



RESEARCH PAPER

Shaping Linguistic Identity through Wakhi Language Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

This main objective of current research is to explore the attitudes of Wakhi-speaking students toward the Wakhi language in Rawalpindi. Wakhi students migrate from Gilgit to Rawalpindi in order to pursue higher education. People's attitudes toward their language have strong effects on its status and maintenance in a community. The study employed a quantitative research approach to obtain the results. A questionnaire was selected as the data collection tool. This research attempted to examine whether the participants are proud or ashamed of their language and accent, also highlight the difficulties they face while speaking Urdu as a Wakhi speaker. Overall, the findings of this research were positive. The young generation is positive in its attitude and is proud to speak their own language which is one of the components that contribute to the survival of language since there are other major languages around.

KEYWORDS Wakhi Language, Language Attitude, Language Maintenance, Pakistan

Introduction

Language plays a very integral part in any individual's identity and society as a whole. People's attitude towards their language has strong effects on its status and maintenance within a community. Urdu is national language in Pakistan and commonly used for interaction among Pakistani people. Students from any part of the country in Islamabad speak Urdu language for communicating with their fellows and friends. Gilgiti students migrate to Islamabad from Gilgit Baltistan for their higher education, especially for their university education. Some Gilgiti students speak Urdu with an accent and can be easily distinguished from those of Islamabad.

According to Crystal (1997) attitude is "The feelings people have about their own language or the languages of others" (p. 215). Both positive and negative feelings towards any language attached in attitude of a person towards that language. Positive attitudes play a significant role in maintaining a language whereas negative attitude towards any language results in language shift and death in society. In this context, a Gilgiti speaker's positive attitude towards their language and culture, for instance, will help them maintain their language and cultural identity. Additionally, defining attitude, McGroarty (1996) used the works of Gardner in the context of second language acquisition and states that attitude has cognitive, affective, and cognitive aspects, which is connected with the values and beliefs possessed by a person and encourages or discourages the decisions made in all spheres of activity, academic and informal (Gardner 1985).

The study focuses on the attitudes of Gilgiti students towards Wakhi language and their attitudes towards Urdu language, when they migrate from Gilgit to Islamabad for the

sake of their studies. This research is conducted to examine the attitudes of Gilgiti students towards their own language whether they feel ashamed of their accent or own their language proudly. Basically, this research will focus on the attitude of the Wakhi participants towards Wakhi language.

Wakhi Language

Like Pashto, Wakhi language has developed from Persian in the northern mountainous areas of Northern Afghanistan and its speakers have spread through the mountain ranges into northern Tajikistan, through the Wakhan border into Northern Pakistan, through the Pamirs into China. A vast number of Wakhi speakers with slight difference in dialects dwell in these areas but a writing system has unfortunately not been developed yet. Master Haqiqat Ali from Passu Gojal Hunza tried to develop a writing system using the German and English alphabets in the 1980s but after his decease nobody could take the idea forward and till now it is still in its nascent stages. Efforts are being made to preserve and promote the language through cultural programs in Islamabad where intellectuals are being invited to contribute to promote their language via the GICA channel and speakers from not only upper Hunza and Gojal but all other Wakhi speaking areas are invited to take part; in this regard student body's enthusiastic participation is worth mentioning ("Wakhi," 2026).

Literature Review

Language attitudes has remained a central topic in the context of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics research because they influence language policy, language learning, social identity, and language maintenance. Language attitudes generally refer to individuals' feelings, beliefs, and behavioral predispositions toward particular languages, dialects, or language communities. These attitudes shape a person's behavior towards a language and reflect ideologies and broader social hierarchies rooted within societies. Linguists emphasize that language attitudes are socially constructed and often linked to power relations, institutional structures, and cultural identity.

The classical sociolinguistic literature views language attitudes as judgmental response to other languages and language speakers. According to Baker (1992) language attitudes constitute beliefs and emotions towards languages that determine the effects of language behavior and policy. In a similar manner, Garrett (2010) defines language attitudes as biasedness of people toward language varieties such as dialects, accents, and language groups. These attitudes are frequently indicative of social system of prestige whereby dominant languages or standard languages obtain more social value than minority languages that can be stigmatized. (Giles, 1993).

The main concept of these three-component frameworks is often favored by researchers to examine the language attitudes in a cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimension. The cognitive component is a belief or knowledge regarding a language, the affective component is emotional response to a language and the behavioral component is related to actions based on the attitudes. Collectively, these dimensions give an explanation on how people develop perceptions about language varieties and how these perceptions influence linguistic choices in normal day-to-day communication (Garrett, 2010).

The recent studies have expanded the concept of language attitude through adding multilingual and social-ecological view. For instance, Feng et al. (2023) suggests the systems-based approach to multilingual language attitudes and holds that language attitude develops as a result of the interactions of people among social networks,

community buildings, and wider sociocultural contexts. This perspective shows that there is not only an individual belief that drives language attitudes, but institutional and community-level dynamics are also involved in it. Hence, these findings suggest that the language attitudes work in the context of social systems, such as the family, school, and policy context.

Current research also shows that language attitudes are closely connected to the language ideology which can be defined as the socially shared ideologies of language, identity and power. Kiramba et al. (2023) explored that the presence of dominant monolingual views on the community level can affect the opinion on multilingualism and shape public opinion and support for multilingual education policies. Such ideologies usually define the way communities perceive linguistic diversity as a resource or hindrance to social integration.

Another emerging field of study focuses on the language attitudes in the multilingual societies and linguistic landscapes. According to some scholars, the growing globalization and migration have changed the linguistic environments by rendering multilingualism more noticeable in the social space and institutions. Linguistic landscape studies demonstrate ways in which public signs, the media and the education policy reflect languages attitudes. Recent scholarship indicates that these environments are not only associated with but also mirror how societies in general are perceived toward language prestige and diversity.

Recent empirical research also put emphasis on the importance of language attitudes in developing language learning and educational results. For example, Specht et al. (2025) explored the ways in which metalinguistic instruction in the classroom of the university may help to shape the attitudes of students towards bilingualism. The findings suggests that even the short-term instructional interventions may have a positive impact on the perceptions of multilingualism among learners and raise their awareness of language diversity. These results indicate that educational practices can reshape language attitudes and enable more inclusive perceptions of linguistic diversity.

Also, studies carried on multilingual learners show that language diversity has a significant effect on language attitude. Sulis (2025) concluded that students with multilingual backgrounds had more positive attitudes to linguistic diversity than their counterparts in less linguistically diverse environments. These results affirm the opinion that educational environments and social experiences influences the attitude towards languages.

Attitudes towards language are also inextricably related to both family language practices, and the language development in early childhood. Recent studies exploring the attitudes of parents to communication with young children reveal that family beliefs about the use of language can affect the development of language among young children and heritage language preservation. Argus (2025) also discovered that the attitude of the parents towards language interaction with the children has a significant impact on the patterns of communication within a family and can determine the process of linguistic development and identity formation in children.

The use of language attitudes to determine language policy and the power structure in societies has also been the subject of recent sociolinguistic research. Research on bilingual societies demonstrates that the language attitudes tend to interact with the language policies to decide whether the minority languages are preserved or dominated by the dominant languages. According to Brasca et al. (2024) the attitude of the community to the

bilingual language policies can be a serious determinant of their effectiveness, thus emphasizing the role of the public in the success of the language planning policies.

On the whole, the recent literature shows that language attitudes are dynamic, and influenced by the complicated social, political, and cultural processes. Language attitudes have become more and more grounded in the context of multilingualism, the ideology of language, and social identity in contemporary research. The language attitudes do not just affect linguistic behavior but also educational practices, language policy, and maintenance of linguistic diversity. With the ongoing globalization and migration that is changing the linguistic landscapes, it is still important to gain insights into language attitudes to offer solutions to the concerns on multilingual education, language maintenance, as well as linguistic inequality.

Material and Methods

Research study is quantitative in nature. Researcher has selected questionnaire as tool of the study. The paper is based on the tripartite model of language attitudes that theorizes attitudes on cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels and it is explained using the Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, which theorizes how the attitudes of language are related to group identification, perceived vitality and language maintenance. (Garrett, 2010; Giles and Johnson, 1987).

Participants are selected randomly from FJWU Rawalpindi. The study has quantitative research approach to find out the results. A quantitative questionnaire was chosen because the study intends to obtain measurements of Wakhi language attitudes in a systematic manner between the respondents. Also, it is the most used method in language attitude study. A study of language-attitudes involves a known direct method of data collection using questionnaires and is the most suitable approach to obtain a set of measurable responses, which can be statistically analyzed. Because this research investigates beliefs, emotions, and the behavioral propensity towards Wakhi, a structured questionnaire will enable the operationalization of these aspects in a clear way using scaled questions (Dornyei & Dewaele, 2022; Kircher & Zipp, 2022). This sample mainly includes Wakhi speaking students at Fatima Jinnah Women University Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Convenient sampling is used to select participants which are available or easy to find. The sample is consisted of ten students among the total strength of Wakhi speaking students of FJWU. The questions that have been asked on questionnaire have been valuable in giving a general picture of how Wakhi speaking students from Gilgit Baltistan feel about their mother tongue, the Wakhi language.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Languages Spoken

| English, Urdu, Brushaski | Urdu, Brushaski, Wakhi | Other |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-------|
| 1 | 7 | 2 |

The table 1 shows the number of languages spoken by the participants. Most of the girls whom we interviewed knew English, Urdu, and Wakhi and some Brushaski and only one girl did not know Wakhi and two did not know any Brushaski.

Table 2
Relate More to Wakhi or Urdu

| Yes | No | Don't Know |
|-----|----|------------|
| 7 | 1 | 2 |

The table 2 shows participants' opinions on someone speaking Wakhi. The interviewees said they related more to people speaking Wakhi. Our Brushaski speaking participant said she did not relate to Wakhi although she could recognize it easily in a conversation but not speaking the language she would prefer a neutral language like Urdu or English for communication. Two Wakhi speakers selected the "Don't Know" option which we assume to be lack of understanding for they have replied positively in other questions relating to Wakhi speakers and their language practices.

Table 3
Preference Using Wakhi Among Friends

| Yes | No | Don't Know |
|-----|----|------------|
| 8 | 2 | 0 |

The table above shows the preference of Wakhi among friends. Only two of our participants declared that they did not prefer speaking Wakhi in their friends' circle and the rest said they felt most comfortable in speaking their own tongue.

Table 4
Feeling Anxious Making Mistakes While learning L2

| Yes | No | Don't Know |
|-----|----|------------|
| 6 | 4 | 0 |

The table 4 shows the participants' views on making mistakes while learning L2 at University.

L2 appeared to be quite a problem for students who have recently shifted to Rawalpindi for their studies and 60% of the girls said they were worried about making mistakes in Urdu at their educational institution, which is only natural for as we grow up, we become more and more conscious of our shortcomings as opposed to children who do not mind making mistakes. This matter came in spotlight in the next question where we came to know that peer pressure and idea of shame in front of peers also affects students who go out of their native cities and villages for purposes of studies or jobs, in this case female students who have either come to Rawalpindi in near past or have been here for the past few years.

Table 5
Feeling Ashamed on Accent and Grammatical Mistakes

| Yes | No | Don't Know |
|-----|----|------------|
| 3 | 7 | 0 |

This table above shows the feeling of shame due to their accent and grammar mistakes in Urdu. Most of our participants are female students in their late teens and early to mid-twenties and people tend to be conscious of the company around them. Peer pressure is pretty common in teenagers, and it takes quite some time for the effect to wear off, I noticed that many of the participants were mature enough to see the light side of their accent which differentiates them among their friends, and they were okay with it. 40 % of the interviewees said they felt embarrassed of their grammar mistakes and Wakhi accent of Urdu. Those who did not feel that making mistakes in L2 was not a serious matter were those who believed that since they are not learning a language which is even remotely related to theirs, making mistakes is normal and they know it. They are aware of the fact that not being a native speaker of Urdu language they are prone to forget the grammar rules and make mistakes in gender of things especially as things have gender in Urdu language like French language.

Table 6
Native Language Education

| Yes | No | Don't Know |
|-----|----|------------|
| 4 | 5 | 1 |

The table shows the participants' opinions to be educated in Wakhi language. This was a tricky question as only four interviewees said they thought it a good idea to be educated in their own language and 50% replied in negative, one person said she did not know whether it should be practiced.

Table 7
Feeling of Pride in Speaking Wakhi Language

| Yes | No | Don't Know |
|-----|----|------------|
| 9 | 1 | 0 |

This table shows the participants' feelings while speaking their language. Our questions to the participants were simple and straightforward and mostly overlapping in ideas to check the interviewees' true understanding of their feelings towards their native tongue, Wakhi. It is interesting to see that where the participants did not say enthusiastically that they wanted to be educated in their own language they were literally proud to answer this question, and we even had a participant who added an "of course" to the "Yes" we option we had provided them in the questionnaire.

Table 8
Children Don't Speak Wakhi Anymore

| Yes | No | Don't Know |
|-----|----|------------|
| 9 | 1 | 0 |

The table shows the families whose children don't speak Wakhi anymore. 90% of our sample said that they knew of Wakhi speaking families whose younger generation does not speak Wakhi although they understand it. They speak Wakhi in certain situations only, for example with older members of the family or relatives visiting from villages who do not speak Urdu at all.

Table 9
Not Speaking Wakhi

| Yes | No | Don't Know |
|-----|----|------------|
| 2 | 7 | 1 |

The table 9 shows the participants' views on not practicing Wakhi. 70% percent of our interviewees said it was not a good practice while two denied it; one did not have any views to share.

Table 10
Wakhi Language Transmission

| Yes | No | Don't Know |
|-----|----|------------|
| 9 | 1 | 0 |

The table shows participants' opinions on Wakhi language transmission to their children. Related to our previous question was asking the views of participants about families not passing their language to their children and seventy per cent people said it was a bad practice.

The only participant who did not know if she would be teaching her children Wakhi is the Brushaski speaker and not being related to the Wakhi speaking community as such and not having a knowledge and aptitude of speaking the language herself she was not sure if she would like her children to learn it. From the Wakhi speaking participants 100% thus feel that they should pass the language to their future generation.

Wakhi Language Preservation

We gave the participants an open-ended question so that they could write their opinions regarding the Wakhi language. In this question did we come to know how each member from the group that we interviewed felt about the Wakhi language; it is interesting to see that most had very positive and encouraging comments to give regarding the preservation of the Wakhi tongue. Being educated individuals they had noted the facts which matter most in language preservation, the absence to text and written material. Some even suggested research to be carried out, teaching as a subject at least, promoting the culture, publishing learning material, practice at homes, promoting the language and it being easy, teaching of children at home with proper pronunciation, teaching to new generation, parents' role and arranging of events in Wakhi language for its promotion were the illuminating ideas.

Overall, the findings of this small research were positive that the students who have been studying here for the past eight years or have come recently are proud of their language.

Conclusion

With the awareness of the importance of saving their language from going into oblivion, the students who participated in this research have a clear idea of how important one's language is for a person's identity. Not being language students, they are not aware of the complexities and politics involved behind the prestige attached to a language, but they are certainly proud of their Wakhi identity and most feel that it should be passed to future generation and families whose children do not speak their language are not doing a good practice.

All the participants were students and knew the importance of research and a few suggested that research should be done on and about the language and that the unavailability of manuscripts or any kind of written material is a certain drawback for even the native speakers of Wakhi do not know how to read or write it and even then the language has stood the test of times and survived for a few centuries now. One participant has expressed that it is an easy language to learn and other people should learn it but I think that is not very easy as the pronunciations and sounds in the language happen to be one of the most difficult in all of the Gilgiti languages, equipped with which, in my opinion, Wakhi speakers can learn easily other Pakistani or foreign languages.

Like all bilinguals in the world Wakhi speakers are conscious of the perils of the non-usage of one's native language, and the young generation has the knowledge too. The attitude of the young generation is positive, and they take pride in speaking their language which is one of the factors of helping a language survive for there are other languages in the vicinity. Five major languages of Gilgit Baltistan, Urdu the national language and English the international language. Many individuals learn Chinese as not only do they have a job opportunity with the Chinese workers all along the Karakoram Highway and especially being near the Chinese border and often going across for trading purposes. Others learn Latin origin languages like French, German, Italian and Spanish as tourism is a major source of income for the people of that area. Trend of marriages outside Pakistan is also not unpopular among Wakhi speakers. Living in this multitude of languages it can be inferred that if Wakhi people still like to speak their mother tongue it is the sign of their love for their identity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations can be proposed to support the maintenance and promotion of the Wakhi language among students studying in Rawalpindi. First, educational institutions should encourage linguistic diversity and provide a supportive environment where minority language speakers feel comfortable using and valuing their native languages. Universities and colleges can organize cultural and linguistic events that highlight the Wakhi language and culture, which may strengthen students' linguistic identity and pride. Second, Wakhi-speaking communities and cultural organizations should promote the use of Wakhi among younger generations through cultural gatherings, language workshops, and community programs. Such initiatives can help maintain intergenerational transmission of the language and reinforce positive attitudes toward it. Third, efforts should be made to document and promote the Wakhi language through academic research, publications, and digital media. Developing written materials, online content, and educational resources in Wakhi can contribute to its preservation and wider recognition. Fourth, policymakers and educational authorities should recognize the importance of minority languages in Pakistan and support initiatives aimed at their preservation. Incorporating regional and minority languages in cultural and academic discussions can enhance awareness about linguistic diversity. Finally, future researchers should conduct further studies on Wakhi and other minority languages in Pakistan using larger samples and mixed research methods. Such studies may provide deeper insights into language attitudes, language shift, and strategies for sustaining minority languages in multilingual societies.

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