

Patterns of Language Use among Balti Speakers of Kargil: A Sociolinguistic Study

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Abstract

The Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir possesses several minority ethnolinguistic groups speaking different languages. The sustainability of these groups has been under continuous threat over the years. The prolonged language contact and migration of the members of these communities from traditional homelands to cities and towns has adversely altered their patterns of language use. When we notice some altered patterns of language use among indigenous languages, it becomes very difficult for its speaker to retain it in many domains of day-to-day use. Since language stability and maintenance is always seen as to how speakers use and maintain their language in comparison to the dominant language. Baker (2011) points out that language maintenance is the “relative language stability in the number and distribution of its speakers, its proficient usage by children and adults, and its retention in specific domains (e.g., home, school, religion)”. Since the Erstwhile State of Jammu and Kashmir is home to several small and ethnic linguistic groups speaking different languages. The members of these groups have been migrating from their traditional homelands for many reasons to towns and cities. This migration of the speakers has decreased the demographic count of the speakers and the contact with dominant languages has also resulted in partial or complete shift from their mother tongues. The present paper is an attempt to inquire about patterns of language use among Ethnic community of Balti living in the far flung area of Kargil Tehsil of Union territory of Ladakh. The Ethnic Baltis of Kargil are migrating at an alarming rate to Srinagar and Ganderbal districts of Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir and members of the community are therefore in close contact with the dominant Kashmiri community. Therefore, it is obvious that the dominant languages like Urdu and Kashmiri may have taken some domains of languages which earlier used to be the domains of the ethnic language.

Keywords: Balti, language contact, patterns of language use, Ethnolinguistic groups.

Introduction

It is not commonplace for people to choose which language to employ in regular communication, especially if they live in a multilingual society. Someone who lives in a monolingual society would make such a selection easily. People who live in a bilingual or multilingual country, on the other hand, must make additional decisions about which

language to employ because everyone speaks more than one language. It's also typical that they don't all speak the same language. As a result, domain analysis, as advocated by Joshua Fishman (1972), is critical for gaining a thorough knowledge of a bilingual or multilingual country's language condition.

The language used by an individual may be determined by the interlocutor and the context in which the conversation takes place. Originally it was Schmidt-Rohr who proposed the domain concept in the 1930s (as attributed in Fishman's 1970s works), as a way of sorting out distinct regions of language use in multilingual cultures that are relevant for language choice. Domains were viewed as theoretical constructs that could explain the language in Fishman's interpretation which were supposed to be a more powerful explanatory tool than more obvious (and observable) parameters like the topic, place (setting), and interlocutor. According to Fishman (Ibid), domains are “the occasions in which one language (variant, dialect, style, etc.) is habitually employed rather than (or in addition to) another” (37).

The domain of language use has proven to be an important construct in studies on language preservation and shift, and domain analysis has helped a lot in understanding language behavior among minority communities. Greenfield (1970), a pioneer in domain analysis, divided the innumerable social circumstances he saw during his fieldwork among the Puerto Rican population in New York, whose members spoke both Spanish and English, into five domains: family, friendship, religion, education, and job.

Fishman (1972) expanded on Greenfield's domain analysis, arguing that domains are more than just a cataloging of language use contexts. (28) Sankoff and Poplack, 1979 have underlined the importance of the interlocutor and the topic of conversation in determining people's language preferences and language choice.

While the home/family domain has been demonstrated to be important for maintaining language and slowing language shift, members of minority languages do not have much control over other domains in determining their language use. Therefore, the function of the interlocutor becomes important (Wei, 1994).

Rather than the nuclear family, Clyne (1982) emphasizes the function of extended family structure in the maintenance of language. According to Clyne, the extended family structure comprises not just the grandparents, but also other close and distant relatives and acquaintances.

Javad 2001 studies the domain loss of Danish in Denmark. The study concludes that Danish has lost its domains to English which were previously reserved for English. Building further on the same concept of domain and domain loss in languages Hartmut Haberland 2005 opined that the domain concept's theoretical status has not been taken seriously. The classical domain concept is not always applicable to the current Danish situation. The domain

concept is not always the best tool for describing and explaining language choice, even in multilingual societies within-group multilingualism. He considers code-switching as the “proper usage” of language expression and concludes that only the extended domain concept of Fishman and successors should be used in language analysis of modern societies.

Arua E. and Keoneng Magocha (2010), after studying the patterns of language use of children aged 6–15 in Botswana, revealed that domains are important for studying patterns of language use. The study highlighted the role and expansion of the domains of the local language. While English and Setswana continue to thrive, the other languages will continue to dwindle, with the threat of language death looming in the future. The study suggests that local languages other than Setswana be given more prominence and expansion in terms of domains to increase their prospects of survival.

Holmes and Lee, (2013) concluded that limited use of the minority language in private domains such as the home is an indicator of the shift to the majority language conversely the dynamic use of minority language makes maintenance inevitable.

Eric Ziem Bibiebome, et al. (2019), while studying domains loss of Ga language in the Accra community, emphasizes that inadequate enforcement of language policies, the attitude of Ga speakers, and pressure from the dominant languages are some of the key factors for domain loss of Ga speakers. The indigenous language has competitions for domains that were formerly labeled as Ga domains. The dominance and a demographic number of speakers of both English and Twi languages have made the language encroach on different domains of the indigenous language.

Since the Erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir possesses several minority ethnolinguistic groups speaking different languages, the identity of these groups has been in a continuous threat over the years. The prolonged language contact plus migration of these groups has adversely affected the patterns of language use among these minority groups. One such ethnolinguistic group is the Balti speech community living in the far-flung area of the Kargil district of the Ladakh region. The community is in touch with the dominant Kashmiri community and the Ladakh community.

The seasonal migration of these speakers from traditional homelands to cities and towns has altered the domains of language use among the group members. Languages like Urdu and English are taking over the place of the ethnic languages in many social domains, even if less in households which adversely affects the language. The present paper is an attempt to study different patterns of language use among Balti speakers of Kargil.

The Present Study

Very little is known about the language use patterns and language maintenance and shift among the Balti minority group of Kargil. No agency, government, or otherwise has been set

up for raising awareness and garnering efforts towards the Preservation of this Ethnolinguistic minority group. There has been no institutional support in favour of minority ethnolinguistic groups in J&K.

As the group lives in a far-flung area of Kashmir wherein temperature drops to minus 15 to 20 degrees Celsius which has resulted in the seasonal migration of the people of the community. This migration to the dominant communities is one of the reasons for domain losses of the Balti language in some cases and a complete shift in some other cases as well.

Changes in the language use patterns among these groups with negative consequences for their identity have been the primary motivation for undertaking the present study.

A questionnaire based on 15 open-ended questions was given to hundred Balti speakers who participated in this study. Apart from the demographic profile of the participants, the questionnaire focused on the patterns or domains of language use by Balti speakers in different social domains of the society. The domains include home, family, neighborhood, school/ college /office, etc. The use of language within the family/home domain was further narrowed down to seven subdomains based on the type of kin, i.e., parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, spouse, sibling, and extended relative. Some speakers who seasonally migrate to different parts of the state also participated in the study. Due to a limited number of participants, simple percentage was done and the results were reported.

Patterns of Language Use

As indicated in figure 1, all the participants have reported use of Balti extensively in homes and only 1% of the respondents reported the use of Urdu and Kashmiri also. With native Kashmiri people, the participants mostly use Urdu; however, Kashmiri is also being used as reported by 3% of the participants. The results for language use in the domains, villages/ Mohalla, and local Mosques indicate that 94% and 98% use Balti and 6% and 2% use Urdu. Only 1% have reported the use of Kashmiri in Mohalla /village. However, in offices/schools/colleges 72% have reported the use of Balti, 55% use Urdu and 11% have indicated that they use Kashmiri in this domain.

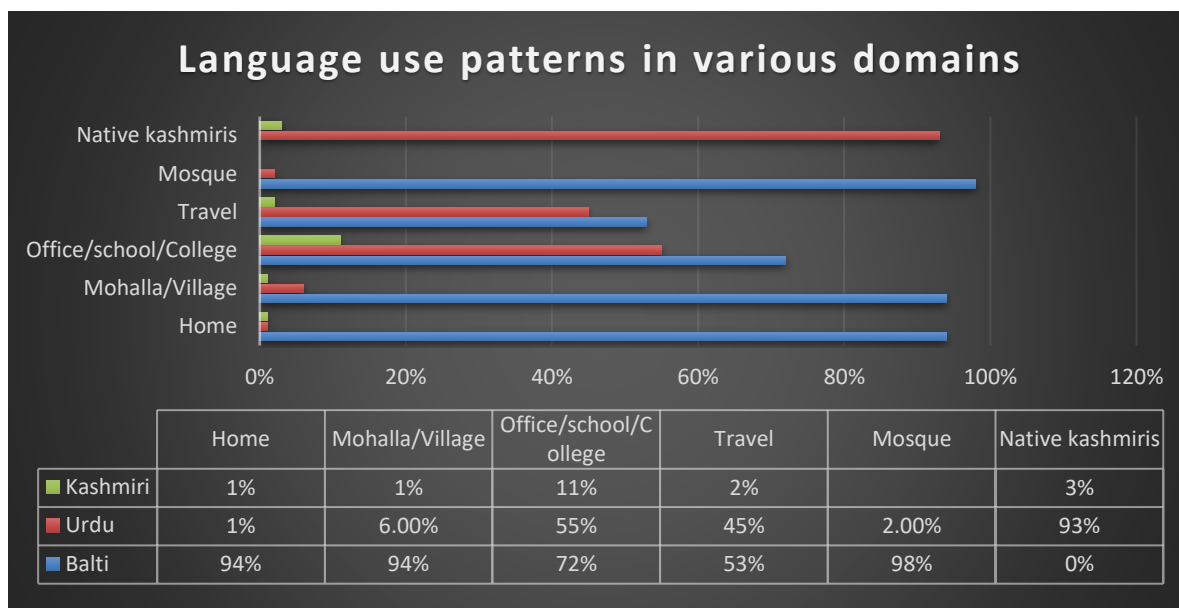


Figure 1: Domain-wise language use patterns among Baltis of Kargil.

During travel and in the domain categorized as office/school/college, the language used by the majority of the participants is again Balti followed by Urdu, with 53% reporting the use of Balti and 45% Urdu. For traveling within the Kargil district, the obvious choice would be Balti and while traveling to or within Kashmir, it would be Urdu. This has been reflected in the results as 53% have reported the use of Balti and 45% Urdu in this domain.

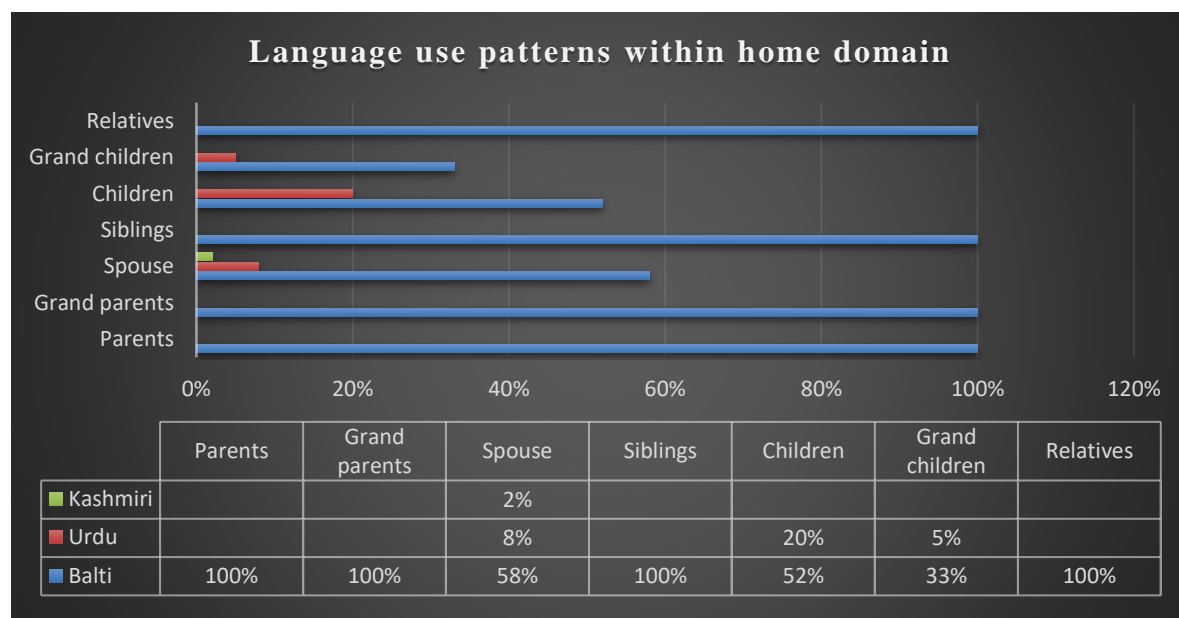


Figure 2: Language use patterns within the family domain among Balti Speakers of Kargil.

Within the family domain, as indicated in Figure 2, all the participants have reported extensive use of the Balti language, with parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended

relatives. Within these subdomains, 100% of the participants have reported the use of Balti. Since marriages are mostly endogamous so Balti is primarily used with spouses, however, 8% of the participants have reported the use of Urdu and a meager 2% use Kashmiri within this subdomain. The use of Urdu with children and grandchildren is significant given the possibility of language shift among younger generations. Use of Urdu with children has been reported by 20% of the participants and 5% with grandchildren, while 54% and 33% of the participants have reported the use of Balti with children and grandchildren respectively. All the participants were not married so less percentage of spouses, children, and grandchildren are reported.

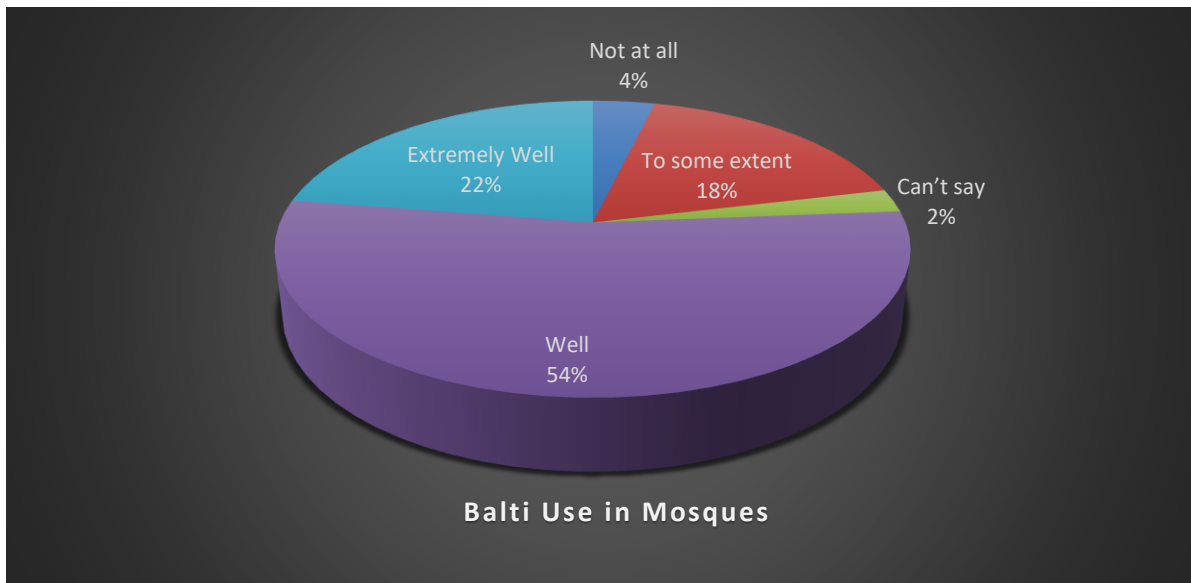


Figure 3: Use of Balti in Mosques and Religious Places.

The majority of the Balti Speakers of Kargil are Shia Muslims. Mosques are significant domains where speakers of different languages interact daily. The study finds that a majority of 54% of the participants use Balti in Mosques and other religious places is ‘well’, with another 23% reporting it to be ‘extremely well’. This indicates a fair degree of control of Baltis over these centers, at least in and around Kargil. A meager 4% have reported that there is no use of the language in this domain and 17% have reported the use of the language as ‘to some extent’.

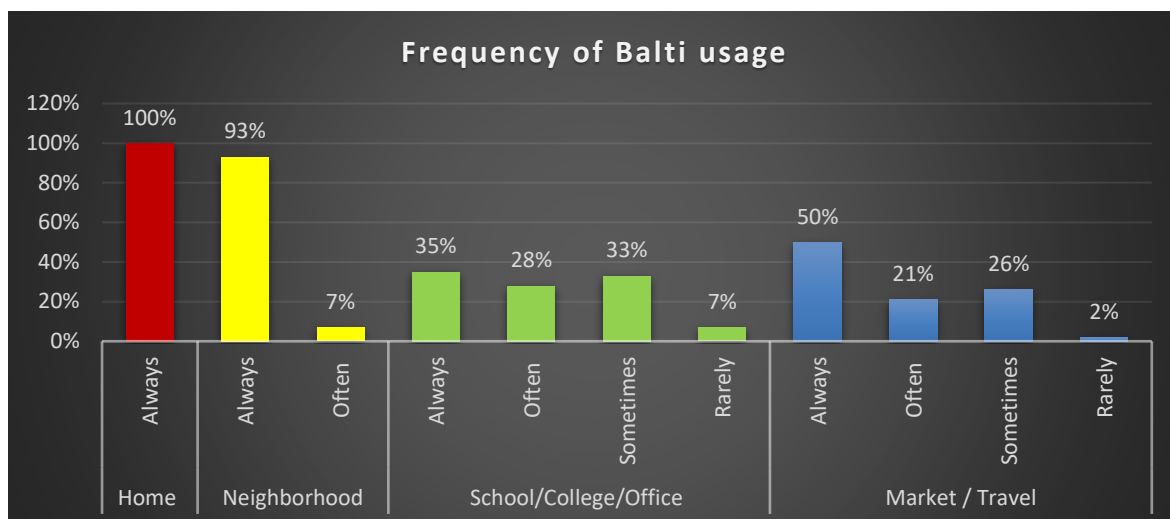


Figure 4: Frequency of Balti usage among various domains.

The frequency of Balti use (fig. 4) among various domains indicates an overwhelming use of the language in all the domains selected for the study, as 100% of the participants have said they ‘always’ use the language at home and 93% have reported that they ‘always’ use the language in a neighborhood with another 7% reporting that they use it ‘often’ in the latter domain. In the domain school/college/office, 35% have reported that they use it ‘always’ and 28% as ‘often’. While 33% have said that they use it ‘sometimes’, only a meager 7% use it ‘rarely’ in the school/college/office. A majority of 50% have said that they use it ‘always’ in the domain market/travel, with another 21% using it ‘often’ in the domain.

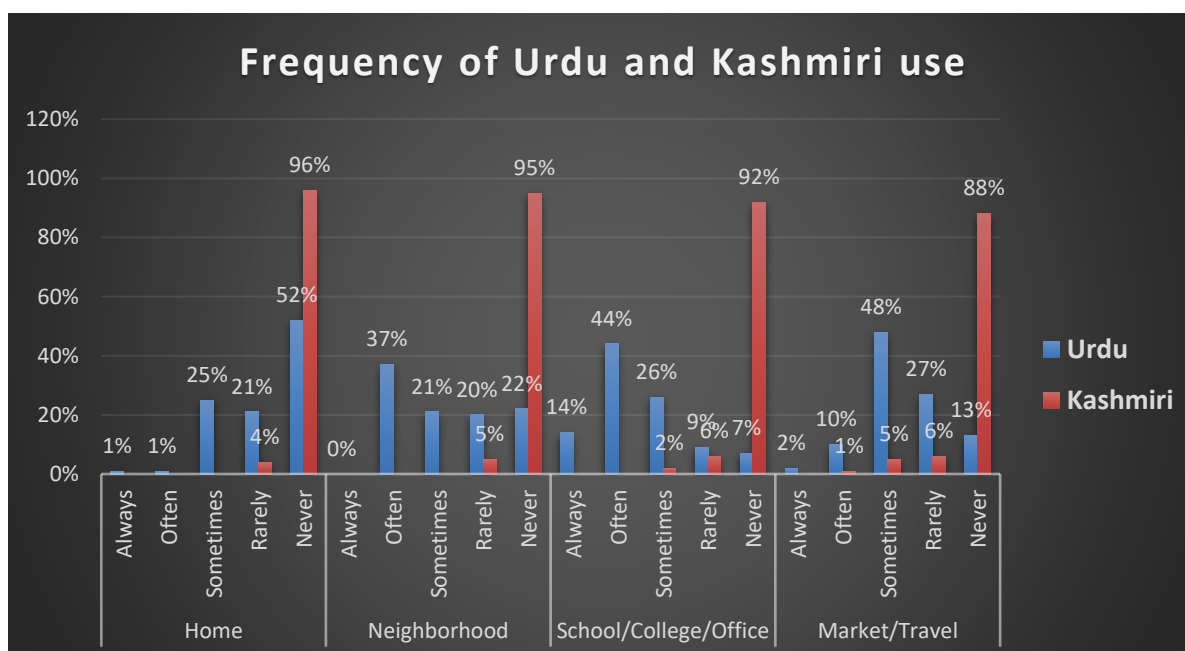


Figure 5: Frequency of Urdu and Kashmiri use in various domains among Baltis

The results for usage frequency of Urdu and Kashmir among Baltis in various domains indicate that Urdu has a significant role in the life of Baltis, especially outside their homes. Kashmiri doesn't seem to be appreciably present in their social lives like Urdu. On average more than 90% of the participants have maintained that they never use the language in any of the selected domains. In the neighborhood, 37% have mentioned that they use Urdu 'often' and in school/college/office, 14% use it 'always' and 44% use it 'often'. In the domain market/travel, 2% use Urdu 'always', 10% 'often' and 48% only 'sometimes'.

Conclusion

The trends of language shift have already set in among members of the ethnic Baltis of Kargil, as indicated in the results of language use patterns with a significant number of participants using Urdu in various domains of society. However, it has not reached a level where it could be concluded that the language of Baltis is under threat. There are no indications of significant disruption in the intergenerational transmission of language among Baltis of Kargil. The younger generations were found to acquire the ethnic language as their first language, which was also found to be the first language of choice within the home domain, and to a larger extent in the immediate neighborhood/Mohalla domain. Beyond immediate neighborhood/Mohalla, like schools, colleges, and offices or while traveling or in the market, language choice is primarily Urdu which has been the lingua-franca for the people of the community. The use of Urdu in market/travel is comparatively lesser than in school/college/office but higher than in neighborhood domain. The use of Kashmiri outside of the home domain was found to be insignificant. Even if the language has a written script but it has not yet been introduced in school curriculum which would have increased its strength and use among the members of the community and would have been better learned by the younger generations. Urdu is the medium of instruction in schools, colleges and offices so the young school going children have mastered Urdu language. This language also serves as lingua franca outside their community. Therefore Urdu is used more in domains like schools, colleges, government offices and even during travel. So Urdu has taken up many domains which would have been domains of ethnic language if Balti would have been introduced as a medium of instruction in schools, colleges etc. So the need of the hour is that Balti should be taught to younger generations of the community and should receive every possible help from government to introduce it in education and colleges for better understanding and use by the future generations. There has not been any lexical or morphological influence observed by the researcher while collecting data but prolonged contact with these languages would can the while scenario.

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