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**Shina Language at Risk: A Sociolinguistic Study from Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan**



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Abstract

Indigenous languages are becoming more and more of a worry in Pakistan, especially in places like Gilgit-Baltistan, where there are many different languages but not much importance. This study looks at the sociolinguistic decline of the Shina language, which is a major language in Gilgit-Baltistan and is in danger of going extinct. We chose twenty native Shina speakers from different parts of Gilgit-Baltistan to take part in semi-structured interviews that used qualitative data. Long-term residents talked about their experiences, how they saw things, and how they used language. The recordings were written down and then looked at using thematic analysis. The results show that more and more young people are choosing Urdu and English since they are common in schools, the media, and the workplace. On the other hand, Shina is slowly becoming less common in casual and home settings. Because it is not officially recognised, is not taught in schools, and is not covered by the mainstream media, this language has been pushed to the side. Shina speakers' feelings about their language show that they think their culture is fading away and that they need to protect their linguistic heritage. The study suggests steps that can be taken to protect languages, such as bilingual education policies, community-led revitalisation projects, digital documentation efforts, and local governments playing an active role in promoting languages. This study shows how social and political influences affect language evolution in Gilgit-Baltistan. To protect Shina as an important part of the region's culture, immediate action at the policy level is needed.

**Keywords:** *Shina Language, Language Endangerment, Language Shift, Gilgit-Baltistan, Mother Tongue*

**Introduction**

Language is very important for forming cultural identity, keeping memories alive, and bringing people together in a community. In countries with more than one language, like Pakistan, the sustainability of native languages is becoming more and more at risk because of social, political, economic, and educational pressures that favour languages like Urdu and English (Rahman, 2020; Mahboob & Jain, 2022). Shina, an indigenous Dardic language, is one of those that might die out. It is mostly spoken by a large number of people in Gilgit-Baltistan, especially in the districts of Gilgit, Ghizer, Diamer, and Astore. Shina serves not only as a means of communication but also as a cultural repository for the local communities in Gilgit-Baltistan. However, like many minoritized languages in Pakistan, it suffers from marginalization in state policy, education, media, and public life ((Zaman, Jamal, & Buriro, 2025). Despite being the mother tongue of a substantial portion of the population in the region, Shina remains underrepresented in formal education and receives little to no recognition in national language policy frameworks. This lack of institutional support has contributed to **language shift**, especially among younger generations, who increasingly prefer Urdu and English for social mobility and educational success (Zaman, Abbasi, & Chandio, 2025). Globalisation, people moving to cities, and the rise of digital media all make the problem of language endangerment in Gilgit-Baltistan worse. Shina is slowly dying out, especially in cities like Gilgit and Skardu, where not many people are working to document it and pass it on to the next generation (Zulfiqar & Hussain, 2024). Recent research shows that many young Shina speakers are passively bilingual, which means they understand the language but can't speak it well because they don't use it much at home or in school (Riaz & Ali, 2023).

Because the situation is so urgent, this study wants to look into the social and linguistic factors that are causing the Shina language to fade away in Gilgit-Baltistan. This study looks at the perceptions, practices, and language attitudes of native speakers using qualitative methods. Its goal is to add to the ongoing discussions about language preservation and help shape policy decisions that will help Shina come back and stay alive in its native context.

### **Shina Language in Gilgit-Baltistan**

The main Dardic language in Gilgit-Baltistan, Shina, is becoming increasingly endangered due to the fact that people are changing their attitudes towards language, there is insufficient institutional support, and language is not being passed down from one generation to the next (Hussain, Nawaz, & Ali, 2025; Nazir et al., 2018). Khan and Bibi (2024) and Zulfiqar and Hussain (2024) have noted that Shina has a rich cultural heritage; however, it is generally absent from formal education systems, state media, and official language regulations. An increasing number of young individuals are employing Urdu and English to advance in life, while Shina is exclusively employed in informal contexts, such as family conversations and community events (Riaz & Ali, 2023; Shams & Anwar, 2020). Research indicates that Urdu is increasingly replacing the national language in ordinary conversation, even in households where the local language is spoken. This is particularly accurate in cities such as Gilgit, Skardu, and Astore (Zaman, Majeed, & Naper, 2025).

This decline is a component of a broader trend that is affecting numerous native languages in Pakistan, particularly in regions such as Gilgit-Baltistan, which are politically disadvantaged despite their linguistic diversity (Rahman, 2020; Akbar & Jabeen, 2024). Outside factors, such as national language regulations, and internal community factors, such as prestige bias and the notion that Urdu and English are "modern," negatively impact Shina's sociolinguistic health (Nazir et al., 2018; Zulfiqar & Hussain, 2024). According to scholars, the absence of Shina in both digital and print media reduces the likelihood that individuals will consider the language (Dawn News, 2025; Hassan & Noor, 2021). In recent years, there have been endeavours to establish writing systems and document the language (Zia, 2019); however, these endeavours are still fragmented and lack institutional support (Khan & Zaman, 2023). Shina is at a significant risk of losing its language and even becoming extinct in future generations if preservation efforts are not implemented promptly and consistently (Riaz & Ali, 2023; Mahboob & Jain, 2022; Shams & Anwar, 2022).

### **Literature Review**

#### **Minority Languages and Language Endangerment**

Language endangerment is a worldwide problem where smaller language groups slowly lose their native languages because of changes in politics, education, and the economy (UNESCO, 2021). Pakistan has more than 70 languages spoken, and it is going through a major language change, especially in its border areas like Gilgit-Baltistan (Rahman, 2020). Major languages like Urdu and English, which are supported by the government and have a wider range of communication, are often blamed for the loss of linguistic diversity (Mahboob & Jain, 2022). In public, educational, and administrative settings, these dominant languages become linked with upward mobility, pushing regional and indigenous languages to the edges.

### **The Language Landscape of Gilgit-Baltistan**

Shina, Burushaski, Wakhi, and Balti are just a few of the languages spoken in Gilgit-Baltistan, which is one of the most linguistically diverse areas of Pakistan (Akbar & Jabeen, 2024). Shina is the most widely spoken Dardic language, but it doesn't have any institutional support. Shina is not taught in schools, written down in official documents, or shown in the news (Khan & Zaman, 2023). Even though many people speak it as their first language, it is often seen as less important than Urdu in formal and academic settings (Zulfiqar & Hussain, 2024).

### **Change of language and how young people feel about it**

Language attitudes are crucial for the preservation of languages. Recent studies indicate that younger Shina speakers are increasingly adopting Urdu and English due to educational policy, peer influence, and social standing (Nazir et al., 2018; Riaz & Ali, 2023). Shams and Anwar (2020) conducted an ethnographic research of Shina speakers in Gilgit city, revealing that younger individuals frequently construct hybrid identities through language switching. For instance, people converse in Shina at home while employing Urdu and English in educational, professional, and public settings. This particular linguistic usage within a specialised domain is a prevalent indicator of incipient language attrition (Hussain, Nawaz, & Ali, 2025).

### **Language Policies and Exclusion from Institutions**

Pakistan has always chosen Urdu as the national language and English as the official and academic language (Rahman, 2020). This dual-language policy has pushed regional languages like Shina to the edges, with few or no representatives in state institutions or schools (Akbar & Jabeen, 2024; Mahboob & Jain, 2022). Zulfiqar and Hussain (2024) say that without being included in the curriculum or media, Shina can only be passed down informally, which is very likely to fade away in multilingual settings.

### **Efforts to document and bring back to life**

Even though the government doesn't care about Shina, local scholars and cultural groups have tried to keep it alive. For example, Muhammad Amin Zia's book *Shina Qaida aur Grammar* (2019) on Shina spelling and grammar is a step towards making things more standardised and writing them down. But these programmes don't have official support from the government or are part of the school system (Zia, 2019). Khan and Bibi (2024) say that community-driven revitalisation programmes are important but can't last without support and funding from institutions.

### **Identity and Resistance in Sociolinguistics**

Interestingly, Shina speakers in some places are very emotionally attached to their language and proud of their culture (Hassan & Noor, 2021). This attachment is a way of resisting the idea that all languages should be the same. Cultural pride alone can't stop language shift, though. It needs to be backed up by passing down language from one generation to the next, getting official recognition, and being seen in the media (Khan & Zaman, 2023; Shams & Anwar, 2020).

The literature makes it clear that a number of sociolinguistic, institutional, and ideological factors are putting the Shina language in Gilgit-Baltistan at risk. The language is still culturally important, but it is becoming less important because it doesn't get enough institutional support, fewer young people are using it, and Urdu

and English are becoming more popular. To protect this important linguistic heritage, we need to make changes to policies, get the community involved, and use bilingual education models.

### **Statement of Problem**

Even though more and more researchers are interested in endangered languages in Pakistan, the Shina language spoken by a large number of people in Gilgit-Baltistan is still not well studied in modern sociolinguistic research. Most of the research that has been done so far has looked at language policy on a large scale (Rahman, 2020; Mahboob & Jain, 2022) or general trends of language shift across Pakistan (Khan & Zaman, 2023). But there haven't been many real-world studies that look at how people actually use the Shina language, how it is passed down from one generation to the next, and how the community feels about it. There isn't much qualitative research that lets native Shina speakers talk about their experiences with language change, moving to the city, and identity in the context of Gilgit-Baltistan. There are also not enough studies on community-led revitalisation strategies, bilingual education, and the sociolinguistic problems of keeping languages alive in this area (Zulfiqar & Hussain, 2024; Riaz & Ali, 2023). This study's goal is to fill this important gap by doing a thorough sociolinguistic study based in the Gilgit-Baltistan area.

### **Research Objectives**

- To investigate the current status and patterns of Shina language use among different age groups in Gilgit-Baltistan.
- To explore the sociolinguistic factors contributing to the decline of the Shina language.
- To examine the attitudes of native speakers toward Shina, Urdu, and English in various social and educational domains.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the current status of Shina language usage across different domains (home, education, media) in Gilgit-Baltistan?
2. What sociolinguistic factors are contributing to the decline of Shina among native speakers?
3. How do different generations of Shina speakers perceive the value and utility of their mother tongue compared to Urdu and English?

### **Significance of the Study**

This research is significant both academically and socially. At an academic level, it contributes to the limited body of literature on endangered languages in northern Pakistan, especially within the Dardic language family. It provides a contextualized understanding of how language shift and endangerment operate in multilingual, peripheral regions like Gilgit-Baltistan. By foregrounding the voices of native speakers, this study offers empirical evidence on the cultural, emotional, and functional significance of Shina, helping scholars and policymakers appreciate its role in identity formation and community cohesion.

On a practical level, the findings can inform policymakers, educators, and local leaders in designing inclusive language policies, bilingual education models, and community-based revitalization efforts. The study also aims to raise awareness among

Shina-speaking communities about the urgent need to protect and promote their linguistic heritage. In doing so, it aligns with broader goals of cultural preservation, linguistic diversity, and sustainable development in multilingual nations like Pakistan.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to look into how the Shina language has changed over time in its real-life sociocultural setting. When trying to understand complicated social issues like language attitudes, identity, and passing things down from one generation to the next, a qualitative method works best, especially from an emic (insider) point of view (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). The case study design lets us look closely at how Shina-speaking people in Gilgit-Baltistan use language, taking into account the region's unique cultural and linguistic dynamics..

### Targeted Population

This study focuses on native Shina speakers residing in several regions of Gilgit-Baltistan, including Gilgit, Skardu, and Diamer.

### Sampling Technique

Researchers employed a purposeful sampling technique to ensure the selection of participants with extensive knowledge and capable of providing profound insights into the usage, transmission, and attitudes towards the Shina language.

### Sample Size:

There were 20 people in the sample, including youth. The sample size is small but varied, which means that it focuses on depth and detail instead of generalizing statistics.

### Data Collection

Researchers used semi-structured interviews to gather data. The interviews were done in Shina, Urdu, or English, depending on what the participants wanted, and they were recorded with permission.

### Data Analysis Technique

The collected data was transcribed and analyzed using **thematic analysis**, following the six-step model by Braun and Clarke (2021).

### Ethical Considerations

All ethical protocols were strictly followed. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any point. **Informed consent** was obtained prior to recording interviews. Identities of participants were anonymized to maintain confidentiality and privacy. Ethical approval was sought from the relevant academic institution, and data was stored securely to prevent unauthorised access (Beskow, 2019).

## Data Analysis

### Language Shift and Domain Loss

A significant number of participants emphasized the increasing shift from Shina to Urdu and English across nearly all domains of life. Particularly, younger parents shared that Shina is often missing from their children's daily routines. One respondent (R7) observed: *"At home, I try to speak Shina with my kids, but they reply in Urdu. They find Shina difficult and even feel it's not important."* Another participant (R2), a school teacher, added: *"Even in casual school conversations, students avoid Shina. It's as if they've unlearned it."* Some parents (R8, R11) expressed guilt over their inability to enforce the use of Shina: *"We started in Urdu with them*

*because it seemed necessary for their studies. Now they hardly speak a word of Shina."*

The above reflections substantiate the phenomenon of **domain shrinkage** (Fishman, 1991), where minority languages lose their relevance in domains like education, media, and formal interaction. The encroachment of dominant state languages (Urdu) and global languages (English) is indicative of a **shift in functional load**, where Shina is reduced to informal settings only (Hornberger, 2006).

This aligns with research that suggests such shifts often go unnoticed until it's too late (Dorian, 1981). If this trend continues, Shina may soon reach a "**moribund**" stage where native transmission ceases (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

### Intergenerational Transmission Gaps

Older respondents (especially R12, R13, R17) unanimously lamented the loss of language continuity between generations. One 65-year-old grandfather (R12) said: *"My grandchildren only speak Urdu. They understand a little Shina, but they never speak it. It's painful."* A retired community elder (R13) added: *"We used to sing lullabies and tell stories in Shina. Now, mothers are doing it in Urdu and even English."* Young parents (R6, R10) admitted a lack of proficiency themselves: *"Honestly, I can speak Shina but not well enough to teach my children. That's the reality."*

This breakdown in intergenerational transmission is **perhaps the most critical marker of language endangerment** (UNESCO, 2003). Once children stop acquiring a language naturally at home, revitalization becomes far more challenging and requires institutional intervention (King, 2001).

The case of Shina mirrors similar trends among minoritized languages globally, where rapid sociolinguistic transitions marginalize mother tongues within a generation (Crystal, 2000). As the family domain is traditionally the **last stronghold** of endangered languages, its erosion signals a grave turning point (Spolsky, 2009).

### Perceived Prestige and Language Shame

Many younger respondents reported internalized stigma associated with speaking Shina in public. A university student (R3) noted: *"In school, if you speak Shina, they laugh. Everyone wants to sound modern by using English."* Another respondent (R5), an urban college-goer, said: *"Shina is for villagers. We don't want to sound backward."* A female respondent (R18) added: *"Even in homes, mothers teach Urdu because they fear their children will lag behind."*

These reflections illustrate the **prestige disparity** that often leads to **voluntary language abandonment** (Bourdieu, 1991; Woolard, 1985). When a community internalizes such negative ideologies, even well-meaning individuals may choose dominant languages for upward mobility (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

This trend is widely observed in postcolonial contexts, where former colonial languages or national lingua francas are positioned as gateways to economic success, while regional languages are stigmatized (Phillipson, 1992; Rahman, 2004). Consequently, Shina speakers are caught in a dilemma between **identity** and **integration**.

### Institutional Marginalization and Lack of Representation

There was widespread concern among teachers, professionals, and local leaders (R4, R9, R15) about the absence of Shina from public institutions. A teacher (R9) noted: *"There is no textbook in Shina. Students never read or write in their language."* A local radio announcer (R15) shared: *"We proposed a 15-minute Shina news segment, but it was rejected. They said there's no audience."* Another respondent (R4) added: *"Even government forms, street signs, or announcements are never in Shina. It's as if it doesn't exist."*

The systemic exclusion of Shina reflects **structural linguistic injustice** (May, 2012). When a language is denied representation in schools, governance, or media, it is symbolically erased (Tollefson, 2002). Lack of institutional support leads to loss of written tradition and reduces opportunities for language development and standardization.

This undermines both **instrumental** and **integrative** functions of language (Gardner & Lambert,

1972). Without state recognition, Shina cannot fulfill its potential as a language of literacy, administration, or creative expression, further relegating it to private spaces only.

## Cultural Identity and Emotional Attachment

In contrast to earlier themes, many respondents (R1, R14, R16, R20) demonstrated a deep emotional connection with Shina. An elder (R14) stated:

*"Shina is who we are. Without it, our culture will be lost." A (R16) shared: "When I write poetry in Shina, I feel my ancestors' voice in my heart." A (R1) said: "Even if my kids don't speak Shina, I will always pray in Shina."*

This theme illustrates the **symbolic capital** of Shina as a carrier of **collective memory, spirituality, and identity** (Fishman, 1996; Edwards, 2009). Emotional attachment plays a crucial role in sustaining resistance to language shift. These sentiments may serve as a **foundation for bottom-up revitalization** movements, particularly through oral literature and cultural performances (Hinton et al., 2018).

Despite institutional neglect, community-driven preservation efforts often begin with such emotional connections. They represent **latent language resilience**, waiting to be activated through policy, education, and media intervention (Austin & Sallabank, 2011).

The responses suggest that the community knows what needs to be done and is ready for change. Fishman's (1991) Reversing Language Shift (RLS) model suggests that revival should be built on passing down language from one generation to the next, teaching it in schools, and getting people interested in the community. This is in keeping with that paradigm. Digital platforms like YouTube, mobile apps, and online storytelling are a good approach to keep minority languages alive in the 21st century (Pietikäinen et al., 2018). If schools and local governments adopt these technologies, they can help young people easily reconnect with their language heritage.

All of the results demonstrate that the Shina language is in big trouble because of big changes (like state language policy and globalisation) and subtle changes (like family language choice and attitudes). But the community has a shot since they have strong emotional ties and real plans about how to improve things. We need to use new digital tools, assistance from institutions, and mobilisation from the community to safeguard Shina. The results reveal that the language is in danger, but they also demonstrate that it could be brought back to life if people from diverse areas work together in a meaningful way.

## Discussion

The study's results reveal that the Shina language is dying out in Gilgit-Baltistan because of a multitude of things, such as institutions not caring about it, changing ideas about language, and decreased communication between generations. The fact that everyone agrees that Shina is generally not used in schools, businesses, and the media anymore is a clear sign of domain loss. Fishman (1991) believes that a language loses its utility quickly when it stops being used in public and only utilised at home. It seems that the fact that Urdu and English are becoming more and more popular in both formal and casual contexts is speeding up this process for Shina. People reported that kids answer in Urdu even when they are spoken to in Shina. This illustrates how little Shina is used in everyday life.

The weakening of intergenerational transmission is also worrying. A number of older people said they were sad that their grandchildren either don't use Shina at all or don't understand it. This is a very dangerous time for a language, as UNESCO's (2003) language vitality framework shows, because it shows that older people are no longer passing on their language to younger people. This is a major risk factor for the eventual death of the language. The data show that younger family members, who mostly learn Urdu and English in school and through the media, are becoming more and more disconnected from their linguistic heritage. This disconnect could lead to permanent language loss in the near future if it isn't fixed on purpose and in a planned way.



Another new theme is how people, especially young people, see speaking Shina in a bad light. A lot of younger people said that speaking Shina in public is frowned upon and seen as a sign of being behind the times. This feeling of being linguistically inferior comes from larger social hierarchies, where English is seen as modern and progressive and local languages like Shina are seen as old-fashioned or rural. Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power says that some languages become prestigious not because of their own qualities, but because they are associated with power, status, and access to opportunity. The fact that Shina is less valuable than other languages has led to a prestige economy that encourages people to switch languages in order to move up in society.

The answers also show that there isn't enough institutional support for Shina. Teachers and people in the community said that Shina is not taught in school, mentioned in official communications, shown in textbooks, or shown in the news. This lack of visibility in institutions makes the language less useful in both symbolic and practical ways. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) says that when a language is intentionally or passively left out of education and government, it is a form of linguistic genocide. In this situation, Shina is not only being pushed to the side, but it is also not getting the systemic help it needs to survive and grow.

The research demonstrates that the community maintains a strong affective attachment to Shina and a strong sense of cultural pride, despite the fact that these issues are concerning. Many individuals stated that Shina is a significant component of their identity and that its loss would result in the loss of their cultural and historical heritage. This visceral attachment to the language is a significant advantage, even for those who do not frequently employ it. According to Hinton et al. (2018), language revitalisation initiatives are frequently successful when they are founded on the affective connections that the community has with its linguistic heritage. Despite the fact that its usage has decreased, there is still a robust foundation for revitalisation initiatives. The research indicates that the respondents are enthusiastic about revitalising the language, which is a positive development. Participants proposed a variety of strategies to increase the language's allure to young people, such as teaching it to young children, creating digital content and literature in the language, and utilising contemporary platforms such as YouTube. Global best practices for revitalising a language include community-led activities, the use of technology, and the instruction of the native language (Austin & Sallabank, 2011; Grenoble & Whaley, 2020). Young individuals are enthusiastic about utilising digital instruments to acquire new languages. This demonstrates a method of "technologized revitalisation," which integrates traditional knowledge with contemporary technologies to preserve and disseminate endangered languages. In conclusion, the research demonstrates that society is unable to reconcile the emotive, cultural, and historical significance of their own language with the effects of national and global languages. The community's emotional attachment to Shina and willingness to propose practical remedies provide me with some optimism, despite the concern regarding the manner in which language is used and transmitted. The preservation of Shina as a living language in Gilgit-Baltistan could be achieved through a coordinated effort that incorporates grassroots mobilisation, institutional reforms, and the use of modern media.

### **Conclusion**

The research indicates that the Shina language in Gilgit-Baltistan is in a precarious state. This is due to the fact that it is not being utilised as frequently in social settings, it is not being transmitted from one generation to the next, there are detrimental language ideologies, and institutions are not providing it with sufficient attention. The narratives recounted by the participants demonstrate that Shina is becoming less significant and beneficial in both personal and community contexts, particularly among young individuals, as an increasing number of individuals transition to Urdu and English. People in the community are committed to maintaining the language's vitality and emotional attachment, as evidenced by the survey. This emotional and cultural dedication can be a powerful force for the preservation of languages when utilised appropriately through changes in education, community-based initiatives, and new technologies. The findings indicate that it is imperative to immediately modify local and national policies in order to acknowledge and advocate for linguistic diversity as a significant component of cultural identity and history. The Shina language can be preserved for future generations in Gilgit-Baltistan by integrating grassroots initiatives with institutional support.

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