

## Morpho-Syntactic Variation in Balti Spoken in District Shiger: A Descriptive study

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### Abstract

*The present study aims to explore morpho-syntactic variation in Balti, as spoken in the Shiger district of Gilgit Baltistan. Employing a descriptive-qualitative research design, the study examines a sample of 60 participants, randomly selected, with 15 individuals from each of the four villages in Shiger. The participants, all native Balti speakers, range in age from 30 to 60 years. Data collection was conducted through open-ended interviews, recorded in audio format. The findings of the study indicate that speakers from different regions within the Shiger district exhibit morpho-syntactic variations. Specifically, the study identifies four variants of Balti—Basha, Braldo, Shiger Mal, and Gulabpur—based on these variations. Consequently, dialectal boundaries can be delineated between these regions within the Shiger district. Moreover, this study contributes to the documentation of the Balti language, which is classified as one of the most endangered languages globally.*

**Keywords:** Balti, Balti Dialects, Regional Dialects, Morpho-syntactic Variations, Dialectal Variations

### 1. Introduction

Language serves as a systematic tool for communication, allowing individuals to convey thoughts, emotions, and interpretations (Milewski, 2019; Trask, 2003). It not only facilitates expression but also shapes cultural identity and behavior (Chaturvedi, 2015). With thousands of languages spoken worldwide, each possessing numerous dialects, the diversity of linguistic expression is vast. According to the Ethnologue's

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26th edition (2023), there are 7168 known living languages globally, each with its own set of dialectical variations.

Balti, spoken in four districts of Gilgit Baltistan—Skardu, Shiger, Kharmang, and Khaplu—along with pockets in India and China, is a prime example of linguistic diversity. The region where Balti is predominant is referred to as Balti Youl, and its speakers are known as Balti. Abbas (2016) estimates nearly 400,000 native Balti speakers across the four Baltistan districts. Despite its rich literary heritage, with works like "Keser—the son of god by Kazmi (2020)" recognized by UNESCO (2020) as one of the world's longest epics, contemporary Balti literature faces decline. Fewer individuals engage in writing poetry, stories, or other literary forms, leading to a gradual erosion of the Balti lexicon and a decline in speaker numbers.

Consequently, Balti has been classified as one of the world's most endangered languages, with limited scholarly attention devoted to its preservation. The present study seeks to address this gap by investigating dialectal variations within the Balti language as spoken across the four regions of the Shiger district in Gilgit Baltistan. Through this research, the aim is to contribute meaningfully to the preservation and understanding of Balti linguistic heritage.

Dialectical variation encompasses the diverse linguistic expressions found among speakers within a speech community, often influenced by social or geographic factors (Rickford, 2002). This variation encompasses regional, social, and individual differences, including phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic aspects.

Phonological variations involve differences in pronunciation, stress patterns, intonation, and speech rhythms. Morphological variations pertain to how words are formed, including the use of prefixes, suffixes, and infixes to create word structures. Lexical variations involve the use of different vocabularies or lexemes to refer to the same concepts. Syntactic variations concern differences in sentence structure and word order.

In this study focusing on Balti spoken in different regions of district Shiger, Gilgit Baltistan, the emphasis lies on morpho-syntactic variation. Specifically, the research aims to explore the morpho-syntactic differences among Balti speakers from various areas within the Shiger district, thereby

investigating the existence of regional dialects. By narrowing the focus to morpho-syntactic features, the study aims to achieve its objectives within the scope of a Bachelor's thesis.

Furthermore, this research endeavor seeks to lay the groundwork for future scholars to delve deeper into the complexities of the Balti language, providing a platform for continued exploration and understanding of its linguistic nuances.

## **2. Literature Review**

Dialectical variation refers to the varieties of a language spoken by different speakers who are separated by social or geographic boundaries in a speech community (Rickford, 2002). The variety of language spoken by different speakers who are separated by social boundaries is called sociolect and the variety of language spoken by different speakers who are separated by geographic boundaries in a speech community is called regional dialect. Omar and Alotaibi (2017) state that in linguistic discipline, dialect is the variations of language that is used in a certain geographic area. Even two speakers, who speak the same language, may not speak in a same way. Hovy and Purschke, (2018) argue that regional variation in language is a multifaceted phenomenon characterized by a variety of grammatical, lexical, and phonological features that are in a state of continuous evolution. As a result, dialects are not static rather form a continuum in most languages.

A descriptive qualitative research was carried out by Appen (2015) that discovered the existence of four Pashto dialects spoken in Pakistan and Afghanistan: The South-West dialect, South-East (Quetta), North-East (Peshawar), and Central/North-West. The findings of their study showed that mostly dialectical variations in Pashto are lexical and phonological. The researchers argue that clearly dividing the dialects only by geography and tribes is not possible. Still, it can be divided based on phonological variation which comprises geography and tribal affiliation because the proposed boundaries are not exact and often overlap.

A recent qualitative study has been conducted by Chitsuko, (2019) that explored the intricate relationship between phonological, morphological, and lexical variations in Japanese dialects, with a particular emphasis on adjectives. The researcher employed secondary data from various geo-linguistic surveys and dialect dictionaries to validate the estimated

changes in phonological, morphological, and lexical variations. The study revealed that geographical data from numerous surveys and data from dialect dictionaries are both effective in interpreting the changes' course. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that the phonological types of adjectives play a critical role in interpreting phonological variation and change. However, the researcher acknowledges a significant limitation in the interpretation of language variation and change of adjectives in the Niigata dialect, which remains tentative.

Peter and Carla, (1992) conducted a sociolinguistic survey on the languages of Northern Area of Pakistan including Balti language. According to their findings, Balti people perceive minor differences in the way the language is spoken across various parts of Baltistan. The most noticeable variations are found in Chorbat, which still shares almost 90% of its vocabulary with other Balti regions. Additionally, there are some phonological differences between the regions, which can be attributed to geography; western and eastern Balti locations exhibit different phonological traits. The boundary between the two groups of regions is generally observed to fall between Khapalu and Chorbat in the Shyok Valley and between Skardu and Kharmang in the Indus Valley; however, this varies somewhat depending on the feature under consideration. It is important to note that while there may be dialect variations between Balti speakers in different regions, they are not perceived as obstacles to communication between them. Moreover, based on the phonological and lexical variation the researcher identified six dialectal variations spoken in Baltistan: Skardu, Kharmang, Shiger, Khaplu, Chorbat, Roundu. It is worth noting that the study's scope was confined to a small number of participants from the center areas of the districts, with no consideration given to other villages within these regions. It is important to recognize that this approach may have limited the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the entire district. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of dialectal variations, it is crucial to investigate the villages within these districts as well. Intending to fill this gap, this study aims to investigate the dialectical variation of Balti, spoken in different villages of district Shiger.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The present study employs a descriptive qualitative research method to identify the number of Balti dialects spoken in district Shiger based on morpho-syntactic variations by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

#### **3.2 Population and Sample**

To conduct this study, the researcher has selected four regions of district Shiger and their peripheral villages: Basha (Tiser to Arandu), Braldo (Haider Abad to Asokli), Shiger Mal (Kothang to Younu, and Gulabpur (Niali to Sogho) which are 15 to 20 miles away from each other. Social contact between these villages is negligible. The researcher selected a purposive sample of 60 participants; 10 from each four selected regions, (age ranged from 30 to 60) of uneducated native Balti speakers who are the permanent resident of the four selected regions of district Shiger. The main challenge of the study in selecting the participants for the researcher was that, in this era of science and technology people are moving towards cities for the purpose of getting education, to learn skills and to find better jobs and they adopt other's dialects, vocabularies, structure and pronunciation. Consequently, if the researcher selected those people for sampling, the result of the study would not be reliable. Thereupon, the researcher carefully selected only those people who are permanent resident of the villages of district Shiger and they never lived in other districts and down cities.

#### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedure**

The researcher personally visited the selected four regions of District Shiger: Basha, Braldo, Shiger Mal and Gulabpur and their peripheral villages for the purpose of data collection. The Data collection involved recorded speech samples, elicited through open-ended conversations with all the participant of the four selected regions of the district Shiger. During the recording, at first, the researcher told them that the researcher came to record the conversation in order to identify the dialectical variation among different speakers. However, the participants were hesitant and did not talk in a natural way and the researcher was unable to record interviews of more than 1 minute. To resolve this hindrance, the researcher started taking interviews without informing the participants about the recordings for the natural data and once it was done the researcher explained them the

purpose and the significance of the recordings. Some participants were still hesitant; so, the researcher erased the recorded interviews before them to fulfill the ethical consideration. The researcher recorded 3 to 5 minutes informal interviews and in some interviews more than three people were participating. The researcher then transcribed all the recorded interviews orthographically. The useful data extracted from the recorded interviews were categorized into different tables on the basis of morphological, phonological and lexical variations and analyzed them for the findings of the study.

### 3.4 Tools

Smart phone recorder is used as tool for data collection. The researcher recorded all the interviews using a smartphone recorder. Transcription sheet, English phonemics and tables have also been used as guideline tools for data analysis.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

The researcher has considered and set necessary ethical measurements in order to validate the data collection procedure under the ethical consideration. The researcher has selected only those participants who were permanent resident of district Shiger for valid and unbiased findings. The researcher has taken prior consents from the participants for the data to be analyzed in the current study and has also assured them to keep their data confidential and shall not be used for any other purposes.

## 4. Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were orthographically transcribed and then all the morpho-syntactic variations were identify and analyzed.

**Table 4.1: Balti variations in the use of the postpositions: *ka*, *haa* and *kha***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger Mal	Gulabpur
Guoqspi ka	Guoqspi haa	Guoqspi kha	Guoqspi kha

Table 4.1 shows the use of morpho-syntactic variations of postpositons *ka*, *haa* and *kha* by different Balti speakers.. The result shows that the respondents from different regions use distinct variant form of *ka*, *haa* and *kha* which indicates morpho-syntactic variation between different regions in district Shiger. The word *guokhpa* is a noun which means in English “morning” and when the postpositons *ka*, *haa* and *kha* are followed, the

meaning becomes “in the morning”. The respondents from Braldo attaches the postposition ‘ka’ as *guoqspi ka*. The respondents from Basha attaches the postposition ‘haa’ as *guoqspi haa* and the respondents from Gulabpur and Shiger Mal attach the postposition ‘kha’ to the word *guoqspa* as *guoqspikha*.

**Table 4.2: Balti variants of suffixes *sta*, *sopa*, *setpa* and *spa***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Aongsta	Aongsopa	Aongsetpa	Aongspa

The table 4.2 shows the use of variants of suffixes *sta*, *sopa*, *setpa* and *spa* by different Balti speakers. The results show that the four regions add different suffixes in using the word *aong* (come) in past tense (came). The respondents from Basha use the variant *aongsta*. The respondents from Braldo use the variant *aongsopa*. The respondents from Shiger Mal mostly use the variant *aongsetpa* but few respondents use the variant *ongspa*. The respondents from Gulabpur mostly use the variant while few use the variant *ongspa*. Although the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur add the same suffix *pa* but the respondents from Shiger mostly embed the infix *et* as in the word *aongs-et-pa* while only few respondents from Gulabpur embed the infix *et* but others do not embed the infix as in the word *ongs-pa*.

**Table 4.3: Balti variation of postpositions: *nang* and *na***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Skardu nang	Skardu nang	Skardu na	Skardu na

The table 4.3 shows the results of variant forms of postposition *nang* and *na*. The result indicates that speakers of Basha and Braldo use variant postposition than the speakers of Gulabpur and Shiger Mal. The word ‘Skardu’ is the name of the capital of Baltistan when the postpositions *nang* or *na* are followed, the meaning becomes ‘from skardu’. Thus, the result shows that two variant postpositions were used: *skardu nang* and *skardu na* by the Balti speakers of district Shiger. The former variant is used in Shiger Mal and Gulabpur while the letter is used in Basha and Braldo.

**Table 4.4: Balti variants of suffixes *chik*, *pa* and *na***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Guachik	Guapa	Guana/guachik	Guana

The table 4.4 shows a distinct use of suffixes *chik*, *pa* and *na* by different balti speakers. The words *guachik*, *guana*, and *guapa* are functional words which mean ‘therefore’ or ‘so’ in English. The respondents from Basha use the variant suffixes *guachik*, the respondents from Braldo use the variant *guapa* and the respondents from Shiger Mal mostly use the variant *guana* but they also use the variant *guachik* and the respondents from Gulabpur only use the variant *guana*.

**Table 4.5: Balti variants of suffixes *rek* and *rey***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Khperek	Khperek	Khparey	Khparey

The table 4.5 shows the use of variant suffixes *rek* and *rey* by different Balti speakers. The results reveal that the respondents from Basha and Braldo add the variant suffix *rek* while the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur add the variant suffix *rey*. The result shows that the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur add the same variant suffix *rey* as in the word *Khparey* while the respondents from Basha and Braldo attach the same variant suffix *rek* as in the word *Khperek*.

**Table 4.6: Balti variants of infix *pa***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Bespamet	Bespamet	Besmet	Besmet

The table 4.6 shows the result of the use of infix *pa* by different speakers of Balti belonging to different regions of district Shiger. The result reveals that the respondents from Basha and Braldo embed the infix *pa* in the word *bes-pa-met* while the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur do not embed the infix as in the word *bes-met*. The word *bespamet* and *besmet* means “incomplete”. When the infix *pa* is embedded it makes no any difference in the meaning.

**Table 4.7: Balti variations of postposition: *sua*, *sun* and *sula***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Su a	Su a	Su na/su la	Su na/su la



The table 4.7 shows results of the use of variant postpositon *sua*, *sunā* and *sula* which mean “with whom or to whom”. The results reveal the variant use of the postpositions *a*, *na* and *la* with the word *su* (who). The respondents from Basha and Braldo on use the postpositon *a* with the word *su* as in the word *su a*. On the other hand, the respondents from Gulabpur and Shiger found to use two different postpositons: *na* and *la* as in the words *su na* and *su la*. The both lexical bundles: *su na* and *su la* were used equally by the respondents from Gulabpur and Shiger Mal.

**Table 4.8: Balti variants of postposition: *shita*, *sta shida* and *chanla***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Khuy shita	Khuy sta	Khuy chanla/shida	Khuy chanla/shida

The table 4.8 shows the use variants postpositon *shita*, *sta*, *shida* and *chanla* by the respondents belonging to different regions of district Shiger. The results reveal that the respondents from Basha use the postpositon *shita* with the base word *khuy* (he) as *khuy shita* (with him). The respondents from Braldo add the use *sta* with the word *khuy* as *khuy sta* (with him). The respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur use two variant postpositions *shida* and *chanla*. The results reveal that the respondents from Gulabpur and Shiger Mal relatively use two and more variants while the respondents from Basha and Braldo mostly use one variant.

**Table 4.9: Balti variants of postpositon *bang*, *vang* and *bing***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Khuru bang	Khuru vang	Khuru bing	Khuru bing

The table 4.9 shows variant propositons *bang*, *vang* and *bing*. The result reveals that the respondents from different regions of Shiger use different postpositions with the word *Khuru*. The word *khuru* is a base word which means room and when the postpositions: *bang*, *vang* and *bing* are followed as in the words: *khuru bang* *khuru vang* and *khuru bing* the meaning becomes “in the room”. The result demonstrates that the respondents from Basha use the variant *khuru bang*. The respondents from Basha use the postpositon *vang* with the word *khuru* as in the example *khuru vang*. The respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur use the same postpositon: *khuru bing*.

**Table 4.10: Balti variants of suffixes *skuor* and *yoq***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Ghorskuor	Ghorskuor	Ghoryoq	Ghoryoq

The table 4.10 shows the results of variant use of the suffixes *skuor* and *yoq*. The result reveals that the respondents from the Basha and Braldo use the variant *ghorskuor* means “leave it”. On the other hand the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur use the variant *ghoryoq* (leave it). The result demonstrates that the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur use the same variant *ghoryoq* while the respondents from Basha and Braldo use the same variant *ghorskuor*.

**Table 4.11: Balti variants of suffixes *pa*, and *bana***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Khyarpa	Khyarpa	Khyarbana	Khyarbana

The table 4.11 shows variant use of the suffixes *pa*, and *bana*. The words *khyarpa* and *khyarbana* literally mean “after dying” but the respondents use it pragmatically in a bad manner to mean “came”. The result reveals that the respondents from Basha and Braldo use the variant *khyarpa* ending in the suffix *pa* while the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur use the variant *khyarbana* ending in the suffix *bana*. The result demonstrates that the respondents from Basha and Braldo attach same suffix *pa* while the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur use the same suffix *bana*.

**Table 4.12: Balti variants of suffixes *ka* and *kha***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Ayeka	Adyka	Ayekha	Ayekha

The table 4.12 shows results of variant use of the suffixes *ka* and *kha*. The result reveals that the respondents Basha use the variant *ayeka* means “there” with the ending of the suffix *ka*. The respondents from Basha use the variant *adyka* with the same ending suffix *ka*. However, they add an infix *d* as in the word *a-d-ka*. The respondents from Gulabpur and Shiger mal use the same variant *ayekha* with the ending suffix *kha*.

**Table 4.13: Balti variants of suffixes *ra* and *da***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Yora	Yora	Yodda/yora	Yodda/yora

The table 4.13 shows result of the variant use of the suffixes *ra* and *da*. The word *yod* means “it is there” and when suffixes *ra* and *da* the meaning becomes “Is it there?” The result reveals that the respondents from Basha and Braldo only use the variant *yora* with the ending of the suffix *ra* while the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur use two variants *yodda* ending in the suffix *da* and less frequently the variant *yora* with the ending of the suffix *ra*.

**Table 4.14 Balti variants of suffixes *pa* and *na***

Basha	Braldo	Shiger mal	Gulabpur
Kopa	Kopa	Kuana	Kuana

The table 4.14 shows results of the morpho-syntactic variations of *kopa* and *kuana* which mean (after listening or hearing). The results reveal that the respondents from Basha and Braldo use the variant *kopa* ending with the suffix *pa*. The respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur use the variant *kuana* ending with the suffix *na*. Thus, the result reveals the morpho-syntactic variations between the Balti speakers belonging to different regions of district Shiger.

#### 4.1 Findings & Interpretation

The speakers belonging to different regions of district Shiger make morpho-syntactic variations as Table 4.2 shows the use of variants of the suffixes *sta*, *sopa*, *setpa* and *spa*. The results show that the four regions add different suffixes to the word *aong* (come) to use it in the past tense. The respondents from Basha use the variant *aongsta*. The respondents from Braldo use the variant *aongsopa*. The respondents from Shiger Mal mostly use the variant *aongsetpa* but few respondents use the variant *ongspa*. The respondents from Gulabpur mostly use the variant *aongsetpa* while few use the variant *ongspa*. Although the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur add the same suffix *pa* but the respondents from Shiger mostly embed the infix *et* as in the word *aongs-et-pa* while only few respondents from Gulabpur embed the infix *et* but others do not embed the infix as in the word *ongs-pa*.

The respondents from different regions of district shiger use different postpositions as can be seen in (table 4.7) that shows the use of variant postposition *sua*, *suna* and *sula* which mean “with whom or to whom.” The respondents from Basha and Braldo use the postposition *a* with the word *su* as in the word *sua*. On the other hand, the respondents from Gulabpur and Shiger found to use two different postpositions: *na* and *la* as in the words *suna* and *sula*. The both variants: *suna* and *sula* were used equally by the respondents from Gulabpur and Shiger Mal.

One of the interesting finding of the study is that the respondents use variant infixes as the (Table 4.6) shows the result of the use of infix *pa* by different speakers of Balti belonging to different regions of district Shiger. The result reveals that the respondents from Basha and Braldo embed the infix *pa* in the word *bes-pa-met* while the respondents from Shiger Mal and Gulabpur do not embed the infix as in the word *bes-met*. The word *bespamet* and *besmet* means “incomplete”. However, adding the infix *pa* makes no any difference in the meaning. The study also reveals that the morpho-syntactic variation is the relatively highest variations among Balti speakers in district Shiger.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study investigates dialectical variation of Balti language in district Shiger, Gilgit Baltistan. This study only examined morph-syntactic variations of Balti speakers belonging to different geographic regions of district Shiger to identify the number of Balti dialects spoken in district Shiger. After critically analyzing the collected data, the study concludes that based on morpho-syntactic variations, the researchers identified four Balti dialects (Basha, Braldo, Shiger Mal and Gulabpur) spoken in district Shiger. The results show that different speakers belonging to different regions of district Shiger make morpho-syntactic variations in their spoken. Therefore, we can draw linguistic boundaries between different regions of district Shiger based on morpho-syntactic variations. Moreover, the present study is an attempt to contribute in language documentation of Balti language which is one of the most endangered languages in the world.

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