Exploring Intergenerational Linguistic Identity of Dhatki Speakers in Sindh, Pakistan

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Abstract

Pakistan is a multilingual country where seventy-four languages are spoken (Siddiqui, 2019). English is the official language, while Urdu is used as a common Lingua Franca; while each province has its own provincial official language (Sindhi, Punjabi, Pashto & Balochi). The language policy of Pakistan promotes dominant languages only as a result indigenous languages are becoming extinct and gradually are on the verge of language shift and death in urban areas. Hence, maintaining a linguistic identity in such a context pose serious challenges to the speakers of a language. This paper explores the linguistic identity of Dhatki language speakers across three generations in the different districts of Sindh. For this purpose, a qualitative case study was conducted and data was collected using open-ended questionnaire and the responses were analyzed thematically. Data was collected using purposive and snowball sampling from 33 participants. The results highlighted that Dhatki language was going through a gradual language loss, its speakers stigmatized the use of the language due to lack of documentation, and the constant use of dominant languages in different spheres of social and educational life. The speakers attributed this shift to governmental negligence and language activist’s behavior towards Dhatki language.

Keywords: Identity, language maintenance, language death, Dhatki

Introduction:

It is pertinent to define identity before linking it to language. Identity is a dynamic concept which is made up of many layers of sub-identities (Mishler, 1999). Stanford University online resource
defines identity as a social category in which a member feels connected to a group based on certain traits and also distinguishes himself/herself from other groups based on distinctions. Linguistic identity may seem a monolithic concept, but it actually may be a complex entity. Owing to the dynamic nature of identity, speakers may be confused and may identify themselves with multiple identities instead of one permanent identity (Andrews, 2010). This is also a case with Sindh in particular and Pakistan in general in terms of multiple identities.

Being a multilingual country, and having Urdu, Sindhi, Pashto, Seraiki, Punjabi, and Balochi as common Lingua Franca, the speakers of other indigenous languages have often difficulty in narrating their identity based on language to other speakers. On a broader spectrum, the speakers normally define their identity, even the linguistic one, in terms of the province where they live in or with a dominant language of their region (Siddiqui, 2021). A Dhatki native speaker may define himself/herself as Sindhi, often excluding his/her own mother language as an identity marker (Abbasi & Aftab, 2019).

There are a number of other smaller indigenous language speakers whose mother tongue has not been documented or heard by majority of speakers in Pakistan. For instance, a Marwari speaker hailing from Hyderabad found it difficult to explain to his colleagues about Marwari identity and language and their ancestral home in India and Pakistan. His colleagues found it hard to believe that such a community existed in Hyderabad where most of them had lived entire lives. (Veesrio, 2021). This complacency is not limited to laymen perceptions. Even in the linguistics circles, many researchers are unaware of such languages. Researchers have observed that a majority of indigenous languages are either under-researched or unexplored. A number of languages do not have any written script. Such a scenario may also adversely affect the indigenous languages in the region.

Taking this problem along, it is essential to ascertain the challenges faced by the speakers of Dhatki language regarding their linguistic identity across the generations in rural districts of Sindh. As the language preference are already changing and language shift is occurring in cities (Abbasi & Aftab, 2019 & Jhatial & Khan, 2021)

**Research Question:**

- What linguistic identity challenges are faced by Dhatki speakers across three generations in different districts of Sindh?
Literature Review:

Dhatki is an Indo-Aryan language; known as Dhatii or Thari and is closely related to Marwari language (Veesrio, 2021). It is mostly spoken in the eastern Sindh (Sanghar, Umarkot & Tharparkar) and some speakers have migrated to Karachi for education, while some of its speakers reside in Rajasthan India as well (Abbasi & Aftab, 2019). Dhatki language is considered as an indigenous language and was not included in the ‘other languages’ column in Census-2017 (PBS, 2021). May (2000) asserts very clearly that defining identity through language is a complex idea and that the linguistic identity may be questioned through different ways. Therefore, in a multilingual country like Pakistan, where identity may be defined from the perspective of religion, federal nationalism, and political affiliation. The linguistic identity remains comparatively the strongest form of defining identity.

The polity of Pakistan patronizes English at the cost of minority indigenous languages (Nawaz, et al., 2012). The linguistic hierarchy enacted overemphasizes the use of English in the power domains of Pakistan. It is perpetuated under the pretext of national integrity and modernization. A myth of economic growth and national unity was created to legitimize the act of suppression of the non-major languages. Thus, the language policy of Pakistan remains a tool of suppression of indigenous language identities ((Ahmed & Khan, 2017). Hence, many languages in Pakistan go through the process of linguistic endangerment due to this policy and attitude of speakers towards their mother tongue (Manan et al., 2021).

The speakers of the minority indigenous languages encounter with multiple linguistic identity challenges. Firstly, the attitude of indigenous language speakers towards their own mother tongues matters most to maintain linguistic identity. Punjabis are ashamed of their language (Rehman, 2022). Second, indigenous languages are legally abandoned in Pakistan. The indigenous languages have not been duly recognized and they have also been neglected by most of the governments (Manan et al., 2021). Thirdly, the speakers of indigenous language speakers are often socially persecuted. Indigenous languages are the markers of cultural shame. They are considered as a marker of being rustic and uncivilized. The negative stereotypes ascribed to them cause embarrassment and resentment. Minority languages are often associated with stigma, inferior, handicap. Some of them yield to dominant languages and dissociate with their mother tongues. (Rehman, 2022). Furthermore, Jhatial & Khan (2021) stated that the speakers of Dhatki and
Marwari, minority languages in the province of Sindh, do not have much freedom to use their languages in society in comparison to Sindhi and Urdu. People look unfavorably towards us, said one of the participants in a study conducted by Jhatial & Khan (2021). Similarly, Abbasi & Aftab (2019) explored the language choices, its reasons and status of Dhatki language in the urbanized city Karachi. 30 young generation Dhatki speakers enrolled in a public sector university were part of the study. The findings reported that Dhati speakers are shifting to majority languages English, Urdu and Sindhi. They responded that students have negative stereotypes towards their language and Dhatki speakers; as they mock and call us Dhati and consider us from lower-class and harassed because of their skin color. These perceptions enable the Dhatki speakers to shift their identity from Dhatki speakers and identify themselves as Sindhi speakers for social assimilation and acceptance. Kiani, et al. (2020) reported a similar view that children of Hindko speakers are mocked by their classmates when they use their mother tongue. While, the speakers of Punjabi language feel ashamed of using their mother tongue. They consider it unsophisticated and label people as ‘Paendu’ – rustic.

Fourthly, the indigenous languages speakers have less or no jobs prospects. There is an effective denial of opportunities to the speakers of local languages (Ahmed & Khan, 2017). Their utility in both education and employment is almost negligible. According to Jhatial & Khan, (2021), indigenous languages are not used in educational institutions. English language opens gates for a number of high level jobs (Nawaz, et al., 2012). According to Jhatial & Khan, (2021) students are forced to use dominant language in educational institutions. Unless they learn English, it is impossible for them to receive education and get well-paid jobs.

The linguistic identity challenges encountered by indigenous languages lead them to language shift and extinction. The language shift initiates the journey towards language death. Many indigenous minority languages in Pakistan face extinction (Nawaz, et al., 2012). It causes linguistic and cultural identity crises for the communities who stop using their mother tongues

**Methodology and Data Collection Procedure:**

The study focused on investigating to confirm whether issues highlighted in the review of literature stood true in their participants’ case across generations. For this purpose, a qualitative case study approach was adopted (Creswell, 2015) and an open-ended questionnaire was designed by the researchers which mainly focused on the problems and issues faced by the users of indigenous
language speakers of Pakistan as highlighted in literature presented hitherto which was validated by the experts in the fields and piloted as well. Based on literature, following questions were generated which were later asked from the participants of the study:

- How do you think the dominant language(s) in your context affect(s) your mother tongue?
- What are your thoughts on the possible threats to your mother tongue?
- If there are any threats to your mother language, what do you think are the reasons?
- How would you define the attitude/role of various governments towards developing/not developing your mother tongue?
- How far is it true for your community that speaking your mother tongue amounts to a stigma or a reason for being ashamed?
- What challenges do you think you face while defining or maintaining your linguistic identity?

The questionnaire was administered across the Dhatki speakers residing in Mirpurkhas, Umerkot, Tharparkar, and other surrounding districts.

**Data Collecting Instrument:**

The open-ended questionnaire was administered to collect qualitative data. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. First part consisted of demographic information of the respondents, and second part consists of 6 open-ended questions items.

**Sample:**

For this study purposive and snowball sampling was selected (Creswell, 2015). Data was collected from 33 respondents (23 male and 10 female). The sample size of 33 participants was enough, as the researcher started receiving same amount of data with the increase in number of participants.

**Data Analysis Technique:**

The qualitative data is analyzed through Constant Comparative Method (Maykut& Morehouse, 1994). The recurring themes and concepts are identified. The overlap themes and concepts are combined and then analyzed descriptively.
Findings & Discussion:

Influence of dominant languages:

On the onset, it was clear from the responses that Dhatki being a minority language is affected by the dominant languages like English, Urdu, and Sindhi on a considerable scale. Such dominance affects Dhatki language negatively most of the times as is voiced by the respondents of this study. Their responses show that the adverse effects of dominant languages are cast on the use of language, and its vocabulary mainly. Moreover, the prestige and use of their mother tongue is also reduced. Bishop (2007) says that when the dominant and dominated languages come in contact, there is a gradual shift of language from dominated language to dominant language which may also be termed as the gradual language death for the former. This seems quite plausible for our study as Dhatki speakers have never been politically subjugated by Sindhi speakers, nor have they ever been colonized, rather Dhatki speakers have had a long history of calling themselves Sindhi, and many of them have even been famous Sindhi nationalists. Despite that, their language suffers at the hand of Sindhi. Phillipson (1992) is relevant when there is an adverse effect of English over Dhatki language.

Perceived threats to Dhatki:

Speaking of threats, some speakers did not perceive any threat to their mother tongue. However, the majority of speakers did perceive some dangers such as media, other languages as medium of instructions at educational institutions, and the gradual language shift. Most of the media channels broadcasted in the southern districts of the Sindh, or other districts generally, are either in Urdu or Sindhi. A few channels might be in English, Balochi, Punjabi, Arabic, etc. But they are negligible in number. The major influence comes from Urdu and Sindhi channels with their news, dramas, movies, music, and other programs. Apart from that, schools mostly disseminate education in three languages as media of instruction i.e. English, Sindhi, Urdu. Textbooks in most of the private schools are in English language and Sindhi and Urdu are taught as subjects only. However, in government schools, the textbooks are mostly in Sindhi language till matriculation and English and Urdu are taught as subjects. In both cases, there is no inclusion of Dhatki language neither as a medium of instruction, nor as the language of textbooks. However, sometimes a few teachers might use Dhatki language here and there. But due to medium of instruction and textbook language constraint, they need to come back to using the dominant
languages. David (2005) has stated two types of dangers posed to the indigenous languages in terms of language shift or language loss: internal and external. The internal loss consists of the lack of education or literacy in the minority language. In case of Dhatki, this lack of literacy is caused by the government negligence and the strong influence from the dominant languages. The external factors consist of the debilitating language policies that support only the dominant languages. In case of Pakistan, there are no language policies however the general attitude from the various governments towards languages other than Urdu and English has been discriminatory and subtractive.

**Perceived reasons behind the threats to Dhatki:**

Stating the reasons, speakers expressed that the lack of documentation of their mother tongue Dhatki was one of the reasons why they felt their mother tongue to be threatened. Secondly, they also declared dominant languages and the media as major reasons behind the perceived insecurity of their mother language. Finally, the negative attitudes of their fellow community members were also a reason behind such perceived language loss. Indeed, over 70 languages are spoken in Pakistan and hardly around 10 languages are properly documented and even lesser languages are institutionalized. Dhatki is not one of those documented languages. Although in neighboring country India, some development of Dhatki in terms of documentation has taken place but due to Devnagri script, that has not been accepted across the border. Hardly any authoritative work has been carried out for the documentation of Dhatki language. Moreover, due to constant influx of written and spoken text of Sindhi, Urdu, and English, the need to use Dhatki language is filled up by the former languages. Negative attitudes towards mother tongue are a common phenomenon observed by the researchers in their country.

**Perceptions about governments’ attitude towards Dhatki language:**

No respondent defined the role of federal and provincial governments positive towards their mother tongue Dhatki. All the responses were negative in which it was stated that governments did not pay any attention to Dhatki, nor did they provide any support for its development. They also said that there was no policy for the regional languages. Pakistan does not indeed have any language policy at all. Speakers of most of the languages, other than Urdu, feel marginalized. One of the respondents had actually complained about this in his response.
Stigmatization of mother tongue use:

Only a few speakers felt that their community does not add any stigma to mother tongue use. However, the majority of respondents shared that there was a strong stigmatization of their mother tongue use in their community. Elaborating this, they shared that their community exhibited this behavior because they think that their language is backward. One of the respondents said that people in their community are sometimes taunted for speaking their mother languages. A respondent said that they felt ashamed to speak their mother tongue. Settings where other languages are already frequently used such as universities or other educational institutions, the speakers felt uncomfortable speaking their mother language there. Speaking of public places, a respondent had an interesting thing to say, she said that her family felt ashamed to speak in Dhatki at any public place. It was also expressed by respondents that the younger generation was stigmatizing the use of mother language more than the older generations. Xiulan (2007) has discussed the danger posed by nationalism to the minority languages and cultures. The dominant cultures assert their superiority over the smaller cultures and hence the later become subdued into the former gradually. The same appears to be true in case of Dhatki language vis-à-vis dominant languages.

Challenges faced by mother tongue speakers in maintaining their Linguistic Identity:

When asked what challenges the speakers went through while maintaining their linguistic identity, the respondents presented diverse answers. Lack of documentation, script, alphabet, grammar, etc.; low prestige given to Dhatki; and preference given to dominant languages were the three major themes deduced from their responses. Respondents complained that Dhatki was a dominated language and that is why they were ignored, if they speak it publicly, they are made to feel ashamed even by the members of their own community. Others said that since Dhatki was spoken in remote areas of Sindh province, therefore they were being neglected due to their geographical position too. Moreover, they also complained that Dhatki speakers were also labeled with degrading and derogatory titles for speaking Dhatki therefore they avoided speaking it in public spaces to avoid being labeled.

Another challenge faced by speakers of Dhatki is on institutional level where they do not get any option of selecting Dhatki if they were taking up any competitive examination, interview, test, medium of instruction, etcetera. This forced them to learn and use dominant languages and
define their identity with the dominant cultural groups. Some respondents expressed a concern that due to this forced use of dominant languages, their younger generations are gradually losing their competence in Dhatki language.

The case of Dhatki language in Sindh here may be seen as a case of language shift as described by May (2000) who has defined it in three stages. At first stage, the speakers of minority language are forced to speak and use dominant language especially in academic settings. At a second stage, bilingualism prevails in which dominant and dominated languages exist side by side. At third stage, the speakers of minority language do not speak it anymore and completely switch to the dominant language in the course of a few generations.

Conclusion:

Dhatki is one of the minority languages spoken mostly in the southeastern part of Sindh province. The native speakers of Dhatki language think that their language is under the threat of language death. The perceived threats and challenges described by the respondents are lack of documentation, subtractive and heavy influence from dominant languages, national and provincial media, Sindhi, Urdu, and English media of instruction at school, social stigma behind using Dhatki language in public spaces, and governmental negligence. Researchers speculate that with current trends in Dhatki language, there is a strong chance, the speakers of Dhatki language may go through a language shift in coming generations.

References:


