From Linguicism to Language Attrition: The Changing Language Ecology of Gilgit-Baltistan

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Abstract
The study examines potential threats and prospects for the linguistic ecosystem of Balti and other local languages spoken in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. The researchers employ a mixed-methods approach in the study and the data is collected from 305 respondents through a survey questionnaire developed on Google forms. The respondents are either native Balti speakers or use Balti as their second or link language. The questionnaire used in the study contains both close-ended and open-ended questions. The findings of the study show that the linguistic ecosystem of Balti and other local languages is highly endangered and has been severely contaminated. These languages are losing their domains of use at an increased pace mainly due to the arrival of digital media in the region. Language attrition, mediated by relexification, is at its peak, and the future prospects for Balti and other minority languages of Gilgit-Baltistan seem quite bleak due to the growing influence of linguistic imperialism in the region which is being facilitated mainly through the system of education and the digital media.

Keywords: Linguistic ecosystem, language contact, relexification, digital media, language shift.

Introduction
We, human beings, live and flourish in a diverse ecosystem in the same way as the other animal and plant species in the world. Romaine (2008) extends the idea of biodiversity a little further by asserting that, “[t]his diversity is reflected not only in the rich variety of plant and animal species and ecosystems in nature but also in the variety of cultures and languages in human societies” (p. 07). Correspondingly, Krauss (2007) believes that the ecosystem for languages is based:

…on the model of the term biosphere which we use for the ecosystem of biodiversity that is the delicate membrane around our little planet in which we have evolved and on which
our survival as living organisms utterly depends, I construct the term *logosphere* for the ecosystem of linguistic diversity that is the delicate environment of cultural and intellectual and linguistic diversity in which we have evolved and on which, I herewith claim, our survival as humanity utterly depends. (p.16)

The way Krauss juxtaposes the term ‘logosphere’ with ‘biosphere’ highlights that human survival is not only dependent on suitable physical conditions on the earth but is equally dependent on the sustenance of linguistic diversity. He rightfully asserts that humans not only inhabit a certain physical space but also constitute a cultural space through the use of languages. Under usual circumstances, when two individuals come to interact with each other, they employ the language(s) that both of them share; usually, that is the mother tongue. However, in those contact situations when the interlocutors do not share the same mother tongue, they opt for a common language to help them understand each other and the language which helps mediate both the speakers is called a *lingua franca*. A lingua franca is “any language that is used between two people who don’t share the same first language” (Myers-Scotton, 2006, p. 5). The improved means of transportation and communication, across the globe, have brought people from different ethnic, religious, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds together providing greater opportunities for language contact. However, language contact situations bring a number of positive and negative effects with them. This very phenomenon of language contact has transformed the globe into a multilingual society; since in a multilingual world, “‘language contact’ occurs when speakers of different languages interact and their languages influence each other” (Matras, 2009, p. i). In this way, a community that was “…typically a monolingual once …becomes bilingual as a result of contact with another (usually socially more powerful) group and becomes transitionally bilingual in the new language until their own language is given up altogether” (Romaine, 2000, p. 51). Stronger nations and their languages may not see such a situation owing to their social status as “language death does not happen in privileged communities; it happens to the dispossessed and disempowered” (Romaine, 2008, p. 09). *This form of linguistic imperialism leads to linguicism, a situation in which one language and its speakers are regarded as superior over the others* (Brenzinger, 2017; Phillipson, 1992, 2009). *Languages spoken in Pakistan are no exception to this fact; the Balti language spoken in the Baltistan region of Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan) is a victim of linguistic imperialism where it is losing grounds to the dominant languages, viz. Urdu and English* (Aikhenvald, 2019; Dash, 2020).
Owing to the recent surge in language contact opportunities in the linguistic ecosystem of Balti, language shift has been so rapid that Balti may not be able to sustain for a longer period of time if nothing is done in time. A renowned local scholar, Muhammad Hassan Hasrat maintains, “...for a language to thrive, it is...necessary for it to be used in day-to-day newspapers, journals, and writings, and such opportunities are not available for Balti language” (Hasrat, 2021, p. 278; translated into English by researcher1). The future of Balti and other minority languages in Gilgit-Baltistan (an area overseen by Pakistan as a self-governing region) is at stake as the advent of electronic/social media and the internet has accelerated the pace of language degradation to an unprecedented level (Tsunoda, 2006). These media platforms seem to have fast-tracked the lexical attrition of Balti as the Balti youth are unable to utter a complete sentence in their L1 without mixing words from the dominant languages (Urdu and English).

**Literature Review**

The modern world, aided with information technology and social media, is growing into a mosaic of different cultures and languages growing together and complementing each other. The increasing use of social media and the internet has changed the conventional notion of language contact; now, the speakers of two different languages do not need to live in the same neighborhood to have language contact. Unlike the olden days, living in their own countries or societies they can interact via social media and the internet (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2013; Hoffer, 2002). In this way, “…the internet and social media have …contributed to increasing the opportunities of contact among speakers of different languages” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017, p. 906). However, the contact in such scenarios helps the dominant languages to flourish as compared to the minority languages; that is why, “when groups are in contact, they both value their own language, but typically the less powerful group learns the other group’s language, not vice versa” (Myers-Scotton, 2006, p. 09). As a result, the participant belonging to the minority language transforms into a bilingual. In this case, Myers-Scotton’s (2006) definition of bilingualism applies, which states that “bilingualism is the ability to use two or more languages sufficiently to carry on a limited casual conversation” (p. 44). This phenomenon of media-mediated bilingualism further strengthens the dominant languages as “…new media, including broadcast media and the Internet, usually serve only to expand the scope and power of the dominant language at the expense of endangered languages” (UNESCO 2003, p. 11). Such language contact situations where the speakers of different languages are exposed to dominant languages either conventionally or through media promote the dominant
languages in all the domains of language use. Once the dominant languages replace the minority languages in important domains of use, it leads the minority languages towards language attrition. Language attrition is a product of language contact where the individual bilingual/multilingual belonging to minority language groups choose one of the languages that they can speak to use in their day-to-day affairs based on its effectiveness and instrumentality for jobs and other social affairs (Cholakova, 2015; Austin & Sallabank, 2011; Romaine, 2010; Miyaoka, Sakiyama, & Krauss, 2007; Mufwene, 2002). Abandoning a language in this way results in language attrition and then language shift (Romaine, 2000; Crystal, 2014; Fishman, 2001). In the process of language attrition, the weaker language erodes continually till it is either very much restricted to a few informal settings or domains of use in the native society or it slowly and gradually ceases to exist at all, which is termed as language shift (Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Kedrebeogo, 1998). “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)” (Fishman, 2000, p. 17). The minor languages all around the globe are facing a similar threat from the dominant languages spoken around them. “Some linguists believe that the prospects for survival of the majority of these languages over the next century are very gloomy” (Romaine, 2000, p. 51). A number of scholars working on language vitality believe that by the end of some decades most of the languages spoken in the world will go extinct due to a number of reasons pushing the natives towards language shift (Grenoble, 2011; Crystal, 2010; Tsunoda, 2006). That is why “many smaller languages are dying out due to the spread of a few world languages such as English, French, or Chinese. It has been estimated that eleven languages are spoken by about 70 percent of the world’s population” (Romaine, 2000, pp. 50-51). In this fast-changing world, the minor languages are losing ground to the very few languages spoken by the majority of the world’s populace. This phenomenon of language shift is disturbing the equilibrium of the linguistic ecosystem in the world for the languages spoken by a smaller number of people.

A language, like an animal species, according to some scholars (e.g., Steffensen & Fill, 2014), thrives in its respective ecosystem. If its ecosystem is disturbed, the language may cease to live. Grenoble (2011) has described language ecology in the following words:

The field of language ecology studies the interrelationships between speakers and their languages as situated in their full (contemporary and historical) context. An implicit and critical part of language ecology is the fact that language is not isolated from other social,
cultural and ecological factors but interacts with them. Such factors include those which are traditionally considered to be within the realm of linguistics, such as the presence and use of other languages, as well as those which are not, such as economics, politics and the physical or natural environment. (p. 30)

One needs to consider two kinds of factors while looking at the ecosystem of a language, namely:

a. linguistic, b. non-linguistic. “The ecological approach to language considers the complex web of relationships that exists between the environment, languages and their speakers” (Wendel, 2005, p. 51). No one can separate the diverse nature of variables found in the very ecosystem. However, the parasitic elements in the linguistic ecosystem consume the weaker species to maintain their own dominance. Therefore, according to Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas (2018, p. 123):

… maintenance of a linguistic hierarchy typically involves a pattern of stigmatization of dominated languages (mere ‘dialects, ‘vernaculars’), glorification of the dominant language (its superior clarity, richer vocabulary) and rationalization of the relationship between the languages, always to the benefit of the dominant one (access to the superior culture and ‘progress’).

In the context of Pakistan, English is the dominant language that was brought to Indo-Pak during the British colonization of the country. The aftermath of colonization is still visible in India and Pakistan a long time after the departure of colonizers in 1947. Their legacy, the English language, still rules this part of the world where people prefer English as the medium of education over their national and provincial languages (Crystal, 2003). English is considered a panacea and a considerable command of the language equates to the knowledge and quality education required for guaranteeing a successful life (Shamim, 2011; Mckay & Rubdy, 2009; Ferguson, 2006). Ironically, the very facility is not available to common masses in its true sense but only the elite of the country have access to it thereby making them more dominant than ever before (Mansoor, 2005). “English has thus far served to consolidate the interest of the powerful globally and locally and to maintain an exploitative world order that can disenfranchise speakers of other languages” (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2018). The language decides the eligibility of the people to integrate into the upper class of the society; thus, it pressurizes the minorities to assimilate into the nation-state which as a result compels the minorities to abandon their own language for the sake of better life prospects (Pandharipande, 2002; Phillipson, 1992). This phenomenon puts a number of minority languages at the risk of language attrition and consequently language endangerment.
(Derhemi, 2002; Eriksen, 1992). Such conditions in a society pave the way to imperialism and inequality.

Our world divides people into hierarchies and this division directly or indirectly results in inequalities, “…we live in a world characterized by inequality – of gender, nationality, race, class, income, and language” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47). Inequality, in one way or the other, in third-world countries is a product of linguistic imperialism. The local languages are ignored and denied access to media and education which “…intensifies the marginalization of local languages and is definitely a threat to the local language ecology” (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2018, p. 129). Once the language ecology of the local languages is disturbed, the natives unintentionally play a decisive role in the extinction of their native language(s). Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (2018) treat linguistic imperialism as an independent variable stimulating structural and cultural inequalities which as a result disturb the natural equilibrium of the linguistic ecosystem of minority languages.

The current study is one of the first of its nature on the Balti and other local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, which endeavors to determine the factors responsible for pushing Balti and other languages of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, out of their domains of use in their own linguistic ecosystem by answering the following questions.

1. What are the main factors behind language attrition, especially among the Balti L1 speakers, in Gilgit-Baltistan?
2. How does the phenomenon of language contact contaminate the linguistic ecosystem of Balti and other local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan?
3. What are the attitudes of the L1 speakers of Balti and other local languages towards their mother tongues and the dominant languages, i.e., Urdu and English, found in their immediate surroundings?

Methodology
The data for this study have been collected through a questionnaire, comprising both close-ended and open-ended questions, on google forms disseminated among the people of Gilgit-Baltistan via emails, messenger, and WhatsApp. The sample of the study comprises the natives of Gilgit-Baltistan who speak Balti and other minority languages spoken in this very region of Pakistan. For the purpose of this study, Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas’s (2018) idea of the hazardous effects of linguistic imperialism for the linguistic ecology of minority languages serves as the theoretical
framework. The sample of this study consists of 305 respondents.
The data collected through the questionnaire on google forms was analyzed using Mann-Whitney U test as the data was not normal for all variables. Moreover, responses to the open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire helped to “… refine, extend, or explain the general picture” (Creswell, 2012, p. 542) of the findings obtained through the quantitative data.

Findings
The data was not normal for all variables, so a nonparametric test (i.e., Mann-Whitney U test) has been applied for the analysis. Adhering to the norms of the Mann-Whitney U test, the data have been placed in a single table and the statements have been placed in a particular sequence according to their affiliation to the emerging themes after the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Furthermore, the statements have been numbered to make referencing easier while interpreting the findings.

Table 1: Language contact and its impact on the linguistic ecosystem of Balti and other local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.</td>
<td>Use of Urdu words in mother tongue communication by the L1 speakers</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>150.29</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>146.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.</td>
<td>Use of English words in mother tongue communication by the L1 speakers</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>165.86</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>111.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>Switching from mother tongue to Urdu or English while communicating a particular idea</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>161.64</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>124.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d.</td>
<td>Use of English or Urdu equivalents while communicating in their L1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>165.08</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>111.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.</td>
<td>Media of Urdu and English lexical infusion into L1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>155.81</td>
<td>0.284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>146.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>The most influential media in injecting words into local languages</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>154.06</td>
<td>0.635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>148.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g.</td>
<td>language(s) used on the social media platforms</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>159.82</td>
<td>0.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>137.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>h.</td>
<td>Language(s) used while posting a status</td>
<td></td>
<td>154.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i.</td>
<td>Language(s) used while commenting on social media</td>
<td></td>
<td>156.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j.</td>
<td>Use of mother tongue while posting a status or commenting on one</td>
<td></td>
<td>148.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k.</td>
<td>Ability to count in the mother tongue(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td>143.68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l.</td>
<td>Use of kinship terminologies by adults</td>
<td></td>
<td>147.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m.</td>
<td>Use of kinship terminologies by children</td>
<td></td>
<td>150.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.</td>
<td>Urdu and English are replacing the local languages</td>
<td></td>
<td>160.70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o.</td>
<td>Social media help dominant languages</td>
<td></td>
<td>155.79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p.</td>
<td>English and Urdu are helpful but not mother tongue</td>
<td></td>
<td>156.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q.</td>
<td>No future for my mother tongue</td>
<td></td>
<td>153.51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>r.</td>
<td>I am not helping my mother tongue</td>
<td></td>
<td>149.55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.</td>
<td>Role of social media in the development and revival of local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan</td>
<td></td>
<td>152.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is no significant difference between the responses of the two groups (i.e., male and female) with reference to the statement (Table 1-a) that the use of Urdu words in mother tongue communication by the L1 speakers as the p-value for this item is 0.74, which is greater than 0.05. The results indicate that both groups behave similarly. However, there is a significant difference between the two groups regarding the use of English words in mother tongue communication by
the L1 speakers as the p-value is 0.000. Thus, here both the groups differ greatly in their opinions. Furthermore, both the groups, i.e., male and female, share similar opinions about switching from mother tongue to Urdu or English while communicating a particular idea and the use of English or Urdu equivalents while communicating in their L1. For both the statements the p-values are 0.003 and 0.000 respectively, that is, below 0.05, which indicate that there is a significant difference in their opinion about the questionnaire items in question. However, they have similar opinions about the last two statements (e & f). The p-value for media of Urdu and English lexical infusion into L1 is 0.284 which shows no significant difference of opinion between the two groups. Similarly, the p-value for the statement the most influential media in injecting words into local languages is 0.635 which again shows no significant difference in the opinion of both the groups. Thus, the first six statements (a – f) in the table above cover the major theme of infusion. Both the groups have significant differences in their opinion regarding half of the six statements and they have similar opinions regarding the rest of the three. However, the qualitative data show a great similarity among the participants’ responses regarding the infusion of English and Urdu words into Balti and other local languages. Some of their responses are quoted here.

People prefer to use Urdu words even when there is a Balti word to be used. For example, if someone has to say “I don’t know” then he says “Pata met” instead of saying “hltakhfa met”;

There are tons of factors but the most obvious ones are: learning other languages for education, communication, business and other purposes; considering the languages of politically dominant nations as desirable languages and looking down upon native languages as the languages of the savages and uncivilized are the main reasons of their downfall;

Mixing of foreign words into Balti and other local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan is quite prevalent and alarming. If the pace of lexical infusion remains accelerating with the passage of time, these languages may lose their core lexicon and the speakers shift to the dominant languages after some decades. The unchecked and unprecedented infusion of exotic words into Balti and other local languages causes erosion of linguistic knowledge of the locals.

The two groups, i.e., male and female, have almost similar priorities regarding the language(s) that they use on the social media platforms as the p-value for this item is 0.067 that is higher than 0.05. Thus, both the groups behave almost in the same way. Similarly, both of the groups use the
same language(s) while posting a status or commenting on a status on social media as the p-values for them are 0.946 and 0.648 respectively. However, there is a significant difference between both the groups regarding the use of their mother tongue(s) while posting a status or commenting on one as the p-value for this item is 0.005. Similarly, both the groups significantly differ in their opinions regarding their ability to count in their mother tongue(s), and the use of kinship terminologies for their blood relatives as the p-value for these items are 0.000 and 0.003 respectively. However, both the males and females have similar opinion regarding the use of kinship terminologies by children in their homes as the p-value for this item is 0.076.

The statements from g – m in the table above mainly discuss the erosion of linguistic knowledge on the part of the L1 speakers mainly due to language contact with the dominant languages through digital media. To refine and extend the quantitative findings, some responses to the open-ended questions are quoted here.

- It is a bitter truth that nowadays using local languages on social media and electronic media is considered to be a sign of inferiority;
- We usually cannot/do not use local languages on social and electronic media because we would suffer in terms of less audience, less understanding and lesser dissemination of our message;
- Because all the native speakers post either in English or Urdu and do not share posts in local languages so it has become a major tool to weaken the local languages;

Nowadays new generation feels shy to use their local languages and mostly at home parents use English and Urdu with their children;

The attitude of the L1 speakers plays a great role in the survival of any language, and when the natives feel shy to use their L1 then the very language is doomed to die. The quantitative and qualitative findings for the theme erosion show that Balti and other local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan are facing internal and external threats simultaneously and the chances of their survival against the dominant languages seem quite bleak.

The statements found from n – r in the table above mainly focus on the notion of threat to Balti and other local languages. As the study found that both the groups, i.e., male and female, significantly differ in their opinion regarding the statements at number n and r in the table above
as the p-values for them are either less than 0.05 or equal to it, i.e., 0.002 for *Urdu and English are replacing the local languages* and 0.050 for *I am not helping my mother tongue* respectively. However, the p-values for the rest of the three statements, o, p, and q, are beyond 0.05, i.e., *social media help the dominant languages* with 0.311, *English and Urdu are helpful but not my mother tongue* with 0.439, and *no future for my mother tongue* with 0.522, thus, no significant difference in the opinions of the respondents. The respondents, in most cases, believe that Balti and other local languages are threatened and the excessive use of dominant languages by the L1 speakers poses a great threat to the survival of these minoritized languages. The following statements by the respondents extend the findings of the quantitative phase of the study.

All the courses are taught in English and moreover, almost all interviews are taken in English language and jobs are given to those people who have good English;

Both electronic and social media play vital role in weakening the local languages of GB as these platforms usually use the languages which are understandable for more people to enhance their followers, nationally or internationally;

The L1 speakers believe that command over Urdu and English promises a brighter future for them as they are more instrumental, but their mother tongues provide no professional and educational benefits to them. This attitude of the natives poses a great threat to the survival of Balti and other local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan.

However, the same media that endanger Balti and other local languages can be used to revive them. In this regard, the two groups have similar opinions about the role of social media in the development and revival of local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan as the p-value for this item is 0.266.

By using social media, we can develop our local languages and flourish our own languages and traditions through social media;

Every one has access to social media, hence it can play a pivotal role in promoting native culture and tradition with protecting the local languages of Gilgit Baltistan.

Balti and other waning languages of Gilgit-Baltistan can be revived with the help of digital media and support from the government and the community.

**Discussion**

The findings of the study show that almost all the young L1 speakers of Balti and other local
languages have access to social media and other digital media platforms that give them the opportunity to come in contact with the speakers of other languages (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017). Language contact affects the interlocutors (Matras, 2009) which results in bilingualism or multilingualism, which has been considered as the first step towards language attrition and shift (Romaine, 2008; Fishman, 2000). Almost all the participants of the study speak more than two languages, and according to the data, education, print media, electronic media and now social media have been the most prominent agencies in transforming the locals of Gilgit-Baltistan into bilinguals and multilinguals (Bhatia & Ritchie, 2013). Contact with the dominant languages has a great influence on their linguistic preferences in their day-to-day affairs (Grenoble, 2011).

The locals prefer to use dominant languages, i.e., Urdu and English, instead of their mother tongue due to the instrumentality of the dominant languages. It is mainly because of the dominance these languages enjoy in the domain of education whereas local languages are completely ignored in this very important domain of use. Moreover, the L1 speakers of local languages feel that a competency in English can bring them better future prospects especially in the form of white-collar jobs (Crystal, 2014; Shamim, 2011; Phillipson, 1992). Furthermore, to stay connected and to be counted as ‘us’ in the modern world, they prefer to use Urdu and English on social media platforms. The exclusion of minority languages, from these two important domains of use (education and media), due to the pressure of dominant languages, is clearly an instance of linguicism (Derhemi, 2002). The dominant languages, Urdu and English, not only receive more opportunities for their promotion through education and digital media, they also trespass the domains ideally associated with the local languages such as: family and friends’ (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013).

According to the findings of the study, the L1 speakers do not use their mother tongues on social media and as a result they are marginalizing their language(s) in their own linguistic ecosystem (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013). The L1 speakers of Balti and other local languages feel shy to use their mother tongues on social media which, according to the findings of the study, make them sound inferior and crude. The inclination of the locals towards dominant languages has resulted in the attrition of a large number of lexical items of these languages; therefore, these languages cease to be used in a number of domains where they were proudly used some decades ago (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). The negative attitude of the natives towards their own language(s) and the influx of foreign words into these languages have drastically limited their use to a few
domains, so much so that in some cases the local languages have been completely replaced by dominant languages in some families.

Local languages are losing ground in other parts of the world as well. In India, 197 languages are endangered among more than 600 languages spoken in the country (Dash, 2020). Similarly, there is a loss of minority languages in Iran due to the dominance of Persian (Ghanbari & Rahimian, 2020). Likewise, the loss of Native American languages in the USA is equally alarming (McCarty, 2010). According to Tao (2019), major instances of language loss are taking place in the developing nations. He further alarms that minority languages and cultures are at a risk of being engulfed by the internationally dominant English language.

Etim, Okon & Okon (2018) examined the attrition of first language (Añañ) lexical items among Nigerian children. The study found the frequent use of L2, negative attitude towards L1, motivation and the age of learning L2 as the main causes of the attrition of L1 lexical items. Similarly, the speakers of Koronfe, spoken in Burkina Faso (West Africa), shifted to the dominant language Moore when their parent stopped transmitting Koronfe to their children (Kedrebeogo, 1998). A northern part of India provides an example of language erosion and shift in the form of Maithili, Braj and Bhojpuri losing ground against Khadi Boli (Standard Hindi) (Pandharipande, 2002).

The situation is no different in Gilgit-Baltistan. A majority of children, under thirteen years of age, are unable to count in their mother tongue. They are not able to address their blood relatives with the kinship terms of their native language. It clearly indicates that the lexical items related to counting and kinship terms have already undergone attrition in the local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan. If the local languages are not made a part of education system, electronic media and social media, they may not survive in the near future (Fishman, 2001). Furthermore, unless the natives are sensitized and start associating their identity and prestige with these languages, the revival of their languages seems impossible (Romaine, 2000).

According to Phillipson and Skuttnab-Kangas (2013), two of the most important factors causing language loss are: formal education and media. Regrettably, the findings of this study affirm that the linguistic ecosystem of Balti and other local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan is highly endangered mainly due to the strong influence posed by the two factors mentioned by Phillipson & Skuttnab-Kangas: education and media. Under the influence of these two important factors, the attitude of the L1 speakers of Balti and other local languages of the region is not favorable towards their own
languages (Pandharipande, 2002); as a result, these languages are rapidly losing their domains of use which is correspondingly shrinking their influence in their own native land. To restore, rebuild and revive the linguistic ecosystem of Balti and other local languages, their native speakers must volunteer and reclaim their native tongue(s) through documentation, preservation, maintenance and revitalization. To accomplish this mammoth task, the natives must change their attitude towards their mother tongue(s) to restore their lost prestige and honor. The current study, so far, is the first attempt to view language contact and endangerment in this mountainous community holding a particular perspective regarding the state of the vitality of Balti and other local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. To have a complete picture of the phenomenon under study, in-depth research studies, focusing language contact and its impact on the local languages, are required in the future.

**Conclusion**

The ecosystem of Balti and other local languages of Gilgit-Baltistan is at a high risk and as it is degenerating at an increased pace with the passing of each day. A number of factors, especially related to language contact, have affected the vitality and future prospects of these languages and the following are some of the most prominent ones. Education system (which promotes only Urdu and English and completely ignores the local languages) has become a tool for linguicism as it has not only changed the perspective of the locals towards their native language(s) but has also introduced Urdu and English lexical items into Balti and other regional languages by replacing a large number of their everyday words. The pace of language attrition mediated by relexification has significantly increased with the advent of digital media, especially social media. Access to various social media platforms has double-folded the speed of language attrition and change. The natives of Balti and other minority languages spend hours each day using social media which directly and indirectly provides them with the opportunity to absorb and use Urdu and English language, which makes the users replace a large number of the lexical items of their native language(s) with Urdu and English words. The younger generations seem to have abandoned the kindship terms in Balti and other local languages and a majority of them either use Urdu or English kinship terms to address their blood relatives. If nothing is done in time, Balti and other local languages will completely lose their ecosystem to the dominant languages and cease to exist. The whole scenario is a clear instance of linguicism where the dominant languages grow and flourish at the expense of the minor ones, thus resulting in their extinction.
Acknowledgment

We are indebted to Dr. Ibrahim Hussain for his assistance and guidance in the use of Mann-Whitney U test for the analysis of the data.

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