

SILENCING NATIVE VOICES: THE CONTESTATION OF MOTHER TONGUES IN MULTILINGUAL PAKISTAN

Dr. Ghulam Ali^{*1}, Prof. Dr. Nasir Mahmood², Mr. Ansar Ali³

^{*1}Associate Professor, CeLTS, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Islamabad

²Professor of Education, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Islamabad

³Lecturer, CeLTS Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Islamabad

Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Ghulam Ali

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan is one of the world's most linguistically diverse nations, home to over sixty-eight languages that collectively constitute a living repository of culture, history, and identity. Yet this extraordinary diversity is under mounting pressure. The hegemony of Urdu as the national language and English as the language of professional prestige has progressively marginalized indigenous mother tongues, relegating them to informal and domestic spheres while depriving millions of children of an education grounded in their first language. This research examines the concept of mother tongue from linguistic, psychological, sociocultural, and educational perspectives; traces its historical trajectory from medieval Europe through the colonial period; analyses the contemporary sociolinguistic landscape of Pakistan; and makes the case for a balanced, rights-based language policy that preserves indigenous languages while embracing multilingualism as a national strength.

Keywords: Mother Tongue education, multilingualism, indigenous languages, The First Language, local languages, Linguistic Landscape of Pakistan, Global Evidence for Mother Tongue-Based Education

1. Introduction

Language is the most intimate garment of the human mind. Among all the languages a person may come to know across a lifetime, none penetrates consciousness as deeply, as effortlessly, or as irrevocably as the first – the language heard before birth in the rhythm of a mother's voice, absorbed without instruction in the warmth of home, and shaped by the sounds of the neighbourhood and the patterns of communal life. This is the mother tongue, and its significance extends far beyond mere communication.

In Pakistan, a country that the linguist-demographer Chaman Hussain (2023) describes as "a land of linguistic diversity", the mother

tongue occupies a paradoxical position. On the one hand, languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Saraiki carry centuries of oral literature, poetry, folklore, and philosophical wisdom. On the other, official language policies and social attitudes systematically privilege Urdu and English, creating a diglossia in which the mother tongues of the majority are consigned to low-prestige, informal domains. The consequences of this marginalization ripple through education, social identity, cognitive development, and cultural continuity.

This research addresses four interlocking questions: What is the mother tongue and how does it differ from related concepts such as the first language and the local language? What

historical forces have shaped the status of mother tongues in South Asia? What is the contemporary situation of indigenous languages in Pakistan, and what are the costs of neglecting them? And what policy interventions are required to reverse their decline? In answering these questions, the research draws on linguistics, psycholinguistics, educational research, and sociolinguistics, weaving together theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence to make a comprehensive case for the preservation and promotion of mother tongue education in Pakistan.

2. Defining the Mother Tongue: Conceptual Clarity

The term "mother tongue" enjoys wide popular usage yet remains the subject of sustained scholarly debate. Achieving conceptual clarity is essential before its educational and cultural significance can be properly assessed, particularly in multilingual societies where the boundaries between languages are fluid and contested.

2.1 The Mother Tongue

At its most fundamental, the mother tongue is the language internalized by a child during the earliest stages of life, acquired not through formal instruction but through immersion in the familial and social environment. It is the language of emotional depth, of lullabies and bedtime stories, of quarrels and endearments. Gisela Steins (2017) defines it as "the language a child speaks instinctively when he comes of age of speaking in his life and the language in which a person shows his identity while he speaks as a native speaker." Muhammad Idris (2018) similarly emphasizes its naturalistic, unconscious character: mother tongue acquisition begins from the mother's lap, is nurtured in the family and the playground, and occurs without deliberate pedagogical effort.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, the mother tongue is not merely the language spoken first; it is the language in which an individual thinks, dreams, and counts – to invoke the formulation of Orekan (2011). It is the medium through which emotions are processed, concepts are formed, and the world is first made intelligible.

Noormohamadi and Rezvan (2008) observe that it constitutes "a foundation for an individual's educational, emotional, and cultural development," while Nishanthi (2020) affirms that it is "vital in framing the thinking and emotions of people."

It bears noting that a bilingual child may possess two mother tongues (Dyken, 1990; Khushnuma et al., 2020). The criterion is not singularity but emotional and experiential primacy: the mother tongue is the language in which a child can "operate confidently in all domains relevant to the child's life" (Yadav, as cited in Khushnuma et al., 2020).

2.2 The First Language

In formal linguistics, the term "first language" (L1) refers to the language acquired earliest in chronological terms. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Hornby, 2018), it is "the language that you learn to speak first as a child; the language that you speak best." While the first language and the mother tongue often coincide, they need not do so. In post-colonial contexts, the language of formal schooling – frequently an inherited colonial language or a national lingua franca – may become, in functional terms, a person's strongest language even when the home language remains distinct.

2.3 The Local or Indigenous Language

Idris and Zobia (2018) define a local or indigenous language as "the language that is spoken at homes, marketplaces and other community areas," distinguished from regional, national, or international languages. The local language is the medium of quotidian life: the bazaar, the mosque, the field. Its social importance lies precisely in its communal embeddedness, yet its prestige is typically lower than that of official or national languages.

A concrete illustration clarifies the distinctions. A child born into a Punjabi-speaking household in Lahore may grow up speaking Punjabi as her mother tongue, begin formal schooling in Urdu, and later acquire English as the language of professional aspiration. Punjabi is her mother tongue, Urdu becomes her first language in the

functional sense, and English her language of wider communication. As Idris and Zobia (2018) observe, this distinction "is not only significant for social researchers, but it is pivotal for social status, linguistic identity and social relations in multilingual and post-colonial societies."

3. Historical Dimensions of the Mother Tongue

3.1 Medieval Origins of the Concept

The conceptual genealogy of "mother tongue" is traceable to twelfth-century medieval Europe, where monastic culture drew a sharp distinction between the *lingua latina* – the language of governance, scripture, and scholastic authority – and the *lingua materna*, the vernacular absorbed unconsciously from early childhood, spoken "at the breast" without need for formal instruction. This distinction was more than descriptive: it encoded a hierarchy of prestige in which Latin represented divine and universal knowledge while the vernacular was associated with the embodied, the temporal, and the domestic.

Yet the very act of naming the vernacular created a platform for its eventual elevation. Monks employed the *lingua materna* to deliver sermons and translate theological teachings to illiterate congregations, thereby recognizing – if implicitly – that meaning could travel only through the language closest to the listener's heart. Over time, this pragmatic acknowledgement of the vernacular's communicative power laid the groundwork for the Renaissance, during which once-subordinate mother tongues achieved sufficient cultural prestige to challenge Latin's dominance in literature, philosophy, and ecclesiastical life.

3.2 Mother Tongue in Ancient Civilizations

Long before the medieval framing, ancient civilizations recognized the intimate relationship between language, identity, and social cohesion, even without employing the term "mother tongue." In the Indus Valley, in Sindh, and across the Gandhara region, local vernaculars functioned as the media of social organization, cultural memory, and religious expression. Sindh, for instance, is rooted in a civilizational tradition that predates recorded history; its oral

literature and centuries-old poetic conventions have played a constitutive role in shaping the social relations, cultural conventions, and historical consciousness of its speakers.

Classical Chinese literary culture, to draw a parallel from elsewhere, similarly demonstrates the centralizing role of a prestigious written language alongside the persistence of regional vernaculars as carriers of local identity. In both cases, the mother tongue – whether or not it bore that name – served as the vehicle through which communities transmitted knowledge, preserved social norms, and affirmed collective belonging.

1.3 The Colonial Period and Linguistic Hierarchies

The most consequential disruption to indigenous language ecologies in South Asia was the consolidation of British colonial rule and its attendant language policies. European colonial powers systematically elevated their own languages as the media of administration, law, and higher education, simultaneously demoting indigenous languages to informal, low-prestige domains. English became the language of the colonial bureaucracy and the Anglophone elite; vernaculars were confined to the home, the marketplace, and the mosque.

The linguistic consequences of partition and the formation of Pakistan in 1947 intensified rather than resolved these tensions. A diglossic arrangement emerged in which Urdu and English occupied the high-prestige positions – the H-variety in Fergusonian terms – deployed in education, government, and formal public life, while Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Saraiki were relegated to the L-variety, their use restricted to informal, private, and familial contexts. This arrangement, as sociolinguistic research consistently demonstrates, was not a natural reflection of communicative efficiency but a historically contingent outcome of political choices that served particular elite interests. Its consequences for the literary development, social status, and cultural sustainability of mother tongues have been profound and lasting.

4. The Linguistic Landscape of Pakistan

Pakistan's linguistic richness is extraordinary. According to Ethnologue, sixty-eight languages are spoken within its borders, distributed across five major regional language families and representing a continuum of speech communities from large and politically organised to small and acutely endangered. Punjabi has the largest number of native speakers, followed by Pashto, Sindhi, Saraiki, and Balochi. Urdu, though the national language, is the mother tongue of only a small minority – principally the Urdu-speaking communities that migrated from northern India at partition – yet it functions as the dominant medium of schooling, official communication, and nationally broadcast media.

English occupies an even more specialized position: it is the language of the upper echelons of the judicial, military, and corporate establishments, and the preferred medium of elite private education. Proficiency in English functions as a powerful marker of social class, effectively limiting access to professional opportunity and social mobility for the large majority of Pakistanis whose educational trajectories do not include rigorous English-medium instruction.

This multi-tiered linguistic hierarchy creates what the sociolinguist may characterize as a linguistic caste system, in which the speaker's mother tongue functions not merely as a communicative resource but as a social credential – or, more precisely, as a social liability when it is an indigenous vernacular rather than Urdu or English. The richness of Balochi folk poetry, the sophistication of Sindhi classical literature, the metaphorical density of Saraiki folk song: none of these confer social prestige in a system in which the dominant languages of power define the terms of legitimate cultural expression.

5. Theoretical Perspectives on the Mother Tongue

5.1 Structural Linguistics

Structural linguistics approaches the mother tongue as the primary source of phonological, morphological, and syntactic competence. The mother tongue is the system in which phonetic

rules are internalized at the neurological level and syntactic structures are deployed without conscious effort. This automatic, unreflective mastery distinguishes the mother tongue from subsequently acquired languages, in which speakers must actively attend to grammatical rules, vocabulary retrieval, and pronunciation. The phenomenon of Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) – the phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic transfer from the L1 to subsequent languages – is well documented in second-language acquisition research (Simon and Mishra, 2025), and its effects on pronunciation accuracy, communicative confidence, and social identity are substantial.

5.2 Psycholinguistics and Cognitive Development

Psycholinguistic research establishes the mother tongue as the foundational scaffold of cognitive development. Early linguistic experience, precisely because it is acquired during the period of maximum neural plasticity, creates the neuro-linguistic architecture that supports all subsequent cognitive operations: critical thinking, problem solving, memory consolidation, and conceptual categorization. Concepts such as justice, time, causality, and moral obligation are grasped most effectively when first encountered in the mother tongue, because the mother tongue provides a familiar framework of association and emotional resonance within which abstract ideas can be anchored.

Furthermore, psycholinguists affirm that human beings experience their thoughts, emotions, and dreams most fully in their mother tongue (Noormohamadi and Rezvan, 2008). This observation has significant implications for education: children who are required to learn in a language other than their mother tongue face a cognitive double burden – they must simultaneously grasp new content and navigate an unfamiliar linguistic code – which inevitably impedes comprehension, retards the development of critical thinking, and dampens creative expression. Mother Tongue Influence also shapes psychological factors such as

confidence, anxiety, and social identity in second-language learning (Simon and Mishra, 2025), underscoring the depth at which the mother tongue is implicated in the whole person.

5.3 Socio-cultural Linguistics

From a sociocultural perspective, the mother tongue is the primary vehicle of social participation and cultural transmission. Through it, children acquire not merely a linguistic code but a world view: the social values, moral frameworks, kinship structures, and cultural practices of the community into which they are born. The Vygotskian tradition in educational psychology emphasizes that language mediates all higher cognitive functions and that the social contexts in which language is learned profoundly shape the intellectual and moral development of the individual.

In multilingual societies, the mother tongue frequently differs from the official or dominant language, and this divergence can generate what sociolinguists describe as identity conflict – a tension between the speaker's deepest sense of self, constituted through the mother tongue, and the social demands of a society that valorises a different linguistic register. As UNESCO (2011) asserts, "Language is not only a tool for communication and knowledge but also a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment, both for the individual and the group."

5.4 Creative Linguistics and Educational Research

Research at the intersection of mother tongue education and creativity has yielded consistent findings across diverse educational contexts. A systematic review conducted by Sakaryali and colleagues (December 2024) at the K-12 level established that effective mother tongue education has a measurable positive impact on individual creativity, particularly during the formative years when students are progressively mastering the expressive resources of their language. The mother tongue, in this perspective, functions not merely as a vehicle for the transmission of received knowledge but as the

generative medium through which children tell stories, compose poetry, formulate hypotheses, and construct original interpretations of experience.

Critical thinking, similarly, is most effectively cultivated in the mother tongue. When students deliberate, argue, and analyse in a language that is fully available to them – without the cognitive overhead of simultaneous linguistic processing – they are free to direct their full intellectual energy toward the substance of ideas rather than the mechanics of expression. Research by Ghafar Sulaimani and colleagues (2025) affirms that mother tongue instruction enhances comprehension, critical thinking, and cognitive skills, and lays a strong foundation for learning additional languages and subjects.

6. Educational Significance and the Evidence Base

6.1 Global Evidence for Mother Tongue-Based Education

The global evidence base for mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is extensive and convergent. UNESCO's landmark report of February 2025, *Languages Matter: Global Guidance on Multilingual Education*, synthesizes decades of research to conclude that "learning in one's mother tongue is crucial for better learning outcomes, cultural identity, and inclusion." Children who receive their initial education in their mother tongue consistently demonstrate superior literacy rates, stronger conceptual understanding, higher levels of school engagement, and greater confidence than children educated in a language foreign to their home environment.

The pedagogical logic is compelling. When a child already possesses a rich oral repertoire in her mother tongue – a grammar internalised without instruction, a vocabulary mapped onto lived experience, a phonological system perfectly calibrated to her articulatory habits – the task of becoming literate is simply a matter of learning to encode in writing what she already knows how to say. When the language of schooling is unfamiliar, however, the child must simultaneously decode a new phonological

system, acquire new vocabulary, and master new grammatical structures while also trying to absorb subject-matter content. The cognitive demands of this double task are simply too great for most children in the early years of schooling.

As Nelson Mandela observed, and as Nishanthi and Rajathurai (2020) cite in their research: "If you talk to a man in a language that he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." Education that reaches only the head – that is processed with effort as foreign material – cannot achieve the depth of understanding that education reaching the heart can produce.

6.2 The Pakistani Context

The Pakistani educational landscape illustrates with particular clarity the costs of mother tongue neglect. Elementary education is delivered predominantly in Urdu or English, neither of which is the home language of the majority of Pakistani children. A Balochi child entering school in Quetta, a Saraiki child in Multan, or a Sindhi child in rural Sindh is immediately confronted with a medium of instruction that is, for all practical purposes, a foreign language. The predictable consequences – high dropout rates, low learning outcomes, and disengagement from the formal educational system – are borne out by both national and international assessments of Pakistani educational achievement.

Pilot programmes in multilingual education offer instructive counter-evidence. Programmes in Tharparkar that have incorporated mother tongue instruction in the early years have demonstrated measurably stronger cognitive outcomes, improved literacy, and greater school retention. In parts of Sindh where both Sindhi and Urdu serve as media of instruction, children consistently show stronger educational performance. The evidence from these programmes corroborates the global research consensus: mother tongue-based education is not a concession to linguistic sentiment but a sound pedagogical strategy with demonstrable benefits for learning outcomes.

The developmental logic is well captured by Idris's (2018) observation, drawing on Clarke,

that "the strong base of the mother tongue provides lasting support in the making of the self-concept, and strengthens the relations within and outside the family," while also "providing a cognitive and linguistic base for learning other languages." If a child masters mathematical concepts in Sindhi, she possesses conceptual understanding that is fully transferable when she subsequently learns to express those concepts in Urdu and English. Conceptual understanding, once achieved in the mother tongue, is not language-bound; it is available for expression in any subsequent language the child acquires.

6.3 Mother Tongue, Multilingualism, and the Additive Approach

It is essential to clarify that advocacy for mother tongue education does not imply the rejection of multilingualism. On the contrary, the most robust research in the field supports an additive model: the mother tongue provides the cognitive and emotional foundation upon which additional languages are most effectively built. A Balochi-speaking child who receives strong mother tongue instruction in the early years of schooling is better equipped, not less, to learn Urdu and English in subsequent years, precisely because she has developed the metalinguistic awareness, the conceptual sophistication, and the learning confidence that strong first-language literacy provides.

Pakistan's multilingual reality – where most educated citizens operate across a local language, Urdu, and English – is not a problem to be solved but a resource to be cultivated. Multilingualism, as research consistently demonstrates, fosters cognitive flexibility, enhances creative thinking, and deepens cultural understanding. The goal of a sound language-in-education policy is not monolingualism in any language but the strategic development of all three tiers: a strong mother tongue foundation, functional literacy in Urdu as the national language, and competence in English as an international lingua franca.

7. Cultural Significance of the Mother Tongue

Beyond its educational role, the mother tongue is the primary repository of a community's cultural memory. Folk tales, proverbs, oral poetry, rituals, and the naming practices that map social relationships – all are encoded in, and transmitted through, the mother tongue. When a language dies or contracts, it takes with it not merely a set of phonological rules and grammatical structures but an entire way of perceiving and interpreting the world: a cosmology, an aesthetic tradition, a system of social values.

In Pakistan, the cultural stakes of mother tongue neglect are particularly high. Balochi poetry carries a record of tribal history, ethical philosophy, and landscape perception that has no exact equivalent in any other language. Pashto's classical literary tradition, rooted in the verse forms of Khushal Khan Khattak and Rahman Baba, constitutes a cultural heritage of regional and international significance. Sindhi's ancient connections to the Indus Valley civilisation make it one of the most historically resonant languages of South Asia. Punjabi, the mother tongue of the largest linguistic community in the country, possesses a rich literary tradition – from Baba Farid and Waris Shah to Shah Husain – that is systematically undervalued in the national cultural imagination.

Meng (2020) writes compellingly about the construction of mother tongue cultural identity in intercultural communication, arguing that the promotion of mother tongue culture provides the basis for what he terms "mother tongue cultural identity" – a stable sense of cultural self that is not threatened but enriched by engagement with other cultures and languages. When a society promotes its mother tongue, it not only protects linguistic diversity but creates the conditions for genuine sociocultural harmony and national cohesion. Conversely, the neglect of mother tongues generates what the scholarly literature describes as feelings of cultural uncertainty, social marginalisation, and estrangement from one's own heritage.

8. Misconceptions, Social Prejudices, and Ideological Interference

8.1 Misconception: Mother Tongues are Unsuitable for Modern Education

Perhaps the most damaging and persistent misconception about indigenous languages in Pakistan is the belief that they are somehow inadequate as vehicles of modern knowledge – that Punjabi or Pashto cannot support the teaching of mathematics, science, or philosophy. This view has no empirical foundation. Languages develop in response to the communicative needs of their speakers; there is no linguistic reason why any language cannot be developed as a medium of scientific or academic discourse if the social and institutional conditions support such development. The historical trajectory of Urdu itself – once dismissed by colonial administrators as insufficiently developed for formal purposes, subsequently cultivated as the national language of a modern state – illustrates the socially constructed nature of linguistic prestige.

The related misconception that speakers of indigenous languages possess limited intellectual capacity is not merely unfounded but constitutes a form of epistemic violence – the systematic devaluation of the knowledge traditions, creative achievements, and intellectual life of entire communities. Research uniformly demonstrates that primary education in the mother tongue improves educational outcomes, literacy, and creative capability; the evidence consistently refutes the claim that indigenous-language speakers are inherently disadvantaged learners.

8.2 Political and Ideological Dimensions of Language Policy

Language policy is never merely a technical matter of educational efficiency. It is always also a political matter, reflecting and reproducing relations of power between different social groups. In Pakistan, the privileging of Urdu and English has served the interests of particular urban, educated, and economically advantaged elites who have benefited from their proximity to

the dominant linguistic codes. The marginalisation of indigenous languages has correspondingly served to exclude the rural majority and the speakers of non-prestige varieties from full participation in the economic and political life of the nation.

The persistence of this linguistic hierarchy is not the result of natural linguistic processes but of deliberate policy choices: the absence of mother tongue education in the national curriculum, the failure to develop indigenous-language literary and educational resources, the neglect of indigenous languages in public broadcasting, and the social stigma attached to their use in formal contexts. These are political decisions, susceptible to political reversal. The will to reverse them, however, requires a recognition that the present arrangement serves neither educational equity nor national cohesion.

9. Towards a Balanced Language Policy for Pakistan

The case for a reformed, equitable, and evidence-based language policy in Pakistan rests on four interrelated principles: educational effectiveness, cultural rights, social equity, and national cohesion. The following policy directions emerge from the analysis presented in this chapter.

9.1 Mother Tongue as the Foundation of Early Education

The single most impactful reform would be the introduction of mother tongue-based multilingual education in the early years of schooling. Children in the first three to five years of formal education should receive instruction in their mother tongue, with a carefully managed, gradual transition to Urdu and English in subsequent years. This approach, recommended by UNESCO and supported by decades of comparative educational research, has been demonstrated to improve learning outcomes, reduce dropout rates, and strengthen the cognitive foundation for multilingual development.

9.2 Urdu as Lingua Franca, Not as Replacement

Urdu should be recognised and celebrated as Pakistan's national lingua franca – the language

that enables communication across the country's linguistic diversity and that carries the shared cultural heritage of the Pakistani nation. This recognition, however, should not come at the cost of indigenous languages. Urdu's role is properly that of a bridge language, not a replacement language. Policy frameworks should explicitly protect the rights of indigenous language communities to educate their children in their mother tongue and to develop their languages as media of literature, administration, and public life.

9.3 English as International Language, Not Social Stratifier

English should be accorded its appropriate status as an international lingua franca and a medium of access to global scientific and professional knowledge. However, the present situation – in which English functions primarily as a social stratifier, conferring elite status on those who possess it and excluding those who do not – should be addressed through policies that democratise English-language education while simultaneously refusing to permit English-medium instruction to crowd out mother tongue development in the early years.

9.4 Curriculum, Media, and Institutional Support

Indigenous languages require active institutional support if they are to survive and flourish. This means their inclusion in national curricula not merely as subjects but as media of instruction; the development of indigenous-language educational materials, dictionaries, and literary resources; representation on public broadcasting through television, radio, and digital media; and recognition in public administration at the provincial and district levels. Social prejudices against indigenous language speakers can be dismantled only through sustained institutional affirmation of the value of linguistic diversity.

9.5 Recognition of Multilingualism as a National Asset

Pakistan's linguistic diversity should be reconceptualised – in political discourse,

educational policy, and national culture – not as a problem of fragmentation to be managed through the imposition of a single national language but as a resource of extraordinary cultural and cognitive richness. A nation whose citizens move fluently across multiple languages, cultural traditions, and ways of knowing is a nation possessed of intellectual flexibility and creative capacity that monolingual societies can only envy. The goal of language policy should be to nurture this multilingualism from its roots, in the mother tongues of Pakistan's diverse communities, while developing the shared linguistic resources – Urdu and English – that enables participation in national and international life.

10. Conclusion

The mother tongue is not simply the first language a child learns. It is the cognitive architecture of her mind, the emotional register of her inner life, the cultural map by which she navigates her world. To silence it – whether through deliberate policy or through the accumulated weight of social contempt – is to silence a dimension of the child's selfhood, and, in aggregate, to silence the accumulated wisdom, beauty, and identity of entire communities. Language education while simultaneously refusing to permit English-medium instruction to crowd out mother tongue development in the early years.

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