Urdu Language Attrition Due to the Preference for English: A Cross-Generation Comparative Study

Ume Amin [1]
Abdul Qadir Khan [2]

Abstract

This research aims to explore the linguistic behavior of speakers of Azad Kashmir among two generations and their linguistic preferences to determine their degree of shift/maintenance. Being a Mixed Method study, the research utilized both quantitative and qualitative data gathered through a questionnaire administered to 112 speakers, 52 females with the count of 26 each in both generations, and 60 males from Gen X and Millennials, residing in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, followed by in-depth interviews of 10 key informants from the adult generation to analyze the psychological and sociological factors responsible for the attrition. The research findings indicate clear signs of Urdu language attrition among the Kashmiri community living in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, despite having a positive attitude towards the Urdu language, which is indicative of a high sense of ethnolinguistic vitality. It seems that the process of partial shift has started in the Millennial group. The impact and level of attrition in Gen Z is unexplored to date, which can be studied in future. Keeping in view the existing sociolinguistic conditions in the context of AJK, where high socio-economic importance is attached to English, it is expected that the attrition process may get completed in 4-5 decades, with a complete loss of competence in the national language and the native language of thousands of AJK residents. The findings of this study can lead to the awareness needed to maintain linguistic and cultural diversity at both regional and national levels in Pakistan and can accelerate the efforts to bring reforms to the country's existing language and education policy.

Keywords: Attrition, Lexical Preferences, Code-switching, Language shift

[1] Individual Researcher
[2] Professor, Department of English, University of AJ&K, Muzaffarabad

1. Introduction

The study is based on the Azad Jammu and Kashmir residents who have Urdu as their first and national language and also learn English as their second language in schools. The effects of English acquisition and learning on Urdu are explored on the lexical level. This is an understudied aspect known as National/ Native language attrition, in which the native language competence decreases due to the increased use of L2.

Due to its relatively young and understudied nature, there is a "terminological jungle," as described by (Köpke, 2019). Kopke has provided a framework to define 18 language attrition directly related to language use and performance. According to Kopke, language attrition is not only related to the frequency of language use; instead, it has more to do with performance, which means even if the person is not using a language in his daily discourse but the language is intact in production and comprehension then we cannot say that language attrition happened per se(Köpke, 2019). So the first sign of language attrition is incompetency in production and comprehension.

Another study on language attrition shows that attrition is directly linked to the individual's attitude. In the study of German, the Jewish refugees who fled to Anglophone countries before World War II, it was observed that L1 attrition was caused by the disuse of L1 and the negative attitude that developed towards German (Köpke, 2007).

In Kasparian and colleague's view, L1 attrition can be viewed as a "less efficient L1 processing, increased L2-to-L1 influence and decreased L1-to-L2 influence (i.e., decreased L1 co-activation)" and "may include effects of increased attention, monitoring (second-thoughts) and motivation to perform well (self-consciousness)" (Kasparian, 2016).

However, the definition pertinent to the present study views language attrition from a language contact perspective, where the competency in L1 reduces in every successive generation leading to language death (Weinreich, 2011). Another framework was provided by Van Els (1986), which includes four types of non-pathological language losses, and the researcher has picked taxonomy No.2 for the study.

1. Loss of L1 in the L1 environment
2. Loss of L1 in the L2 environment
3. Loss of L2 in the L1 environment
 4. Loss of L2 in the L2 environment

L1 attrition in an L2 environment implies that individuals experience difficulties in their first language due to the dominance of L2. Attrition, therefore, is not treated as the loss of a language but rather as incompetency or reduced competency in the first language. From the perspective of language contact, this approach analyzes lexical, morphologic, syntactic, or semantic changes in the linguistic systems of one language due to intense contact with a second language (Bolonyai, 2000). The researcher has picked the lexical system only for this study.

1.1 Research Questions
The present study is an attempt to seek answers of three research questions. These research questions are associated with the study's impact on the inclusion of Urdu at the home level. The research questions of the present study are:
1. What are the preferences of the young generation and older people towards
2. language use?
3. Is language attrition of Urdu happening due to the influence of the English
4. language?
5. What are the reasons for attrition from the perspective of the older group, and how do they view this change?

2. Literature Review
The chapter below presents the arguments associated with the topic and what other studies have to say about the topic. The relationship between age and language usage has been examined from two perspectives: generational language usage and age-specific language use within speech communities (Labov, as cited in Schreurs et al., 2017). Generational language usage refers to the changing language patterns of individuals over time, while age-specific language use focuses on the language used by different cohorts within a community (Schreurs et al., 2017). The distinction between age and generation is not always straightforward, as

age and aging are experienced both individually and as part of a cohort with shared life stages and historical experiences (Studies).

Traditionally, age- and generation-specific language usage was considered simple to analyze (Srinivasan, 2019). However, subsequent studies challenged this notion, calling into question previously accepted distinctions (Srinivasan, 2019). Researchers have recognized different dimensions of age, including chronological age, biological age, social age influenced by life events, and contextual age related to societal norms (Srinivasan, 2019; Schreurs et al., 2017).

In various cultures, age may hold different social significance (Tosun et al., 2019). For instance, in Japan, recent societal developments have shifted perceptions towards youth as a more positive and robust stage of life (Tosun et al., 2019). Additionally, language usage in different stages of life has been the focus of extensive research, with more attention given to childhood and adolescence compared to middle age (Haf & Parkhill, 2017).

Middle-aged individuals often demonstrate higher ethnolinguistic vitality compared to younger and older individuals (Giles et al., as cited in Said & Zhu, 2019). However, language research has tended to use middle-aged language as the norm implicitly, depicting language in children as developmental and in the elderly as degenerative (Said & Zhu, 2019).

While studies have examined language use in older and younger stages of life, comprehensive research on language use during middle age remains necessary to bridge the existing gap in understanding (Schreurs et al., 2017). Scholars have explored the formation of identities in older women in Italy through language analysis (Schreurs et al., 2017). Moreover, investigating how language is used to depict and produce children in modern British society provides insights into the social status associated with childhood (Schreurs et al., 2017).

In summary, understanding language usage and dynamics during middle age is crucial for comprehensively exploring language change and development across the lifespan (Schreurs et al., 2017). Future research should focus on filling the gap in understanding language use during

middle age, which has received less attention compared to other life stages (Haf & Parkhill, 2017).

3. Research Methodology

The present study is based on a survey conducted by the researcher with the residents of Azad Jammu and Kashmir via online questionnaires and interviews. To assess the language status of Urdu in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, the researcher picked a sample of 112 respondents, 26 females and 30 males from both generations aged 20-35 and 35-50. Data was taken from different areas of Azad Kashmir, and only those participants who have Urdu as their first language were added to the study. The questionnaire was shared online with the chosen sample, and participants gave their responses after constant follow-up. All the items of a questionnaire that are used to elicit responses are sequentially analyzed. The frequencies are presented in tabular form, followed by a brief description. The representative data from the Urdu native speakers has been collected with regard to their association with English. Data has been collected via google forms and analyzed using SPSS.

3.1 Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire with closed-ended and a few open-ended questions was given to the respondents. The researcher administered the instrument in simple English with details about technical terms like (Native language, L2, etc.). The respondents were provided with the researcher's contact number to reach out in case of query or confusion. Informed consent was shared beforehand, and they were assured that their identities would not be disclosed. Therefore, their names and confidential information is not added anywhere in the study.

3.2 Sampling

The sampling technique that the researcher used is convenience sampling. As the world is going through a tough time with the pandemic, that is, covid-19, it is tough to gather data through other methods and meet respondents in person (Scholtz, 2021). Due to the consideration of all these issues, the most suitable sampling method is convenience sampling. It allows the researcher to find the participants for the data providence easily. Understanding the sampling technique and choosing the most

appropriate one to collect the data is essential to provide the proper conclusion and results.

4. Results and Discussions

The primary aim of this section is to present an in-depth interpretation and evaluation of the results, ultimately addressing the research questions and objectives laid out in the earlier sections of the paper. By discussing the findings, the researcher aims to uncover patterns, relationships, and potential explanations for the observed phenomena.

Comparing language proficiency across all four language skills is a crucial indicator for assessing the competence of individuals in both Urdu and English. Understanding the extent of proficiency in each language will provide valuable insights into the potential attrition analysis among two distinct generations: Millennials aged 20-35 and Gen X aged 35-50. Analyzing the potential decline in competency in either language within these generational groups will offer significant implications for language acquisition and usage patterns.

The language skills proficiency is assessed in four basic areas: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. These skills are categorized into three levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced. The data presented in the table indicate that respondents in the age group of 20-35 demonstrate a high proficiency percentage in all four English language skills. On the other hand, respondents in the age group of 35-50 exhibit a high percentage of proficiency in Urdu language skills.

These statistics shed light on the language proficiency dynamics between the two generations, highlighting the dominance of English and the potential challenges faced by Urdu in terms of continued usage and development.
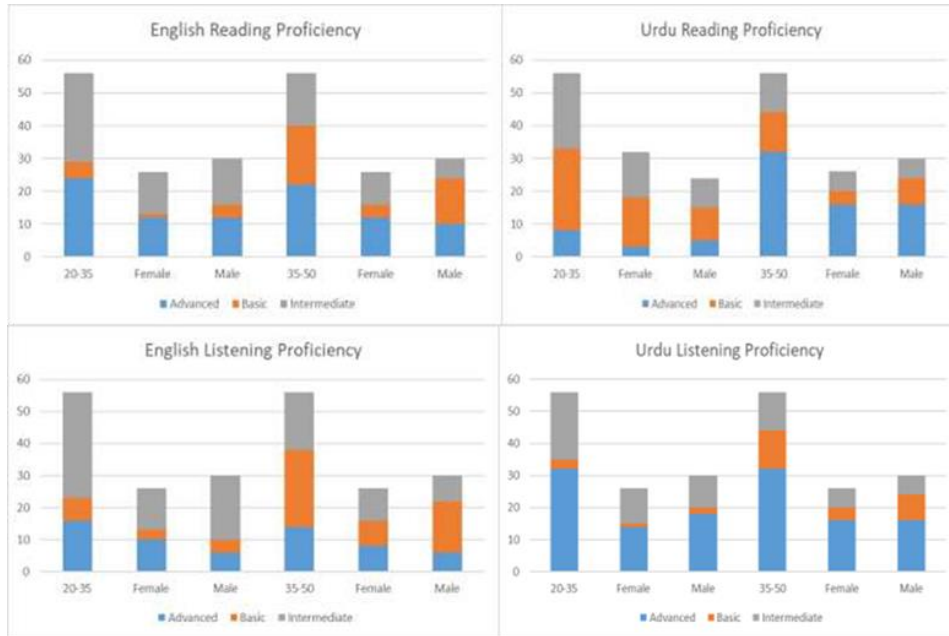
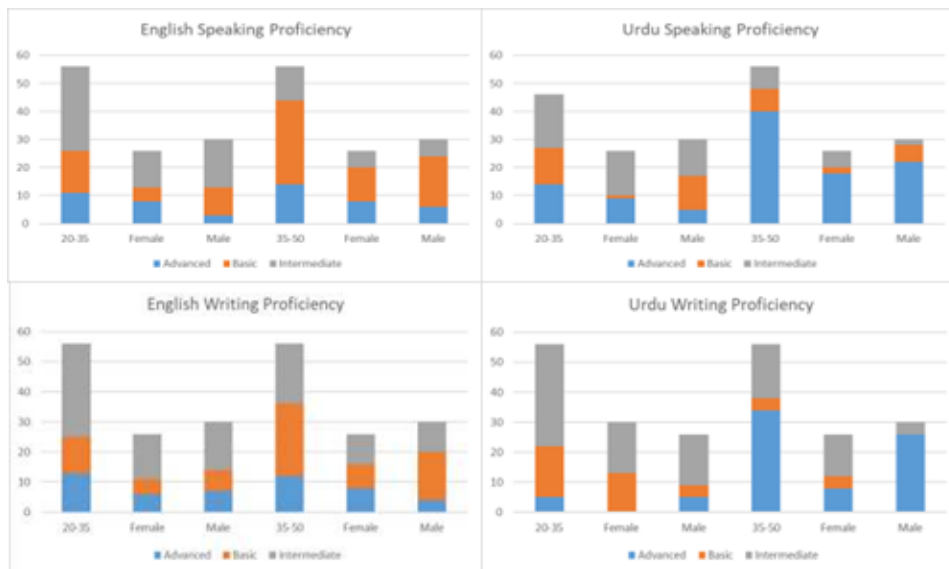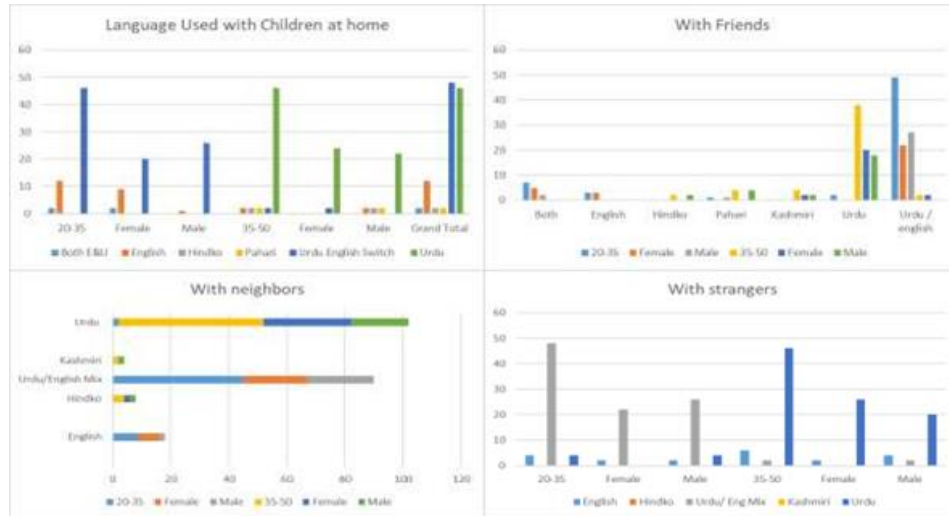**Fig. 4.1: Comparative Analysis of Reading Proficiency**

Fig. 4.2: Comparative Analysis of Speaking Proficiency

Fig. 4.3: Comparative analysis of respondent's language usage

The statistics from the study comparing the use of Urdu and English in different social settings among Gen X and Millennials reveal noteworthy insights.

1. Language Preferences: Gen X demonstrates a tendency to preserve the Urdu language, predominantly utilizing it within the family sphere. In contrast, Millennials exhibit a preference for a combination of English and Urdu, indicating their lexical preferences.

2. Lexical Density: Millennials exhibit a higher lexical density in English compared to Urdu, suggesting a greater richness and variety of vocabulary in their English language usage.

3. Language Usage at Home: Only 12% of the sampled population exclusively speak English at home, while the majority engage in code mixing and switching between Urdu and English.

4. Code-Switching and Mixing: Millennials predominantly engage in code-switching and mixing in various social settings, showcasing a preference for a blended language approach rather than solely relying on Urdu.

5. Difficulty in Finding Alternate Words: Participants reported difficulties in finding alternate words in Urdu, indicating a potential challenge in expressing themselves fully in the language.

6. Impact on Proficiency: The frequency of code-switching and mixing among Millennials has a considerable impact on their proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing. This has led to a significant reduction in command over Urdu vocabulary among the Millennials, with its usage almost diminishing.

These statistics highlight the evolving language dynamics among Gen X and Millennials, with a shift towards a greater integration of English and a subsequent decline in Urdu proficiency among the younger generation.

4.1 Comparison of Language Attitude

The present study categorizes responses based on their suitability and usefulness in academic discourse, revealing notable differences in language preferences between Millennials and Gen X. Specifically, Millennials tend to prioritize English as the most appropriate and valuable language for academic settings, while Gen Xers express a greater affinity for Urdu, with English ranking as their second choice. These findings can be attributed to the fact that English is a globally celebrated language and Millennials are more engaged with the international market, thus perceiving English as more valuable than Urdu. Furthermore, although individuals may have emotional attachments to their national language based on socio-cultural ideals, practical utility emerges as the primary factor driving the preference for English over Urdu.

## 4.2 Respondents Consolidated Responses toward Urdu

This section presents the consolidated views of respondents towards the Urdu language, reflecting the attitudes of both the Millennial and Gen X generations towards teaching Urdu to their respective generations. Among the Millennial sample, 45% supported teaching Urdu, while 115 disagreed with the passing of Urdu to the coming generation. Conversely, 48% of the Gen X sample showed a positive attitude towards Urdu, while eight did not want to teach Urdu to their generation. The results suggest that the majority of the Millennial sample perceives Urdu as an outdated language and views speaking in English as a more progressive and modern

approach. Only 3% disagreed with this statement, while 21% remained unsure. In contrast, 44% of the Gen X sample disagreed with the proposition, while 10% agreed with it.

Furthermore, the study observed that the usage of Urdu among young people is low in both age groups. The majority of respondents from both generations believed that young people under 35 use Urdu less frequently than their elders. Only 7% of the sample from both age groups disagreed with this observation. These findings suggest that Urdu may be losing its relevance among young people in Pakistan, and that promoting its use and teaching it to future generations may require a more concerted effort.
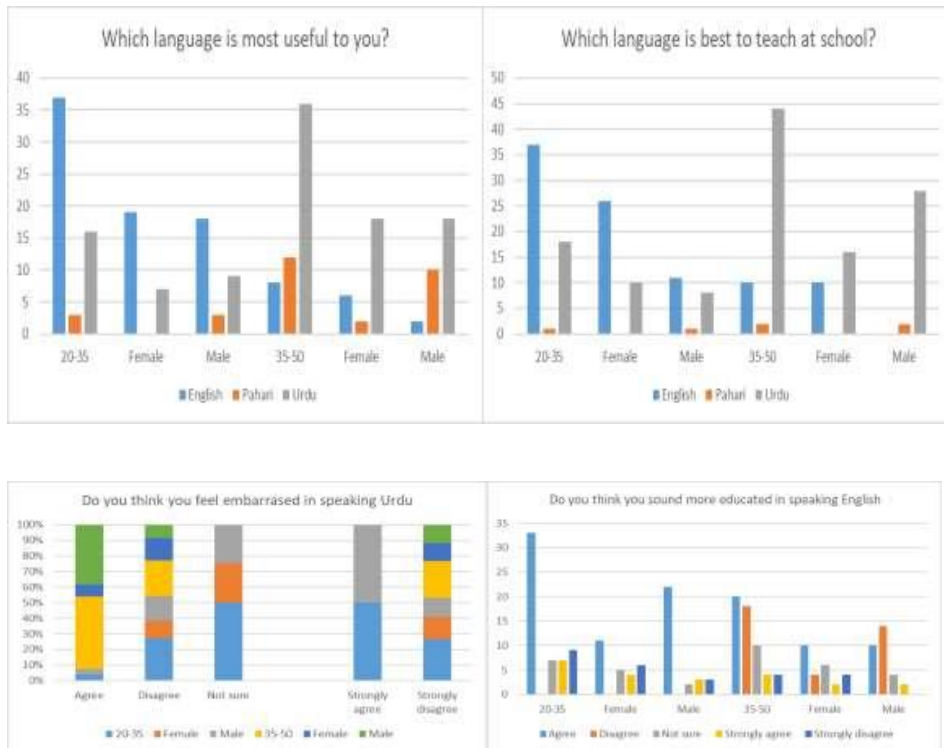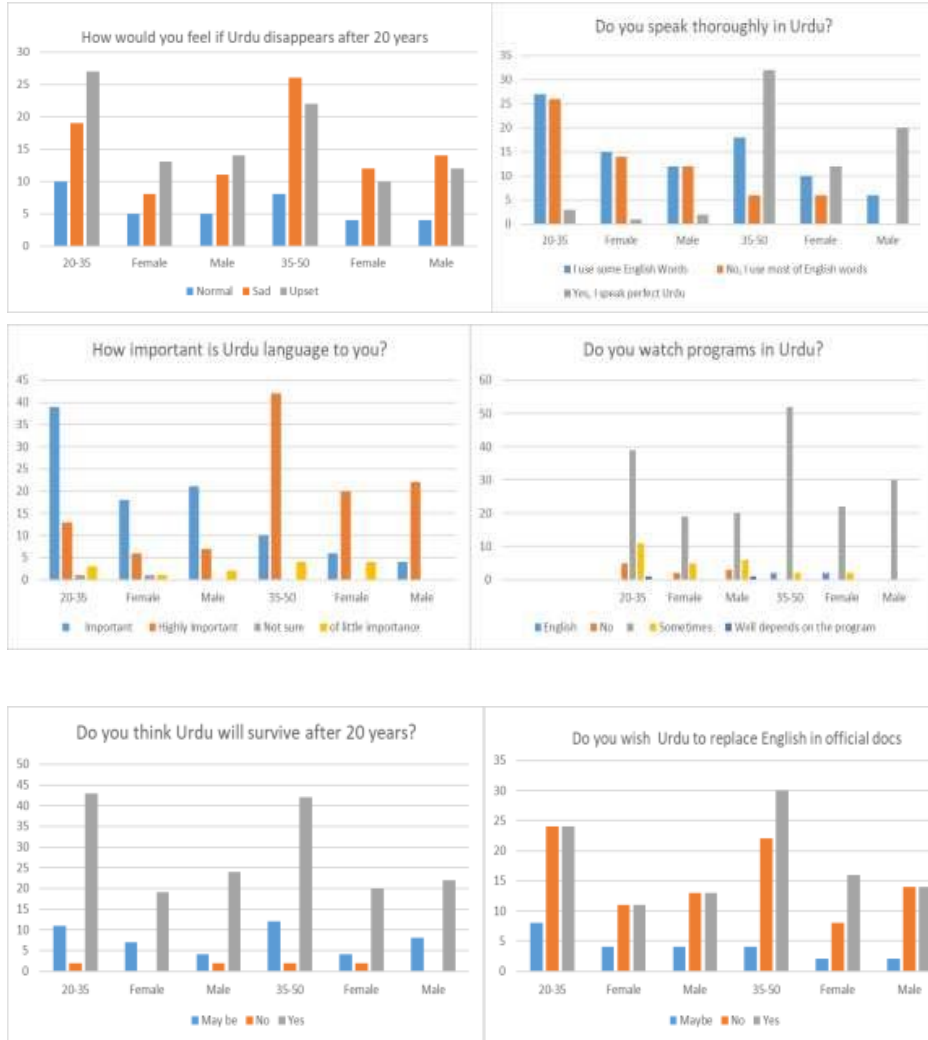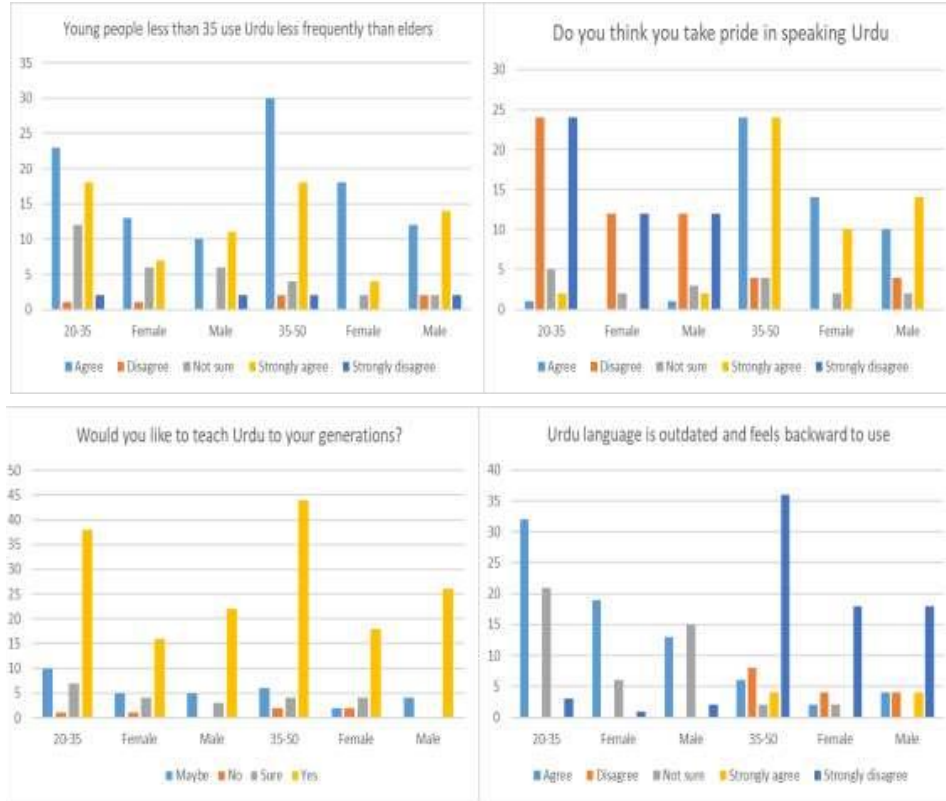
The present study investigates the attitudes of Millennials and Gen X towards Urdu. The results indicate a concerning trend, as the majority of Millennials (48%) do not take pride in speaking Urdu, with only 3% reporting that they do. In contrast, the majority of Gen X participants (485 representation) expressed pride in speaking Urdu. Interestingly, participants from both age groups reported similar levels of comfort in speaking Urdu, indicating that embarrassment is not a significant barrier to language use. However, the lack of pride in the language may be contributing to the participants' limited competence in Urdu, as they do not display a strong interest in learning it.

The findings indicate that a significant proportion of participants from both generations acknowledge the social value of the Urdu language, but express a preference for using English due to its perceived association with competence and education. As a result, participants feel hesitant to

develop their proficiency in their native language, indicating the level of importance attached to the native and national tongue of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Additionally, it was found that most participants prefer to watch television programs in Urdu due to its ease of understanding, with a larger percentage of Gen X participants (52%) than Millennials (39%) preferring Urdu content.

Despite their optimism about the future of the Urdu language, the study reveals a gradual shift towards code-switching and mixing in the context of AJK, with Millennials in particular exhibiting a stronger inclination to develop their English proficiency. This suggests that most participants from both generations are inclined towards making English the official language of the region, and that the language dominance of English is increasingly evident in the context of AJK.

The findings also highlight the potential risks of language extinction, as participants take their national language for granted and remain unaware of the implications of language replacement. Specifically, 27% of Millennials use some English words, 26% use most English words, and only 3% consider themselves to be proficient in Urdu. By comparison, a Gen X sample of 32% believe they speak perfect Urdu, 18% use some English words, and 6% use most English words in their conversations.

In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of preserving the Urdu language in AJK and raising awareness about the risks associated with language replacement. Furthermore, it highlights the need to address the underlying factors driving participants' preference for English and their reluctance to develop their proficiency in their native tongue.

4.3 Reasons of attrition by gen x respondents

The study investigated the diverse opinions of individuals from different backgrounds on the adoption and use of the Urdu language in Pakistan. Responses received from participants varied considerably, indicating the influence of personal experiences and mental filters on their perspectives. While some individuals believed that the adoption of Urdu as the national language was due to its ability to unite people, others viewed it as a potential hindrance to globalization and progress. Moreover, the shift towards English as a preferred language for business and communication

was identified as a factor contributing to the declining use and status of Urdu. The study recommends the promotion of the Urdu language through systematic efforts to upgrade and transform it to compete with other international languages. It also highlights the importance of native language in personal and professional communication and suggests the need for a mindset change towards its adoption and promotion. The study concludes by proposing strategies for increasing the importance of the Urdu language, beginning with early childhood education in a homecare environment. The findings of this study can be used as a foundation for further research and development of policies for promoting and preserving the Urdu language in Pakistan.

5. Conclusion

The research paper highlights the decline in proficiency of the national language, Urdu, among the Millennial generation in Azad Kashmir due to the dominance of the English language, which is considered more prestigious and essential for employment. The paper emphasizes the need for policymakers, government, and private sectors to implement policies to enhance the use of Urdu to maintain a balance between the national language and the foreign language. The safety of the national language cannot be taken for granted, and its promotion and protection are necessary. The role of media, especially literature, in commercializing and safeguarding the Urdu language is also emphasized.

References

Bolonyai, A. (2000). "Elective affinities": Language contact in the abstract lexicon and its structural consequences: Affinities really become interesting only when they bring about separations'(Goethe: Elective Affinities). *International Journal of Bilingualism, 4*(1), 81-106.

Kasparian, K., &Steinhauer, K. (2016). Confusing similar words: ERP correlates of lexical-semantic processing in first language attrition and late second language acquisition. *Neuropsychologia, 93*, 200-217.

Köpke, B. (Ed.). (2007). *Language attrition: Theoretical perspectives (Vol. 33)*. John Benjamins Publishing.

Schmid, M. S., &Köpke, B. (2007). Bilingualism and attrition. *Language attrition: Theoretical perspectives, 33*, 1-7.

Scholtz, S. E. (2021). Sacrifice is a step beyond convenience: A review of

convenience sampling in psychological research in Africa. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 47*(1), 1-12.

Van Els, T. (1986). An overview of European research on language attrition. *Language attrition in progress*, *3*, 18.

Weinreich, U. (2011). Languages in contact. *Languages in contact,* 1-436.

Weltens, B., & De Bot, K. (1986). *Language attrition in progress.* T. van Els (Ed.). Dordrecht: Foris.

Appendix-A: Questionnaire

Personal Information
1. Name
2. Gender
3. Age
4. Occupation
5. Marital Status
6. Education
7. Place of Birth
8. Locality of Residence
9. Your native language (First language)
   a) English
   b) Urdu
   c) Other:
10. Level of proficiency in English Speaking *
    a) Basic
    b) Intermediate
    c) Advanced
11. Level of proficiency in Urdu Speaking *
    a) Basic
    b) Intermediate
    c) Advanced
12. Level of proficiency in English Writing *
    a) Basic
    b) Intermediate
    c) Advanced
13. Level of proficiency in Urdu Writing
    a) Basic
    b) Intermediate
    c) Advanced
14. Level of proficiency in English Reading *
    a) Basic
    b) Intermediate
    c) Advanced
15. Level of proficiency in Urdu Reading *
    a) Basic
    b) Intermediate

   c) Advanced

16. Level of proficiency in English Listening *
   a) Basic
   b) Intermediate
   c) Advanced

17. Level of proficiency in Urdu Listening
   a) Basic
   b) Intermediate
   c) Advanced

18. Which language do you speak with children *
   a) English
   b) Urdu
   c) Other:

19. Which language do you speak with family members *
   a) English
   b) Urdu
   c) Other:

20. Which language do you speak with friends *
   a) English
   b) Urdu
   c) Other:

21. Which language do you speak with neighbors *
   a) English
   b) Urdu
   c) Other:

22. Which language do you speak with strangers *
   a) English
   b) Urdu
   c) Other:

23. Which language is most useful to you *
   a) English
   b) Urdu
   c) Pahari

24. Which language is the best to teach? *
   a) English
   b) Urdu
   c) Pahari

25. Would you like to learn Urdu and teach it to your generations*?

a) Yes
b) Maybe
c) No
d) Sure

26. Urdu language is outdated and feels backward to use *
   a) Strongly disagree
   b) Disagree
   c) Agree
   d) Strongly agree
   e) Not sure

27. Young People (less than 35) use Urdu less frequently than older people
   a) Strongly disagree
   b) Disagree
   c) Agree
   d) Strongly agree
   e) Not sure

28. Do you think you take pride in speaking in Urdu *
   a) Strongly disagree
   b) Disagree
   c) Agree
   d) Strongly agree
   e) Not sure

29. Do you think you feel embarrassed in speaking in Urdu *
   a) Strongly disagree
   b) Disagree
   c) Agree
   d) Strongly agree
   e) Not sure

30. Do you think you sound more educated when you speak in English *
   a) Strongly disagree
   b) Disagree
   c) Agree
   d) Strongly agree
   e) Not sure

31. How important Urdu language is to you *
   a) of no importance of little importance
   b) Highly important

   c) Important
   d) Not sure

32. Do you like to listen programs in Urdu *
   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) Sometimes
   d) Other:

33. I watch programs inUrdu language because *
   a) Easy to understand
   b) Express local social and cultural values
   c) To improve Urdu
   d) I don't watch

34. Will Urdu language survive after 20 years? *
   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) May be

35. Do you wish Urdu to replace English in official documentation*?
   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) Maybe

36. How will you feel if Urdu disappears (dies out) within 20 years *
   a) Satisfied
   b) Normal
   c) Sad
   d) Upset

37. Do you think Urdu should be promoted *
   a) Yes
   b) No
   c) Maybe

38. Do you speak thoroughly in Urdu *
   a) Yes, I speak perfect Urdu
   b) No, I use most of English words
   c) I use some English Words Other:

Appendix-A: Structured Interview

Q1: What do you think, due to which reasons Urdu has become a national language of Pakistan?

Q2: What are the attributes of a native language according to you, through which it becomes the easy medium of communication among the people of a country?

Q3: Native language of Pakistan or first language is Urdu, what are the reasons due to which people are so reluctant towards it?

Q4: According to you are there any benefits of language attrition?

Q5: what do you think about the role of native language in a progress of a country?

Q6: What could be done to revoke the English dominancy in the country?

Q7: What do you think are the reasons that make Urdu easy for Pakistanis to use as a medium of communication?

Q8: How to make people realize the importance of the Native or National language?

Q9: What do you think about English getting its roots deeper in the non-English native countries?

Q10: How on a different level a country can support and promote its native language according to you.