so we see its influence.

Speakers of both local languages believe that sacred languages are weakening their mother tongues. O-E lamented, *"Arabic has destroyed the minor languages, and Shina is no exception."* However, for Balti, some respondents hold mixed opinions.

According to LR-B, *"If religion has a 70% positive role in helping the language live, it also has an almost 30% role in demoting this language."* Some respondents credited religion with passing local languages to new generations, as much of the religious poetry used in ceremonies was in Balti. However, a strong decline trend remains. Thus, LR-F credited religion with the vitality of Balti to date, but he also prophesied the inclusion of English in religious practices in the future:

I think Balti is mainly practiced in Baltistan due to Muharram traditions that continue to this day. This means it helps keep Balti alive. Because of this, Balti survives. I see that, whether it happens or not, in the next fifteen to twenty years, the new generation may use English nohas in Muharram.

Given the current trend of language infusion, people may opt for English poetry in religious gatherings and ceremonies in the near future. The data show that religion played a positive role in the past in the growth and flourishing of local languages, but lately it has been replaced by more instrumental and foreign languages. LR-E elaborated on this phenomenon in the following words:

Earlier, it was in favor of it, but now it depends on the people and clerics. They study in Iran, Punjab, etc., so they do not value the local languages; instead, they value Urdu, Punjabi, etc. As a result, people value them too, and they usually do not like local products. What you have done does not matter to you. Earlier, Balti was important, but not now among the people and the clerics.

Balti and Shina not only lost their previous importance in the religious domain, but their supplementary role in educating young kids, either at home or in educational settings, also ended a couple of decades ago. LR-F, with dismay, noted that their *"domains of use are shrinking day by day."*

Education is one of the most effective domains for strengthening and promoting a language, not only among its native speakers but also beyond borders. However, most languages spoken today are not part of education. They are neither used as the medium of instruction nor as the language of the curriculum and textbooks, and this is also true of the two languages, i.e., Balti and Shina, spoken in the Baltistan region. These languages were used either as the medium of instruction or as supplementary languages to support the core language of education when teaching native speakers in the past, especially at the school level. O-B reminisced about his own experience in a school in Skardu in the late 1990s, where the teacher used to translate the content from English to Balti:

Our teacher taught us English and translated it into Balti. I am talking about the late 90s, i.e., 1997-98. One day, he was teaching us about the ozone layer and translated the English content into Balti. Now it no longer happens, and it is discouraged.

However, at present, they are neither the language of instruction nor an auxiliary language in teaching and learning. The natives themselves have come to the conclusion that these languages are no longer part of education, as LR-C related his views in this regard:

Balti is not a language of instruction or curriculum; not only Balti, but also Shina and other languages of Gilgit-Baltistan, are not part of the school syllabus. Thus, these languages will not take long to fall out of use.

One of the language researchers, i.e., LR-D, responding to a question regarding the use of local languages in educational institutions, both private and public, regretfully remarked:

The answer is completely the reverse of what we have seen in a number of educational institutions, where notices such as "You cannot use your mother tongue"

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were posted; rather, students are encouraged to use Urdu and English. I don't think we encourage students to speak Balti; rather, we discourage them.

An example of this indifference in educational institutions was evident at a private school in Skardu, where a student-made poster on classroom rules was on display, discouraging the use of local languages (see Appendix A for reference).

The use of these languages on the premises of educational institutions is prohibited, discouraged, and considered detrimental to achieving the set goals of education. O-B shared his observations on how the community views the use of local languages in education. *"The use of Balti in educational institutions is considered negative."* Therefore, these languages are *"neither found in science, nor religion, nor school/education, nor in anything else."* LR-D described the current state of these languages in the Baltistan region. O-D provided additional information about the use of English in the region and the institutions that are supporting it:

This very university [University of Baltistan, Skardu] plays a key role in spreading the English language in this region. Schools do as well. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was no trend to speak or use English as we do today. Today, it is increasing gradually. Now it has reached its peak.

Beyond education, these languages were the main medium of communication in entertainment. However, with the introduction of technology in the region, aided by the Internet, one of the most effective means of language transfer, folklore, has been removed from the mountain communities in the Baltistan region. The folklore was a treasure trove of the Balti and Shina lexicon, and according to LR-E, *"in earlier days, people narrated the Kesar epic which contained [rare local] words, and it is a treasure of words."* However, games, movies, animated movies, and social media platforms have replaced it, depriving children of opportunities to cultivate imaginative skills. O-D corroborated my argument, affirming, *"I do listen to Balti folk songs. But it is rare. The custom of folktales has vanished. Nowadays, people watch Indian movies, Indian songs, Pakistani, and English songs and movies for entertainment purposes."* Moreover, social media platforms have occupied the people in the region like never before. LR-A asserted, *"Today the internet has busied everyone; every child and every person is busy on social media, and the trend to listen to those stories is vanishing; thus, I think the stories themselves are going extinct."* The majority of social media users are the youth, who are fond of these platforms, watch videos there, and some of them make their own videos and vlogs, but not in their own mother tongues. O-A accused the youth of using social media platforms for self-projection rather than for their mother tongues.

The world has witnessed unprecedented growth and spread of media platforms across the globe, affecting every sphere of life. People have shifted from print media to digital media, and within a few decades we have reached milestones in social media, streaming media, mobile media, virtual reality, augmented reality, and now artificial intelligence. LR-A reflected on the current state of technological development and people's priorities. He narrated:

In the past, we did not have electricity or television, and even radio was very uncommon. The internet and social media were not invented then. At that time, people had no option but to gather at the home of a learned or knowledgeable person [and socialize].

Owing to these developments, we have lost folk life and traditions, folk literature, social gatherings, community life, cultural identity, and, most importantly, our mother tongues. These media platforms are not usually available in all languages of the world; rather, dominant languages, such as English and similar languages, prevail. In this context, it is challenging for the minoritized languages of Baltistan to survive against all odds. According to O-F:

Currently, social media is the most influential medium for language contact. If you look at your daily routine, the first thing you do in the morning is check your mobile phone. And all those conversations on different social media platforms are either in Urdu or English, and whatever we read is either in Urdu or English. We cannot find any traces of the local languages anywhere, and these are the media we mostly encounter throughout the day, whether we are reading or listening.

Although local languages are not found on social media platforms, some natives of Balti and

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Shina, though in smaller numbers, try to write and use these languages in available digital and social media spaces to promote their mother tongues. However, they lack an audience and readership there, so most natives of these languages have shifted to the dominant languages of wider communication so they can be counted as *us* rather than *them* among users of those social media platforms. O-B mentioned what the locals prefer on social media platforms: *Now we can find some programs about the Balti language on social media. But people do not have time to watch them. If we don't take steps now, our language will either go extinct or become a mixture of different languages. I think the youth are not inclined toward those videos in the Balti language; however, people over 50 show interest and watch them.*

Most youth in the region prefer materials available as texts, videos, and audio files in the dominant languages on social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube. These social media platforms have influenced users in the region to a great extent; according to O-B, *"In the last 5 to 10 years, social media has exerted a great impact"* by mobilizing youth to use and communicate in non-native languages, especially Urdu and English. O-E corroborated his fellow respondent's stance: *"The technological boom has significantly exposed them to English, i.e., Social Media platforms Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc."* Their claims were further strengthened by the statement of O-C, *"I can see there are many people learning English through social media; it is the need of the time, and usually, I say it is a compulsion. The biggest sources are education, social media, and digital media."* The findings of this study show that, in the current era, social media has been one of the most effective agents in exposing locals to English, as LR-E asserted in his interview: *"There is an influx [of English] on social media."*

Social media platforms could have become a new domain for minoritized languages; however, *"local languages are not found on social media; I have not seen them,"* O-F regretted the state of his mother tongue. The local languages, i.e., Balti and Shina, are rarely found on these platforms. According to O-A, *"on social media, people use Shina rarely,"* and the same is true for Balti. O-B claimed, *"The people who write Balti on social media, I think there may not be even one percent of the whole population."* The respondents blamed different media platforms for this trend among the natives of these local languages. O-A observed:

Now, if you ask about the current era, a child is exposed to English cartoons on mobile phones before going to school. Now, when a child learns English through digital media, even before school, it is quite dangerous. Because the child interacts with cartoons before learning their mother tongue. I have a nine-month-old kid. Early in the morning, if he doesn't get a mobile phone, he cries a lot. When I give it to him, he gets completely engrossed. He keeps watching it, and if I take the mobile phone away, he cries a lot again. He does not even babble, but he keeps watching it.

Earlier, things were different. There was no digital or social media, and only a few people had access to radio and print media (i.e., newspapers). However, this study's findings show that there are no newspapers in the local languages. According to LR-C, *"we don't have Balti newspapers,"* and similarly, O-F confirmed, *"there is no newspaper in the Shina language."* These languages are nowhere to be found on social media, in digital media, in education, in religion, or even in most of their own previously held domains of use, retreating into informal domains and gradually disappearing into thin air over time.

6. Discussion

The results of the current study suggest that the presence of English in the Baltistan region has implications for the vitality of the Balti and Shina languages spoken here, including language attitudes, intergenerational transmission, domain-specific language use, and the processes of language attrition and shift.

The findings reveal a complete domain-based differentiation in the use of Balti, Shina, and English in the region. Local languages are used primarily in family, friend, neighborhood, and informal settings, limiting their use to informal domains within their own linguistic ecosystem (Hussain & Gill, 2023; Lewis et al., 2017; Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Their use in the family domain is relatively stronger and involves older

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speakers; however, use among younger generations is gradually declining (Hussain & Gill, 2023). According to the qualitative findings, children are losing command of Balti and Shina as exposure to these languages decreases day by day. They are gradually becoming semi-speakers because they have fewer opportunities to listen to and use their mother tongues in daily life (Issa et al., 2023). This pattern may result from associating dominant languages with jobs, upward mobility, education, and their instrumentality. According to Fishman's Domain Theory, the weakening transmission of these languages in the family domain is significant, as the home is the main domain that transmits language to new generations (Fishman, 1972). In most cases, adults' use of Balti and Shina can be seen as evidence of unstable vitality when younger generations become less active users of these local languages.

These local languages have nearly disappeared as media of instruction or as auxiliary languages in education to help students understand unfamiliar concepts. Their limited use in formal domains such as education and administration indicates a near-complete decline in their formal use (Crystal, 2000; Lewis & Simons, 2016; Romaine, 2010). Although speakers identify with these languages, they prefer to learn English over their mother tongues because of its practical utility in everyday life. Thus, a gap exists between positive attitudes and actual language behavior, as symbolic attachment alone is insufficient for a language's vitality. Balti and Shina lack institutional patronage, especially in education, trade, government, and media, whereas Urdu and English have institutional support, practical value, and prestige that the local languages lack (Box, 2019). In addition, their exclusion from formal and institutional domains of language use does not meet the social expectations of their speakers associated with those domains, and the absence of Balti and Shina on social media platforms, which are essential to daily interaction among youth these days, further pushes these languages to the periphery. These findings are consistent with the term "folklorization" coined by Fishman (1968). Taken together, these findings indicate that these languages are currently at vitality level 6b. From an EGIDS perspective, this classification is an evidence-based interpretation and should not be treated as a definitive assessment of every Balti- and Shina-speaking community in the Baltistan region.

7. Conclusion

The current study examined the domains of language use for Balti and Shina in the Baltistan region of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. The findings indicate that these local languages have lost most of their previously held domains of use, and their use has contracted in most formal and instrumental domains, such as education, digital and social media platforms, and professional and administrative settings, where Urdu and English are preferred. In addition, these languages are gradually losing one of their strongest domains of use, i.e., religion. The declining use of these languages among younger generations indicates a downward trend in intergenerational transmission, pushing them toward lower vitality. From the perspective of Fishman's Domain Theory (1965;1972) and Lewis and Simons' EGIDS (2010;2016), speaker numbers alone cannot guarantee sustenance when important domains of language use are lost in favor of dominant languages. The findings show that these languages are functionally restricted rather than disappearing across all the domains of language use simultaneously. Thus, reviving the use of Balti and Shina in formal and influential domains of language use, as well as in family and social gatherings, is important to strengthen them. Without coordinated support from the community and institutions, and with the continued contraction of their domains of use, this may affect their long-term sustainability.

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