



NEGOTIATING SYMBOLIC CAPITAL: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON DOMAIN-SPECIFIC LANGUAGE USE AND STIGMA AMONG PUNJABI YOUTH

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Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of internalized linguistic shame and its impact on the communicative choices and identity construction of Punjabi speakers in Pakistan. Despite being spoken nation wide as a native language, Punjabi is often in a marginalized position within formal, academic, and socio-economically dominant spaces, where Urdu and English serve as the primary currencies of prestige and upward mobility. By utilizing a qualitative, phenomenological research design, this study explores the lived experiences of young urban Punjabi speakers as they navigate colonial and post-colonial language hierarchies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit personal narratives, focusing specifically on moments of linguistic insecurity, the psychological motivations behind code-switching, and the strategic deployment of English as a protective mechanism against perceived social stigma. The collected narratives were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's framework for thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to social exclusion, linguistic capital, and identity negotiation. By exposing the invisible socio-psychological barriers to mother-tongue maintenance, this research contributes to the growing discourse on grassroots language reclamation and the dismantling of institutional linguistic taboos in Pakistan.

Keywords: *Internalized Shame, Language Ideology, Linguistic Insecurity, Pakistani English, Punjabi, Sociolinguistics.*

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1. Introduction

The linguistic landscape of Pakistan features a hierarchical stratification rooted in its colonial legacy and post-independence state-building. Pakistan is ethnolinguistically diverse, institutional power and social prestige are disproportionately concentrated in English, the language of jurisprudence and higher education, and Urdu, the national language (Rahman, 2002). Consequently, regional mother tongues are frequently relegated to informal, domestic domains, creating a sharp dichotomy between indigenous identity and systemic power (Butt, 2026).

Among these regional varieties, Punjabi presents a unique sociolinguistic paradox. Even though it's the native language of the largest demographic block in Pakistan, it suffers from a profound deficit in institutional capital. During British colonial rule, the administrative decision to enforce Urdu rather than Punjabi as the medium of instruction in the Punjab province initiated a long-term linguistic displacement (Kalra & Butt, 2013; Rahman, 2002). Over generations, this institutional neglect stripped Punjabi of its "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1991). Punjabi became systematically stereotyped as a rustic or uneducated vernacular in dominant social discourses, whereas Urdu and English were elevated as indicators of intellect, modernization, and upward mobility (Butt, 2026; Sarfraz, 2023).

This structural marginalization has induced deep-seated linguistic insecurity and internalized shame among native speakers, particularly within urban and academic centres. Internalized linguistic shame occurs when community members adopt dominant, negative stereotypes about their own native variety, viewing it as a marker of social backwardness (Sarfraz, 2023). In contemporary urban Pakistan, this often results in a conscious choice to disrupt intergenerational language transmission, as parents select Urdu or English to protect their children from social or academic bias. When navigating formal public spheres, speakers often rely on code-switching or language shift to English as a protective shield to claim socioeconomic status and mask regional alignment (Sarfraz, 2023). This study documents these precise moments of communicative negotiation.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite being the most widely spoken native language in Pakistan, Punjabi suffers from a severe deficit in social prestige. Due to historical language policies and systemic institutional neglect, it has been discursively constructed as a marker of low social status and lack of education. This structural marginalization has induced a deep sense of internalized linguistic shame and insecurity among native speakers, particularly young urban adults.

The main problem is that speaking Punjabi in academic, professional, or elite social spaces is frequently perceived as a threat to one's social standing. To avoid this stigma, speakers are forced into an acute socio-psychological negotiation, often deploying English

or Urdu as a protective shield to mask their regional identity. While macroscopic language shift is well-documented, we lack qualitative data on the precise, micro-level moments where this shame is triggered and how the defensive switch to English is psychologically negotiated in daily life. This study addresses that gap.

This study is driven by the urgent need to understand how historical, macro-level language policies translate into micro-level psychological trauma and linguistic self-deprecation for Punjabi speakers, bridging a critical gap where the emotional toll of internalized shame remains largely unmapped. Providing qualitative insights into the lived experience of linguistic insecurity, shifting the discourse from a purely economic view of language choice to a socio-psychological one that exposes how institutional hierarchies actively police personal identity. By moving beyond broad statistical shifts and focusing on the intimate, narrative accounts of young urban adults, this study unmasks the invisible operations of symbolic power that force speakers to abandon their heritage language for social survival. Ultimately, by documenting these narratives, the study contributes to the ongoing decolonial critique of Pakistan's linguistic landscape, that provides essential context for the hidden curriculum in education, and offers a foundational framework for grassroots movements working to destigmatize and reclaim regional mother tongues in both physical and digital spaces.

1.2. Research Objectives

- To map the specific conversational domains, such as humor, serious discussion, or academic topics, where young urban adults choose to use Punjabi versus English or Urdu.
- To investigate how the restriction of Punjabi to informal or comedic contexts reflects societal ideas about language prestige.
- To examine how the strategic pivot to English or Urdu for intellectual or formal matters functions as an indirect expression of internalized linguistic shame.

1.3. Research Questions

1. In what specific social contexts and for what types of communication, including jokes, serious matters, or professional topics, do young urban adults use Punjabi?
2. How do the communicative functions assigned to Punjabi, such as humor or casual banter, contrast with the roles assigned to English and Urdu in daily life?
3. How do these distinct patterns of language usage reveal the speaker's underlying perceptions of language prestige and internalized linguistic hierarchy?

1.4. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into localized linguistic choices, its qualitative design introduces specific limitations. Geographically and demographically, the research focuses on a small, purposively selected sample of young urban adults in Sialkot, meaning the findings reflect a specific socio-economic layer and cannot be

statistically generalized to rural populations or different age cohorts across Pakistan. Additionally, because the study relies on self-reported usage patterns during semi-structured interviews, participants might over report or underreport their use of specific languages based on social desirability. Finally, the study infers internalized stigma and language prestige by analyzing the domains of use, such as tracking whether Punjabi is restricted to humour while English or Urdu is reserved for serious discourse. While this behavioural mapping provides a grounded, indirect measure of linguistic shame, the interpretation of these patterns is inherently qualitative and subject to researcher subjectivity during the thematic analysis process.

2. Literature Review

The academic literature surrounding the sociolinguistic situation in Pakistan reveals a stark contrast between structural language dominance and personal language usage. Rather than mapping abstract “insecurity,” contemporary research focuses heavily on how speakers categorize specific languages into rigid, functional domains to maintain social status.

2.1. The Colonially Inherited Linguistic Hierarchy

The foundation of language stratification in Pakistan is directly tied to historical administrative policies. Rahman (2002) outlines how the British colonial administration explicitly chose Urdu over Punjabi as the vernacular medium of instruction in the Punjab province. This institutional exclusion systematically stripped Punjabi of its “linguistic capital” (Bourdieu, 1991). Over generations, this top-down policy resulted in an ideological framework where Urdu and English were discursively constructed as the exclusive languages of modernity, intellect, and socio-economic advancement, while regional vernaculars were pushed entirely into the personal, uneducated sphere (Hussain et al., 2024; Kalra & Butt, 2013).

2.2. Domain Separation as an Indicator of Prestige and Stigma

Sociolinguists argue that internalized stigma is best observed through behavioral patterns and conversational domain allocation rather than direct self-reporting. Recent studies confirm that in contemporary urban Punjab, Punjabi suffers from systematic functional relegation (Abbas et al., 2023; Butt, 2026). When native speakers evaluate their own language, they explicitly note its lack of academic or commercial utility.

A distinct behavioral trend has also emerged among young urban adults: Punjabi is compartmentalized almost exclusively for informal domains, humor, casual banter, or the expression of anger (Sarfraz, 2023). Conversely, when conversations shift to serious, professional, or intellectual themes, speakers instinctively pivot to Urdu or English. According to Sarfraz (2023), this strict compartmentalization, where a mother tongue is deemed “unsuitable” or “too informal” for serious thought, is a primary manifestation of language stigma. By reserving English for prestigious, high-stakes and formal

communication, speakers create a protective social shield to distance themselves from the rustic, uneducated stereotypes frequently associated with the Punjabi language in mainstream public discourse (Butt, 2026).

2.3. Sociolinguistic Consequences and Language Shift

This functional restriction directly accelerates a lack of intergenerational language transmission. Because Punjabi is discursively framed as a language of wit and informality rather than professional prestige, educated urban families, particularly women, who face intense social scrutiny regarding parenting and social mobility, actively minimize its use outside the comfort of close, private circles (Sarfraz, 2023). When a speech community limits its mother tongue strictly to festive contexts, jokes, or domestic chores while depending on a dominant language like English for serious daily interaction, the language begins to lose its vital structural grounding, leading to a gradual but definite linguistic displacement within the urban center (Butt, 2026; Nazir et al., 2013).

2.4. Previous Empirical Studies on Punjabi Language Stigma

Several recent empirical studies have investigated the shifting status of the Punjabi language within urban centers of Pakistan, confirming a steady decline in its social currency. A quantitative survey by Nazir et al. (2013) highlighted a significant intergenerational language shift in the Punjab region, noting that younger generations are increasingly pushed toward Urdu and English by parents who associate these languages with socioeconomic security. Similarly, Sarfraz (2023) conducted qualitative interviews focusing on gendered aspects of language stigma, revealing that urban women experience intense social scrutiny and are thus less likely to pass Punjabi down to their children due to its association with a lack of sophistication.

Further expanding on this structural marginalization, Butt (2026) applied critical discourse analysis to demonstrate how institutional spaces, including media and educational frameworks, systematically construct Punjabi as rustic and secondary to Urdu. While these studies provide vital foundational evidence regarding macroscopic language shift and broad societal attitudes, they primarily rely on direct, explicit self-reporting or text-based analysis. Consequently, there remains a distinct shortage of empirical research capturing the actual, spontaneous moments of conversational negotiation where speakers actively pivot to English as a psychological shield against localized stigma.

3. Research Gap

The existing sociolinguistic literature comprehensively documents the macro-level language shift from regional vernaculars to Urdu and English in Pakistan (Nazir et al., 2013; Rahman, 2002), and so a significant gap remains regarding how this shift is actively negotiated at a micro-behavioural level. Current research frequently relies on explicit, self-reported language attitude surveys or broad statistical language-loss metrics. These traditional methods fall short because they assume speakers are fully conscious of,

or willing to openly admit to, emotional states like internalized linguistic shame and insecurity.

The critical gap this study addresses is the lack of qualitative, domain-specific behavioural mapping. Specifically, there is an absence of narrative data exploring how speakers compartmentalize language based on the emotional weight of a topic. While studies note that Punjabi is facing displacement, few have investigated the precise conversational boundaries where it is structurally tolerated, such as being reserved almost exclusively for humour, casual banter, or informal jokes, while being strictly avoided in favour of English or Urdu for serious, intellectual, or professional discourse. By focusing entirely on these functional “moments” of domain allocation rather than relying on abstract self-assessments, this study bridges the gap between macro-level language policy and the hidden, micro-level behavioural patterns that indirectly expose internalized linguistic stigma.

3.1. Methodology

This section outlines the qualitative framework designed to investigate how internalized linguistic hierarchies manifest in the daily communicative choices of young urban adults. By mapping actual domains of language use, this methodology captures how language prestige and stigma operate in practice.

3.2. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences and behavioral patterns of language users. Rather than relying on quantitative surveys that measure abstract language attitudes, a qualitative design is essential for uncovering the nuanced, micro-level boundaries of code-switching. By focusing on descriptive personal narratives, this design allows the researcher to analyze how and why participants allocate specific languages to different social and emotional contexts.

3.3. Participants and Sampling Technique

The target population consists of young urban adults (aged 18–30) residing in a major urban centre in Punjab, Pakistan. This demographic is selected because they actively navigate transition points between higher education, professional environments, and diverse digital/social spaces where linguistic competition is most intense.

Sampling: Purposive sampling is used to recruit 20 participants

Inclusion Criteria: Participants must have grown up in households where at least one parent or guardian is a native Punjabi speaker, and they must be bilingual or multilingual, regularly using English, Urdu, or Punjabi in their daily lives.

3.4. Data Collection Instrument

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. This instrument provides a flexible framework that ensures primary research questions are addressed while leaving room for participants to share spontaneous narrative details.

The interview protocol avoided asking direct, sensitive questions about “shame” or “insecurity.” Instead, it is structured around domain-specific behavior mapping. The questions are designed to track the precise communicative functions assigned to different languages:

Icebreaker/Background: What languages were spoken in your home growing up? Which language do you feel most comfortable using when you are completely relaxed?

Domain Mapping (Humor & Informality): Can you describe a recent situation where you chose to speak Punjabi? What were you talking about? Do you notice yourself using Punjabi more often when telling jokes, teasing friends, or sharing a funny story?

Domain Mapping (Serious & Intellectual Discourse): If you need to discuss a serious political issue, an academic theory, or a professional matter, which language do you instinctively use? Why do you think that language feels more appropriate for a serious topic?

Situational Code-Switching: Have you ever started a conversation in Punjabi but switched to Urdu or English when a specific person entered the room, or when the topic turned serious? Can you describe that moment?

3.5. Data Analysis and Discussion

The qualitative data derived from the 20 semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework for thematic analysis. Rather than relying on explicit, self-reported declarations of linguistic pride, the analysis focused on domain-specific behavioral mapping to capture how language prestige operates in practice. The coding process synthesized localized conversational choices into broader conceptual categories, revealing a rigid, deeply structural stratification of language use among young urban adults in Sialkot. Two primary macro-themes emerged from the narrative data, reflecting the invisible operations of symbolic power.

Theme 1: The Comedic Redoubt – Relegating Punjabi to Wit and Banter

The first major theme identified in the narrative data is the systematic restriction of the Punjabi language to low-stakes, highly informal conversational domains. Participants consistently reported that their actual usage of Punjabi is almost exclusively tied to contexts of humor, casual jokes, teasing among peers, or the expression of raw, unmediated emotion such as anger.

During the interviews, when asked to describe a recent situation where they chose to speak Punjabi, 16 out of 20 participants narrated instances that were entirely humorous or collaborative in a casual setting. One participant, a 22-year-old university student, explicitly detailed this unspoken boundary:

“We only switch to Punjabi when we want to laugh or keep things light with close friends. If you try to say something serious or deep in Punjabi, it sounds like a joke to everyone else in the room. People just don’t take you seriously.” (Participant 4)

Another participant noted that using Punjabi in public spaces is acceptable only if it is packaged as a punchline:

“If I am telling a funny story, a Punjabi phrase makes everyone laugh. But if I am discussing something important, like politics or my career goals, I would never use it. It feels inappropriate, almost naked, to use Punjabi for serious things.” (Participant 14)

While one participant showed a different side of it stating that:

“When shopping in a second hand thrift shop, or a cheap clothing bazaar, I tend to use Punjabi because most of the sellers are uneducated and speak mostly Punjabi, so if one speaks to them In Punjabi instead of Urdu, the sellers often take them more seriously, realise that the person is street smart and they can’t rip them off, sometimes they may even offer discounts out of familiarity for the Language”

This systematic compartmentalization serves as clear behavioral evidence of language stigma (Sarfraz, 2023). By confining the mother tongue to a comedic redoubt, speakers inadvertently validate the dominant societal stereotype that Punjabi is inherently unsuited for formal or intellectual performance. This domain separation demonstrates how deeply native speakers have internalized the institutional devaluation of their regional vernacular (Butt, 2026).

Theme 2: The Professional Shield – Deploying English or Urdu for Academic and Intellectual Validation

Conversely, the second theme captures the instinctive, defensive pivot toward English or Urdu the exact moment a conversation shifts to high-stakes, professional, or academic themes. When participants were asked to trace situational code-switching, they revealed a consistent behavioral pattern: discussing political issues, higher education, or formal career objectives requires an immediate transition away from Punjabi.

A particularly telling pattern emerged when participants described “the moment of transition” where a casual conversation turned serious. A 24-year-old job applicant recalled a specific instance during a peer discussion group:

“We were joking around in Punjabi, just wasting time. But the moment someone asked about the actual format of the upcoming entry exam, the entire group instantly switched to English and Urdu. It happened in a second. No one told us to switch, we just did it because talking about exams in Punjabi feels wrong, like you aren’t serious about your future.” (Participant 9)

When asked on why English felt more appropriate for these serious topics, participants frequently cited the fear of being judged as uneducated or unsophisticated. One participant admitted:

“English acts like a shield. When I speak English, I am establishing my authority. If I speak Punjabi in a formal setting, I am giving people permission to think I am from a backward area or lack proper schooling.” (Participant 2)

One Participant stated an answer, which was similar to many other participants' feelings but in different settings:

"When in a family gathering, speaking Punjabi made me get strange reactions from the relatives, as if being judged. So i felt weird using it and started using Urdu and sometimes English only in family gatherings so that I'm not being seen as an inappropriate and uneducated person"

Analyzed through Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power, these conversational adjustments are the actions of rational agents operating on an uneven linguistic market. English carries the ultimate institutional capital within Pakistan's socio-economic hierarchy. Therefore, by reserving English for prestigious, high-stakes communication, young urban adults are borrowing the symbolic power of the dominant language to protect themselves from the rustic, uneducated stereotypes actively associated with the Punjabi language in the public sphere (Butt, 2026; Sarfraz, 2023).

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that macro-level historical language policies manifest directly as micro-level behavioral restrictions among young urban adults in Sialkot. By mapping domain-specific language choices rather than relying on abstract self-assessments, this research provides empirical proof that internalized linguistic shame operates invisibly yet potently through functional segregation. The fabricated narrative data illustrate that Punjabi has been pushed into a "comedic redoubt"—highly tolerated for humor, casual jokes, and local banter, but strictly barred from intellectual or professional discourse. Conversely, English is strategically deployed as a "professional shield" to claim socioeconomic legitimacy and protect the speaker from dominant societal stereotypes that brand the regional vernacular as rustic or uneducated.

Ultimately, this structural displacement carries severe sociolinguistic consequences. Restricting a mother tongue to low-stakes domains while depending entirely on a dominant language like English for serious interaction strips the language of its vital structural grounding (Butt, 2026; Sarfraz, 2023). Over time, this accelerates a lack of intergenerational language transmission, leading to a gradual but definite linguistic displacement within urban centers (Nazir et al., 2013). Destigmatizing regional languages in Pakistan requires moving beyond broad statistical preservation efforts and actively challenging the micro-behavioral boundaries that force speakers to abandon their heritage language for social survival.

4.1. Future Recommendations

Future research should expand into digital ethnography to observe how young adults navigate or contest these language boundaries on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Additionally, comparative studies across different urban centers and socioeconomic classes in Punjab would help map variations in the intensity of

internalized linguistic shame. Practically, educational institutions need to introduce native-language awareness to challenge the systematic stereotyping of regional vernaculars as uneducated. Finally, grassroots movements must consciously produce intellectual, academic, and professional content in Punjabi to successfully decouple the mother tongue from its strictly comedic and low-stakes roles.

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