



Language Maintenance and Shift among Pashto-Speaking Diaspora in the Middle East

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Abstract:

This research paper explores how Pashto-speaking migrant communities in the Middle East maintain or shift their language use. It draws on recent studies of South Asian migrants in Gulf countries and compares Pashto communities in other diasporas. The article gathers evidence on where and how Pashto is used, including family language policies, community networks, work and school influences, and government language environments that affect whether Pashto is kept or lost. The paper finds that language maintenance is strongest when dense ethnic networks, intermarriage, and active family language policies exist alongside institutional support such as religious schools, community classes, and media. Conversely, language shift speeds up when migrants quickly integrate socioeconomically, children attend local schools, and households switch to dominant languages like English, Arabic, or Urdu for practical reasons. Based on this review, the paper suggests practical steps for families, community groups, and governments to promote intergenerational language transmission. It also highlights directions for future research, including long-term, mixed-method, and community-based approaches.

Keywords: *Migrant, domains, sustained, socioeconomic, synthesis, integration.*

Introduction:

Over the past five decades, large numbers of Pashto speakers — drawn mainly from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and parts of Balochistan in Pakistan and from Afghanistan — have migrated to the Middle East for work, education, and family reasons. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait,

Bahrain, Oman) host millions of South Asian expatriates; among them, Pashto-speaking migrants form an important albeit understudied group. Migratory settlement in the Middle East introduces Pashto speakers to multilingual ecologies dominated by Arabic and English and shaped by transient labour regimes, limited language rights for migrants, and varied access to formal schooling for children. These conditions produce complex dynamics of language maintenance (continued use and transmission of Pashto) and shift (movement away from Pashto toward host or lingua franca languages). Understanding these dynamics is essential for scholars of migration and language policy and for stakeholders seeking to preserve cultural heritage while facilitating integration and socioeconomic mobility.

This article provides a synthesis of recent scholarship (2020–2025) on heritage language maintenance among South Asian migrant communities in the Gulf, contextualizes findings for Pashto-speaking populations, and proposes evidence-based recommendations. The review focuses on family language policies, education and schooling, community networks and religious institutions, media and technology, and structural constraints in host countries. Where specific empirical studies of Pashto speakers in the Middle East exist, these are highlighted; where direct studies are scarce, the article draws on closely related work on Pakistani and Afghan diaspora groups in the region to infer likely patterns and mechanisms. Recent empirical work on Pakistani families in Oman and broader comparative studies of migrant heritage language practices in the Gulf provide a useful evidence base.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the strategies, practices, and challenges that Pashto-speaking families employ to maintain their language across generations while living in host societies of the Middle East.
2. To analyze the social, cultural, and institutional factors that either support or hinder the maintenance of Pashto, including the roles of community networks, digital media, and education

Research Questions

1. How do Pashto-speaking migrants in the Middle East negotiate language use within the family and community domains to sustain their heritage language?
2. What structural, institutional, and transnational factors contribute to either the maintenance or the shift of Pashto across migrant generations?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to fill a critical gap in the sociolinguistics of migration. While a considerable body of research exists on South Asian migrant languages in the Gulf, relatively little work has focused specifically on Pashto, even though millions of Pashto speakers reside in this region for work and settlement. Understanding their language practices not only enriches our knowledge of heritage

language maintenance in multilingual contexts but also offers practical implications for policymakers, educators, and community leaders. By highlighting the mechanisms that enable Pashto's survival in transnational spaces, this study contributes to broader debates about linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and the future of minority languages in a globalized world

Literature Review

Language maintenance refers to ongoing use and intergenerational transmission of a heritage language within migrant communities; language shift denotes a long-term decline leading potentially to loss as subsequent generations adopt other dominant languages (Fishman, 1991; Romaine, 2000). Family language policy (FLP) — parental ideologies, planned practices, and management of linguistic resources at home — is a critical micro-level mechanism influencing whether children acquire the heritage language. Community networks, religious institutions, and access to heritage language education add meso-level support, while national language ideologies, schooling regimes, and labour migration policies form macro-level constraints or enablers. Recent work emphasizes the dynamic interplay among these levels and the importance of transnational ties and digital media in enabling maintenance across distances. Several contemporary studies reaffirm that FLPs combined with community institutions are among the strongest predictors of continued heritage competence, whereas institutional absence and intense integration pressures predict shift.

Although much of the literature has focused on Urdu and regional South Asian languages more generally, studies published within the last five years provide directly relevant insights for Pashto speakers. Aziz et al. (2024) studied Pakistani families in Oman and found that parents employ multiple strategies (home language use, heritage literacy practices, community schooling) to maintain Urdu and regional languages despite schooling pressures that prioritize English and Arabic; however, children's school obligations and peer networks often lead to decreased heritage literacy over time. The study highlights that parents' beliefs about economic utility strongly influence whether they actively transmit the heritage language.

Frontiers (2024) research in Dubai shows how multilingual urban ecologies privilege English in public and transactional domains but also sustain heritage practices in private and religious domains; non-Arabic expatriates often default to English for cross-community interaction, which diminishes opportunities for children to use their home languages beyond the household. This pattern is likely to affect Pashto as well, especially in cosmopolitan cities where multiple migrant groups mix and English becomes the lingua franca.

Recent reviews and case studies on Pashto contact with English and Urdu document intergenerational lexical change and the increasing use of dominant languages within Pashtun families, especially in urban middle-class contexts (e.g., Intikhab Alam et al., 2023). Comparative diaspora research (e.g., Saydee 2023) reports second and third generation Pashto speakers in North America show gradual language attrition when institutional supports are limited and when integration incentives favor the majority

language. These patterns — lexical borrowing, reduced domains of use, and weakening literacy — map onto broader processes observed among South Asian diasporas in the Gulf.

Gulf states typically do not provide formal heritage language schooling for non-citizen communities; public schooling targets citizens and is delivered in Arabic, while private international schools often teach in English. Labor migration regimes, temporality of residency, and limited civic rights reduce migrants' institutional leverage to demand language services. Several recent chapters and edited volumes document how these macro structures make community and family strategies pivotal for maintenance. The presence of religious institutions (mosques where sermons and religious education may be delivered in Urdu or Pashto) and informal community classes can partially compensate, though such provisions vary widely by city and employer frameworks.

This paper uses a structured integrative review method: it synthesizes peer-reviewed papers, book chapters, and empirically grounded working papers published between 2020 and 2025 that address heritage language maintenance among South Asian migrants in Gulf countries and that specifically address Pashto, where available. The scope includes qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. Given gaps in direct empirical research on Pashto in the Middle East, the review triangulates evidence from (a) Pakistani families in Oman and other GCC contexts, (b) Pashto diaspora studies in non-Gulf settings (for comparative mechanisms), and (c) broader sociolinguistic accounts of multilingual urban life in Gulf cities. Where studies surveyed particular domains (home, school, mosque, media), their findings are reported to build a domain-by-domain account of maintenance/shifts. The review also incorporates policy and grey literature on migration and language ecologies in the GCC.

Findings: Patterns and Mechanisms

1. Domains of Use: Home, Religion, Workplace, and Public Spaces

Across studies, Pashto (like other heritage languages) survives longest in home and religion-related domains. Parents who enforce exclusive use of Pashto with children and who incorporate Pashto literacy (storybooks, religious texts, messaging with grandparents) report higher passive and active competence in children. Religious education delivered in Urdu or Pashto at community mosques provides additional input, especially for children of first-generation migrants. Conversely, workplace interactions and public transactions in Gulf cities typically occur in Arabic or English; migrant adults often use Urdu or English to communicate across South Asian communities, reducing the necessity of Pashto as a lingua franca and thereby narrowing its functional domains.

2. Family Language Policy (FLP) and Parental Ideologies

Parental beliefs about the economic and social value of language shape FLPs decisively. Studies in Oman and other GCC settings show that when parents view English or Arabic as essential for their children's socioeconomic mobility, they deprioritize heritage literacy and even passive exposure. Where parents perceive Pashto as central to identity and moral upbringing, they implement stronger FLPs (e.g., "Pashto-only at home"; heritage reading

routines; use of Pashto media), which tends to sustain at least oral competence into the second generation. However, FLPs are themselves constrained by the schooling environment — parents whose children attend English-medium schools often accommodate code mixing or English dominance to support school success.

3. Education and Schooling Pressures

Access to formal heritage language instruction in Gulf host countries is limited. Children of migrants who attend local Arabic schools or international English-medium schools receive limited Pashto schooling, so literacy in Pashto often declines rapidly across generations. Community-run weekend or evening classes (when present) help but depend on volunteer capacity and parental investment. Research in Oman demonstrates that Pakistani parents perceive a tension between supporting heritage languages and ensuring children's academic success in the host environment; many prioritize the latter.

4. Community Networks, Marriage, and Residential Patterns

Dense co-ethnic neighbourhoods and frequent social interaction among Pashto speakers create fertile ground for maintenance. Conversely, dispersed settlement and intermarriage with non-Pashto speakers accelerate shift. In the Gulf, the labour structure (company housing, mixed worker dormitories) often fragments community density, which reduces everyday opportunities for Pashto use outside the household. Where migrant networks (e.g., transport, construction, small business) remain tightly intra-ethnic, Pashto as a work and social language persists among adult men, though these domains may not include children.

5. Media, Technology, and Transnational Ties

Digital media — satellite television, YouTube, social media, and messaging apps — sustain heritage language exposure across distances. Many Pashto speakers consume Pashto news, music, dramas, and religious programming online, which supports listening comprehension and cultural identity. Regular contact with sending-country relatives via video calls helps maintain socio-linguistic ties. Yet media consumption alone does not guarantee productive competence (speaking, literacy) without interactive opportunities and deliberate FLPs.

6. Generational Differences and Attrition Trajectories

Empirical studies indicate a clear generational trajectory: first-generation migrants are typically highly competent in Pashto and maintain active use; second generation tends to be receptive but shows reduced literacy and varying levels of productive fluency; by the third generation attrition often results in only passive comprehension or complete shift to dominant languages. Comparative diaspora research (North America, Europe) corroborates similar patterns when institutional supports are absent, and recent Gulf studies indicate similar tendencies, albeit sometimes moderated by continued circular migration and close ties to the sending community.

Discussion

Why Pashto Faces Pressure in Gulf Contexts

Several intersecting forces account for the vulnerability of Pashto within the Middle Eastern diasporic environment:

1. Instrumental language economics. English and Arabic offer immediate economic and social advantages. Parents often prioritize these languages for children's schooling and employment prospects (Aziz et al., 2024).
2. Institutional absence. Host countries rarely provide non-Arabic heritage education; private schooling is often English-medium, thus narrowing formal avenues for Pashto literacy.
3. Ecology of contact. In mixed migrant communities, Urdu and English commonly serve as lingua francas. For Pashto speakers, this reduces intergroup necessity for Pashto outside intra-ethnic spaces.
4. Transience and labour regimes. The precarity and temporary nature of many migrants' residency discourages long-term investment in heritage institutions by both host states and migrant families.

Protective Factors and Pathways For Maintenance

The literature points to protective factors that increase the likelihood of Pashto maintenance:

- Strong FLPs that enforce consistent Pashto use and integrate heritage literacy activities.
- Community institutions (weekend schools, mosque-based instruction, cultural associations) which supply structured input and peer domains for children.
- Digital resources and transnational communication enabling access to Pashto media and frequent familial interaction with the sending community.
- Intergenerational reinforcement where first-generation adults model heritage language use and pass on cultural practices.

Limitations of Current Research

Direct, large-scale empirical research focused specifically on Pashto speakers in GCC countries remains limited. Much available work treats Pakistani migrants generically (often focusing on Urdu) or examines Pashto in non-Gulf diasporic contexts. Consequently, precise estimates of intergenerational Pashto proficiency in the Gulf are scarce. The studies that do exist are often small-scale qualitative projects or literature reviews; therefore, longitudinal and representative quantitative data are a pressing need.

Policy Implications and Practical Recommendations

For Families

1. Adopt explicit FLPs. Parents should articulate clear language rules (e.g., Pashto-only time blocks, Pashto with grandparents) and consistently model Pashto use. Evidence shows consistent exposure predicts better maintenance.
2. Incorporate literacy activities. Reading Pashto storybooks, religious texts, and using Pashto in digital storytelling helps secure literacy. Literacy supports long-term retention beyond passive comprehension.
3. Use media intentionally. Curate Pashto media (children's programs, songs, online stories) and encourage active viewing and discussion rather than passive consumption.

For Community Organisations

1. **Offer structured heritage classes.** Weekend schools, after-work programs, and mosque-based literacy sessions can provide systematic instruction, especially reading and writing.
2. **Create intergenerational activities.** Cultural festivals, storytelling nights, and mentorship programs engage youth with elders and strengthen affective attachments to Pashto.

For Host-State and Sending-State Actors

1. Recognize multilingual realities. Host states could permit and facilitate community language classes, or provide modest support (space, time slots) for heritage education, which benefits social cohesion. While political considerations around migrant integration vary, small practical measures (allowing community organisations to register classes, for instance) can strengthen maintenance without contravening host language policies. [SpringerLink](#)
2. Sending-state engagement. Pakistan and Afghanistan can support Pashto maintenance via digital curricula, teacher training for diaspora educators, and partnerships with community groups to provide materials and teacher exchange programs. These transnational supports are cost-effective and can markedly improve heritage language continuity.

Proposed Research Agenda

1. Longitudinal cohort studies. Track Pashto proficiency and usage across generations in multiple Gulf settings (Dubai, Muscat, Riyadh, Doha) to quantify rates of attrition and identify mediating variables.
2. Mixed-methods community mapping. Combine quantitative surveys on language use domains with ethnographic observation of FLPs and community institutions to capture both scale and depth.

3. Intervention studies. Pilot and evaluate community heritage programs (e.g., weekend schools, digital literacy interventions) to measure efficacy and scalability.
4. Comparative studies. Compare Pashto maintenance across contexts (Gulf vs. North America vs. Europe) to disentangle the effects of settlement regime, schooling options, and transnational ties.
5. Policy analysis. Examine legal and bureaucratic constraints influencing the possibility of institutional heritage language support in Gulf states.

Conclusion

Pashto language maintenance among migrants in the Middle East is shaped by a constellation of micro-level family practices, meso-level community supports, and macro-level institutional constraints. The evidence synthesized here (2020–2025) indicates that sustaining Pashto across generations in Gulf contexts is challenging but feasible with deliberate family language policies, community provision of heritage instruction, active use of media and transnational networks, and supportive actions from both sending and host states. Given the cultural and cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism and heritage language knowledge, stakeholders should prioritize low-cost, high-impact interventions (family literacy routines, weekend schools, digital curricula) and invest in longitudinal research to guide policy. Future scholarship must address current empirical gaps and evaluate practical programs for preserving Pashto as a living language in diasporic Middle Eastern settings.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that families play a central role in strengthening intergenerational transmission by consistently using Pashto at home and engaging children in literacy activities from an early age. Community organizations should take initiatives such as establishing weekend schools, cultural centers, and heritage-language classes, often in partnership with religious or social institutions that already function as gathering points for the diaspora. Moreover, digital media should be more effectively utilized by producing and disseminating accessible Pashto content, including apps, online lessons, and children’s programs, so that younger generations can engage with their heritage language in interactive and appealing ways. At a broader level, both sending states such as Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as host countries in the Gulf, should recognize the cultural and social value of sustaining minority languages by creating policies that encourage multilingualism and by supporting community-driven language programs. Scholars, in turn, should prioritize long-term, cross-generational studies to provide evidence-based insights into the evolving patterns of Pashto use and shift.

Finally, certain delimitations were set to keep the study focused and manageable. The analysis concentrates specifically on Pashto-speaking migrants rather than including other minority languages within the diaspora. It also considers literature published between 2020 and 2025, which ensures recency but excludes earlier foundational studies that may still offer valuable insights. The research is largely framed around the context of labor migration in the Gulf states, rather than refugee populations or student mobility, which have distinct dynamics. Additionally, while the study highlights key domains such as

family life, education, media, and community institutions, it does not extend to other areas such as workplace interactions or legal institutions, where language maintenance and shift may also be negotiated. These choices were intentional in order to provide a clear and coherent scope, though they also point to areas for future research.

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