



## Impact of Sociolinguistic Factors on Pashto Language Use in Relation to Identity and Sense of Community in Multiethnic Social Settings

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the sociolinguistic factors influencing Pashto language use among Pashtun students in multiethnic university settings in Pakistan. Despite growing research on language maintenance and shift in multilingual contexts, the linguistic dynamics of Pashtun communities within Pakistani higher education remain under explored. The study examines how emotional comfort, cultural pride, linguistic familiarity and intra-ethnic solidarity shape the linguistic choices of Pashtun students studying at a multiethnic campus. It further investigates the role of social identity and community solidarity in sustaining Pashto use in an environment where Urdu and English hold institutional dominance. The findings aim to contribute to the broader sociolinguistic literature on minority language maintenance in South Asian contexts and to inform future research on language, identity, and ethnicity within Pakistan's multilingual landscape. This mixed-methods study collected questionnaire data from 50 Pashtun students and semi-structured interviews from 30 Pashtun students at COMSATS University Islamabad, Abbottabad Campus. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively, while qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that identity, community solidarity, emotional comfort, linguistic familiarity, cultural pride, and language-maintenance concerns are the principal motivations for using Pashto in multiethnic settings.

**Key Words:** Pashto language, sociolinguistics, minority language, mixed-method, identity, linguistic familiarity, multiethnicity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is home to more than 70 languages, but Pashto holds a special place as one of the largest regional languages. It is mainly spoken in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), northern Balochistan, and the tribal districts, and it has significant communities in Karachi, Islamabad, and Quetta. According to Rahman (1995), Pashto is spoken by more than 30 million people in Pakistan, making it one of the most widely used regional languages after Punjabi.

Pashtuns are known for being one of the diverse ethnic groups in Pakistan. They have migrated to urban centers for work, trade, education, and political opportunities. For example, Karachi has one of the largest Pashtun populations outside KP, where they live alongside Sindhis, Urdu-speaking Muhajirs, and Baloch (Rahman, 1996). Similarly, in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pashtuns are found in large numbers as workers, students, and professionals. In such multi-ethnic urban settings, the default language of interaction across groups is usually Urdu, which serves as the lingua franca. However, when Pashtuns encounter each other, they often switch to Pashto, showing that their language has an important social role beyond private family life (Khan, Nazir, Hamid, & Nazir, 2021). This switching is not only practical but also symbolic. In a society where Urdu and English dominate official communication, Pashto's presence in diverse settings highlights how communities can maintain their distinct linguistic traditions while also functioning in wider national networks.

Pashto use in public and diverse settings also plays an important role in language preservation. According to Fishman (1991), a language survives when it is used in important domains of life such as family, community gatherings, and everyday interactions. If speakers restrict their language use only to the home and stop using it in public, the language weakens over time. In Pakistan, many regional languages face decline in urban areas because people shift to Urdu or English for daily use. However, Pashto is one of the strongest regional languages precisely because Pashtuns actively use it in multiple contexts: at home, in markets, in schools in Pashto-speaking areas, and even in ethnically mixed gatherings. Studies show that in Karachi, where Pashtuns are a large but not majority group, they still maintain Pashto through community networks and frequent use in neighborhoods (Rahman, 1996). Similarly, in Peshawar and Quetta, Pashto dominates daily life and continues to thrive despite Urdu being used in official domains (Khan et al., 2021). By consistently using Pashto in diverse settings, Pashtuns contribute to preserving their language across generations. Every interaction in Pashto reinforces its vitality, ensuring it does not disappear under the influence of Urdu and English.

The motivations behind Pashtuns using Pashto in ethnically diverse settings cannot be explained by a single factor. Instead, it is the interplay of identity, prestige, comfort, and preservation that shapes their choice. Identity remains the strongest driver because Pashtuns feel a sense of belonging when speaking their language. Prestige, though different from English or Urdu, matters in the sense of cultural pride and authenticity. Comfort ensures that conversations are more natural and emotionally expressive in Pashto. Finally, frequent use supports the long-term preservation of Pashto, keeping it alive and active in both private and public domains. Thus, when Pashtuns speak Pashto among themselves in mixed gatherings; it reflects not only a cultural preference but also a conscious or unconscious act of maintaining their language, identity, and traditions within Pakistan's multilingual society.

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

In Pakistan, social gatherings often consist of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds who prefer to use a common language, usually Urdu, to ensure smooth communication. However, when





two individuals from the Pashtun community meet in such settings, they often switch to Pashto. This shift can create a barrier for others who may feel excluded or unable to follow the conversation. This study seeks to explore what motivates Pashtuns to use their own language when interacting with fellow Pashtuns in multiethnic social contexts, and to examine whether factors such as identity, and sense of community play a significant role in this choice. Keeping in view this scenario, the research aims to:

- i. Find out why Pashtuns keep using Pashto when they are in gatherings with people from different ethnic groups in Pakistan.
- ii. To examine how the use of Pashto helps Pashtuns express their social identity and strengthen their sense of community in diverse environments.

These objectives lead to the following research questions:

- i. What are the key factors that influence Pashtuns to use Pashto while interacting with other Pashtuns in a multiethnic social setting in countries like Pakistan?
- ii. How does the use of Pashto among Pashtuns help express their social identity and sense of community in diverse environments?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

By critically examining existing scholarship on language maintenance, language shift, social identity, and community solidarity, the review attempts to establish the current study within the broader sociolinguistic tradition and identifies the gaps that this research seeks to address. Despite a substantial body of literature on minority language use in multilingual contexts, the specific sociolinguistic dynamics of Pashtun students in multiethnic Pakistani universities remain largely unexamined. The review therefore draws on key theoretical frameworks, including Fishman's (1991) work on language maintenance and shift, Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory, Giles's (1977) Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, and Bourdieu's (1991) concept of language prestige and symbolic power, to provide a conceptual lens through which the findings of this study can be interpreted and contextualized. In doing so, it demonstrates the relevance and necessity of the present investigation within the existing field of sociolinguistic inquiry.

Pakistan's identity as a diverse and multilingual nation is deeply intertwined with its history, geography, and socio-political landscape. There are over 70 languages spoken throughout the country, including Urdu, which is the national language, and English, the official language, along with Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Saraiki, and many indigenous languages. This rich linguistic variety showcases the nation's diversity (Seifi, 2015; Gul et al., 2023). However, this same diversity brings about significant challenges, including language-related inequalities, cultural marginalization, and ongoing discussions about national unity.

Inconsistent efforts have been made to maintain linguistic diversity. Although regional languages are intended to be promoted by organizations such as the National Language Authority (NLA), many do not have standardized scripts, institutional support, or online representation (Aqeel & Hussain, 2023). For example, urbanization, migration, and the economic dominance of Urdu and English are all contributing factors to the extinction of minority languages such as Shina and Balti (Ethnologue, 2023). More than 30% of Pakistan's languages are endangered, according to UNESCO (2023), which calls on decision-makers to implement inclusive measures like multilingual education (MLE). Teaching children in their mother tongue before introducing them to national or international languages enhances literacy and self-esteem, as evidenced by successful models in nations like Bolivia and Nepal (UNESCO, 2023).





Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a useful framework for explaining how language functions as a marker of group membership and collective identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Fundamentally, SIT suggests that people's self-concept is influenced by the social groups they are a part of, including their nationality, religion, occupation, or even arbitrary experimental groupings (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The theory starts with the notion that social categorization, the process by which people naturally group themselves and other people into social groups is a natural human behavior. By classifying information into meaningful categories (such as "teacher," "Christian," and "football fan"), this cognitive mechanism streamlines the social world, but it also creates the foundation for intergroup bias and stereotyping (Tajfel, 1978). Through minimal group experiments, Tajfel showed that in-group favoritism can be triggered by even insignificant or random group assignments, such as assigning people to groups based on coin tosses or artistic preferences. Even in the absence of direct interaction or past conflict, participants in these studies consistently gave members of their in-group more resources and actively exploited differences to benefit their group (Tajfel et al., 1971). This disproved previous theories (such as Sherif's Realistic Conflict Theory), which focused on competition for material resources as the main cause of conflict, by demonstrating that discrimination can be created simply by categorization. After being classified, people experience social identification, taking on the customs, beliefs, and ways of behaving of their group. Self-esteem becomes entwined with the group's status as a result of this identification, which cultivates emotional significance (Turner et al., 1987).

Directly opposing the outgroup in an effort to improve status is known as social competition (e.g., protests for political rights). 811. While low-status groups prefer areas where they excel, like community values, high-status groups tend to reinforce dominance in status-relevant domains, like academics (Bettencourt et al., 2001). The legitimacy of intergroup differences, the perceived permeability of group boundaries, and the stability of status hierarchies all influence which of these tactics is used (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

SIT is used in a variety of settings. Strong corporate identities improve performance and cohesiveness in organizational settings, but they can also exacerbate rivalry between departments (Dovidio et al., 1998). To promote collective rights, marginalized groups in politics use social creativity or competition (e.g., LGBTQ+ movements), demonstrating how voice strategies fight discrimination (Raskovic, 2020) 1116. Prejudice-reduction strategies that encourage cross-group cooperation and reframe "us vs. them" into a common "we" are also informed by SIT (Dovidio et al., 1998). Notably, the theory clarifies extreme conflicts where in-group superiority was reinforced by dehumanizing out-groups, such as the genocide in Rwanda or Nazi Germany (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

SIT is criticized in spite of its impact. Some contend that it minimizes institutional or cultural aspects of discrimination while overemphasizing cognitive processes (Hinkle & Brown, 1990). Others point out that, given real-world group histories, laboratory results (such as minimal groups) may not have ecological validity and that it better explains intergroup behavior in the past than it does in the future (Brown, 1988). Additionally, although SIT associates discrimination with identification, there is conflicting empirical evidence that bias is always predicted by high identification (Kelly, 1993). 15. SIT's framework was enhanced by Turner's subsequent self-categorization theory, which filled in some gaps by describing how identity salience varies depending on the situation (Turner et al., 1987).





To sum up, Social Identity Theory offers a strong framework for comprehending how affiliations create identities, exacerbate tensions between groups, and influence social structures. Tajfel and Turner shed light on why people so easily accept "us" versus "them" divisions by bridging cognitive processes, motivational needs for self-esteem, and social strategies. SIT's ongoing validity and improvement in psychology, sociology, and political science are confirmed by subsequent research (Reicher, 2020; Hogg, 2016).

A fundamental shift in our understanding of how social forces influence language variation and change can be found in William Labov's linguistic prestige theory. He maintained that linguistic variation was systematically patterned and socially meaningful. Labov had empirical rigor from his background as a student of Uriel Weinreich at Columbia University, where he switched from industrial chemistry to linguistics (Gordon, n.d.). Language change could be observed in real time through social motivations rather than random drift, as his early research on Martha's Vineyard (1963) showed that sound changes (e.g., centralized diphthongs in "right" or "house") correlated with speakers' attitudes towards island identity and resistance to mainland influence (Gordon, n.d.).

Labov's (1966) study of department stores in New York City, which introduced the idea of overt prestige, was the turning point in the theory. Here, Labov investigated how three stores including Saks Fifth Avenue (high-status), Macy's (middle-status), and S. Klein (low-status) pronounce post-vocalic /r/ (for example, in "fourth floor"). Saks, Klein's, and Macy's employees used rhotic /r/ at 62%, 20%, and 51%, respectively, indicating that /r/ production matched store prestige (Labov, 1966, as cited in StudySmarter, 2022). Importantly, Macy's employees showed signs of linguistic insecurity by hyper correcting, which significantly increased the use of /r/ in careful speech. According to Labov, this supports Pierre Bourdieu's later theories regarding language as symbolic capital by showing that speakers intentionally use high-status variants to gain access to social capital (Labov, 1966). Therefore, overt prestige is a reflection of the institutional support for standard varieties, which are frequently associated with elite socioeconomic groups and education.

Prestige theory is further refined by gender dynamics. Labov observed that because of their increased linguistic insecurity and socialization towards status consciousness, women frequently took the lead in embracing overtly prestigious forms. Men showed stronger covert prestige alignments in New York, while women hyper corrected more than men (Labov, 1966). This trend was supported by Trudgill, who found that men over-reported using nonstandard usage to demonstrate their masculinity. Women used Received Pronunciation (RP) variants 35% more in "lunch," according to a Manchester replication study, confirming Labov's gender asymmetry (Eakin, 2009). This was complicated by Penelope Eckert's (1989) "Jocks and Burnouts" study, which challenged Labov's class/gender binaries by showing that vowel shifts among Michigan teens reflected subcultural identities (such as burnout anti-school ethos) more than demographics (Eckert, 1989, cited in Vaia, 2022).

Labov's model has been criticized for its shortcomings. Joshua Fishman questioned the concept of "prestige" in language planning, pointing out that despite top-down prestige imposition, Turkish alphabet reforms did not alleviate ethnic tensions (Fishman, 1964, cited in Vaia, 2022). Others contended that Labov ignored agency and intersectionality in favor of an overemphasis on socioeconomic class. For example, Eckert's communities of practice framework demonstrated how variation was driven by local social networks rather than general categories (Eckert, 1989).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Labov prioritized quantifiable data in his early methods (such as quick





anonymous surveys), which ran the risk of reductionism. His department store study ignored individual mobility or code-switching, assuming that employee speech reflected customer class (StudySmarter, 2022).

In conclusion, by presenting variation as socially strategic, Labov's prestige theory transformed sociolinguistics. While covert prestige empowers marginalized speakers through identity affirmation, overt prestige upholds hierarchies by elevating dominant norms. Labov's fundamental realization that language is a social practice reflecting and reproducing power is still essential, even though later researchers adopted intersectional and practice-oriented models. He claimed that without its social component, linguistics is incomplete (Labov, 1982).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the sociolinguistic factors that influenced Pashto conversation in multilingual settings, with a particular focus on social identity and sense of community. The rationale for choosing a mixed-methods approach was that it allowed the researcher to collect numerical data to identify patterns and measure the strength of sociolinguistic factors shaping Pashto use among speakers who lived and interacted in an environment where multiple languages coexisted, while at the same time capturing the deeper personal experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of the participants through qualitative means. This combination provided a more complete and well-rounded understanding of the research problem than either approach could have offered alone, especially in a multilingual context where language choice and usage are influenced by a variety of social and cultural forces.

The study was conducted at COMSATS University Islamabad, Abbottabad Campus, a linguistically diverse academic environment where students from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds interacted on a daily basis, making it an ideal multilingual setting for this investigation. The target population consisted of Pashtun students enrolled at the university, regardless of gender. Quantitative data were gathered through structured questionnaires to measure and analyze sociolinguistic variables statistically, while qualitative data were collected through interviews and open-ended responses to gain deeper insight into the lived linguistic experiences of Pashto speakers navigating a multilingual academic setting. Together, these two strands of data were analyzed and interpreted in a complementary manner to effectively answer the research questions.

#### 3.1. Data Analysis and Discussion

##### 3.1.1. *Quantitative analysis of Questionnaire data*

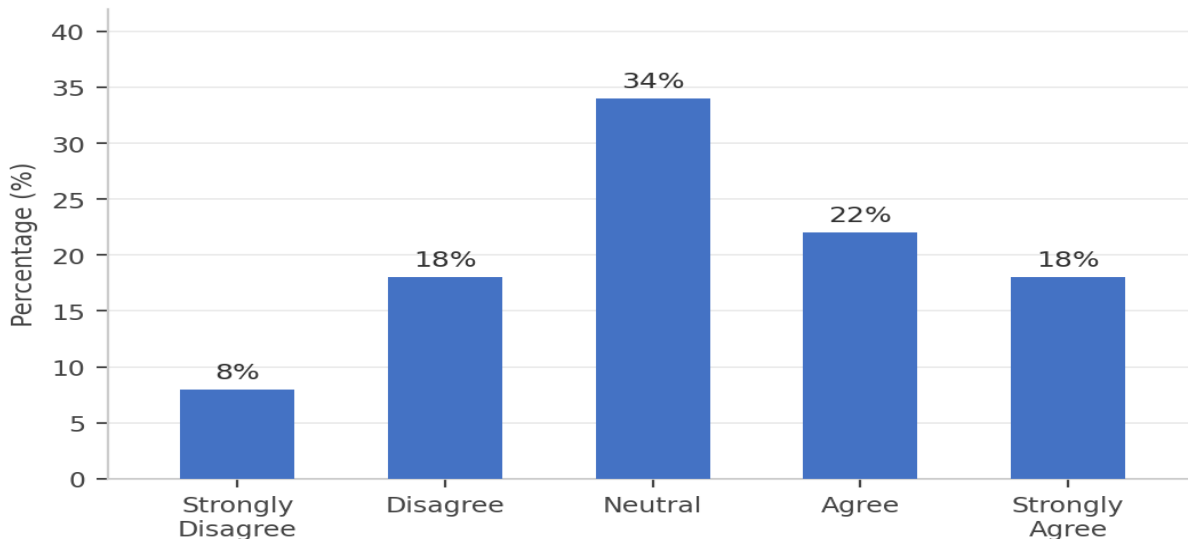
This section presents the quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data collected from the 50 respondents. The analysis specifically addresses the first research question of the study, which examines the sociolinguistic factors that influence Pashto conversations in multiethnic social settings. Through this analysis, the study aims to identify how factors such as speaker identity, the prestige associated with Pashto, the role of heritage language preservation, situational comfort in using one's mother tongue, and the ability to express emotions more naturally and effectively in Pashto shape the language choices of Pashtun students when interacting in diverse social environments.

##### 3.1.2. *Language Prestige and Ethnic Pride in Pashto Use*

The first sociolinguistic factor examined in this study relates to the sense of pride and prestige associated with using Pashto in multiethnic social settings. Respondents were asked to respond to the statement "*I feel proud when I use Pashto in front of non-Pashtuns in Pakistan.*"



The data collected from 50 Pashtun students at COMSATS University Islamabad, Abbottabad Campus revealed notable findings.



**Figure 1: Participants' Responses to the Statement "I Feel Proud When I Use Pashto in Front of Non-Pashtuns" (n=50)**

The results indicate that 18% of respondents strongly agreed and 22% agreed with the statement, reflecting that approximately 40% of the participants associate a positive sense of pride with using Pashto in front of non-Pashtuns. Meanwhile, 34% remained neutral, suggesting that a significant portion of respondents neither strongly identify with nor reject the notion of linguistic pride. On the other hand, 18% disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed, indicating that some students feel reserved or uncomfortable asserting their language identity in multiethnic spaces.

These findings can be interpreted through the lens of Language Prestige Theory, as discussed by Trudgill (1972) and later elaborated in sociolinguistic scholarship. Language prestige refers to the social value and status that speakers assign to a particular language or variety. Prestige can be of two kinds — overt prestige, which is the socially recognized and institutionally supported status of a language, and covert prestige, which is the informal, community-based value attached to a language as a marker of group solidarity and ethnic identity.

40% of respondents who expressed pride in using Pashto demonstrate the presence of covert prestige — they value Pashto not because it holds institutional dominance, but because it symbolizes Pashtun ethnic identity, cultural heritage, and group belonging. This aligns with the argument that minority or heritage languages often derive their prestige from within the community rather than from external institutional recognition. For Pashtun students in a multiethnic university setting, speaking Pashto in front of non-Pashtuns becomes an act of identity assertion and cultural confidence.

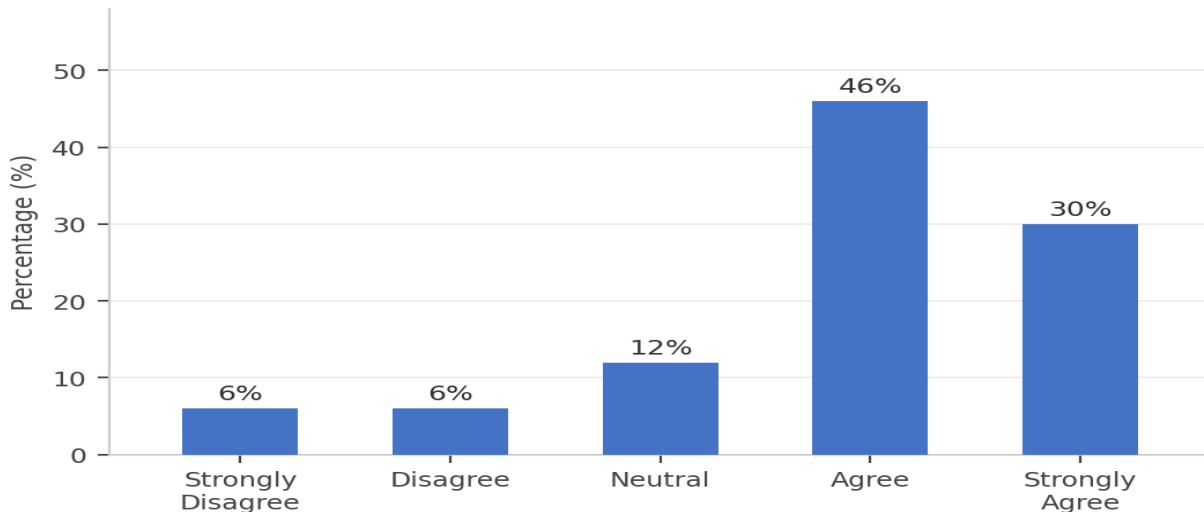
34% neutral response, however, suggests an element of prestige ambiguity — these students may be caught between the dominant linguistic norms of the academic environment, where Urdu and English carry overt prestige, and their own heritage language loyalty. This is consistent with findings in multilingual contexts where speakers experience tension between assimilation and identity preservation.

Overall, this data supports the argument that language prestige, particularly in its covert form, is a significant sociolinguistic factor driving Pashto use among Pashtun students in multiethnic social settings.

### 3.1.3. *Language Preservation and Intergenerational Transmission of Pashto*

The second sociolinguistic factor explored in this study concerns the role of social gatherings in preserving Pashto for future generations. Respondents were asked to respond to the statement "Using Pashto in social gatherings helps preserve the language for future generations." The responses from 50 Pashtun students revealed a strongly positive trend.

The data demonstrates that an overwhelming majority of respondents agreed with the statement, with 46% agreeing and 30% strongly agreeing, collectively representing 76% of the total respondents. This represents a substantial proportion and indicates that Pashtun students are deeply conscious of the role that everyday language use plays in keeping Pashto alive. Only 6% strongly disagreed, while 12% remained neutral, and a negligible percentage disagreed, suggesting that resistance to this idea is minimal within the sampled population.



**Figure 2: Participants' Responses to the Statement "Using Pashto in Social Gatherings Helps Preserve the Language for Future Generations" (n=50)**

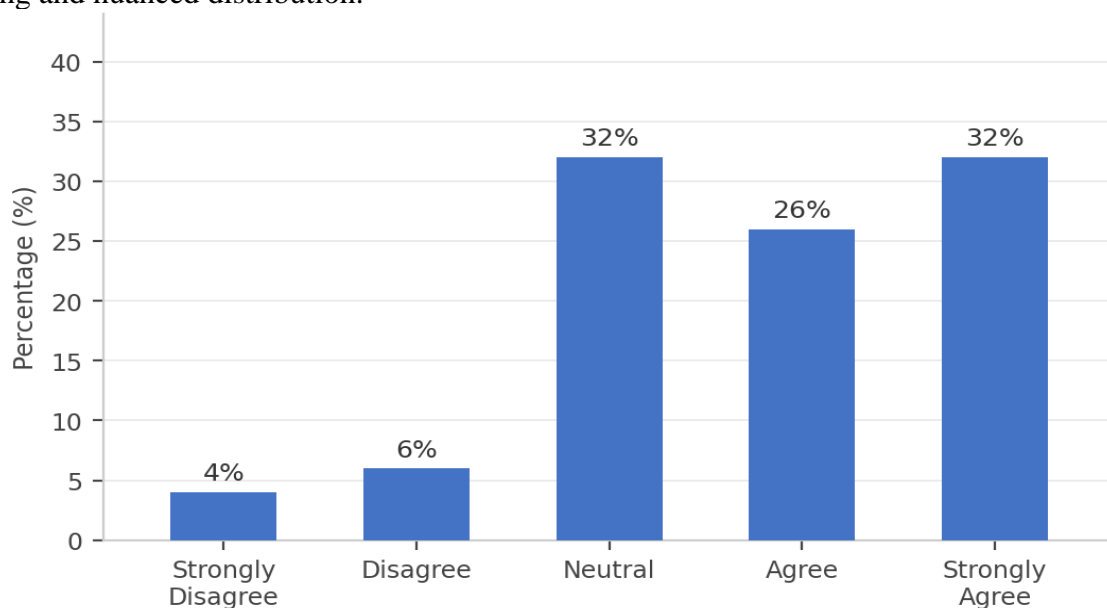
These findings are best interpreted through Joshua Fishman's Reversing Language Shift (RLS) Theory (1991). Fishman argued that the survival of a minority or heritage language depends heavily on its transmission across generations, particularly through informal and intimate social domains such as family interactions, community gatherings, and peer conversations. He emphasized that language shift — the gradual replacement of a heritage language by a dominant one — can only be reversed when speakers consciously and consistently use their mother tongue in everyday social settings.

76% agreement in this data strongly reflects Fishman's core argument. Pashtun students recognize that multiethnic social gatherings are not merely casual interactions but are in fact critical spaces for intergenerational language transmission. By choosing to speak Pashto in such settings, they are actively participating in what Fishman calls stage six of his Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) — the most foundational stage where language use within the community and among peers sustains the language's vitality.

12% neutral response may reflect students who acknowledge the importance of preservation intellectually but do not feel personally responsible for it, possibly due to the dominant presence of Urdu and English in their academic environment. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority response confirms that language preservation consciousness is a strong sociolinguistic motivator behind Pashto use in multiethnic social settings among Pashtun university students.

#### 3.1.4. Perceived Prestige of Pashto over Other Known Languages

The third sociolinguistic factor investigated in this study examines whether Pashtun students assign greater prestige to Pashto compared to other languages they know, such as Urdu or English. Respondents were presented with the statement "Pashto has more prestige for me compared to other languages I know." The responses from 50 Pashtun students produced an interesting and nuanced distribution.



**Figure 3: Participants' Responses to the Statement "Pashto Has More Prestige for Me Compared to Other Languages I Know" (n=50)**

The data reveals that 32% of respondents strongly agreed and 26% agreed with the statement, collectively indicating that 58% of the participants consider Pashto to be more prestigious than other languages in their linguistic repertoire. Meanwhile, 32% remained neutral, which is a notably high proportion suggesting that a significant segment of students are uncertain or undecided about assigning prestige to Pashto over dominant languages like Urdu and English. Only 6% disagreed and none strongly disagreed, reflecting that outright rejection of Pashto's prestige is minimal among the sampled population.

These findings are most effectively interpreted through Language Prestige Theory, as discussed by Trudgill (1972) and further elaborated in sociolinguistic literature. As established in the analysis of the first factor, language prestige refers to the social value and status that speakers assign to a particular language within a given social context. Prestige operates in two forms — overt prestige, associated with institutionally dominant languages, and covert prestige, which reflects the informal social value a language holds within a specific community.



The 58% of respondents who assigned greater prestige to Pashto over other languages clearly demonstrate the operation of covert prestige. For these students, Pashto carries deep symbolic value rooted in Pashtun ethnic identity, cultural heritage, and community solidarity. Even in a multiethnic university setting where Urdu and English hold overt institutional prestige, a majority of Pashtun students continue to regard their mother tongue as the most prestigious language within their own social and ethnic framework.

The notably high 32% neutral response, however, reveals a prestige conflict experienced by many students. Being immersed in an academic environment where Urdu and English dominate formal and informal interactions, these students find themselves caught between the overt prestige of dominant languages and the covert prestige of their heritage language. This reflects the sociolinguistic tension that minority language speakers commonly face in multilingual institutional settings.

Overall, this data strongly supports the argument that covert language prestige is a significant sociolinguistic factor motivating Pashto use among Pashtun students, even in contexts where other languages hold greater institutional dominance.

### 3.1.5. Use of Pashto as a Strategy for Maintaining Privacy in Multiethnic Settings

The fourth sociolinguistic factor examined in this study investigates whether Pashtun students consciously use Pashto as a means of maintaining privacy from non-Pashtuns in multiethnic gatherings. Respondents were presented with the statement "I use Pashto in multiethnic gatherings to maintain privacy from non-Pashtuns." The responses from 50 Pashtun students revealed a notably strong trend toward agreement.

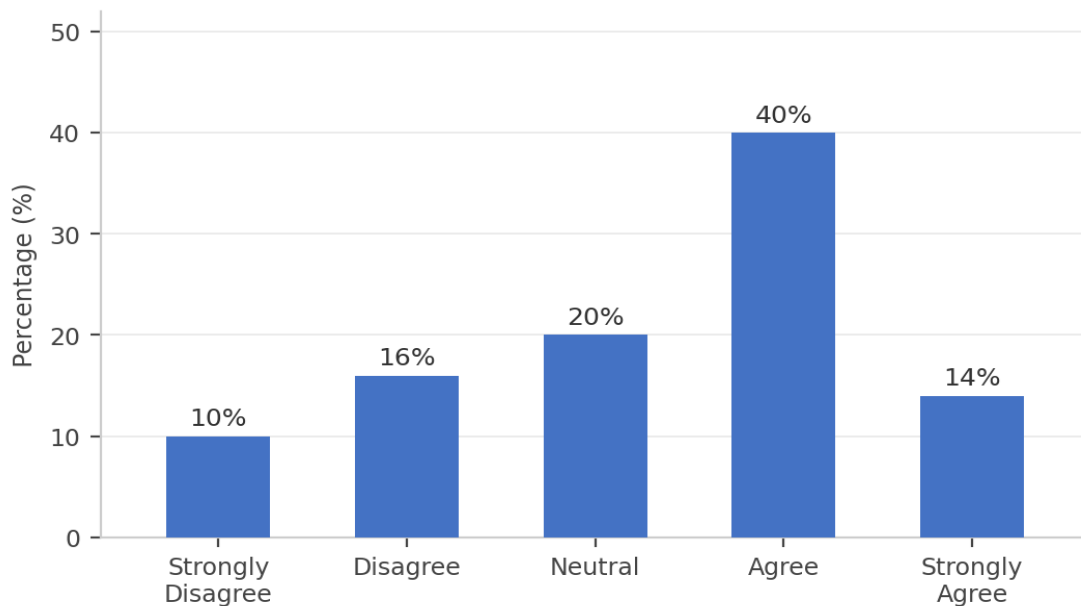


Figure 4: Participants' Responses to the Statement "I Use Pashto in Multiethnic Gatherings to Maintain Privacy from Non-Pashtuns" (n=50)

The data demonstrates that 40% of respondents agreed and 14% strongly agreed with the statement, collectively representing 54% of the total respondents. This indicates that more than half of the sampled Pashtun students deliberately use Pashto as a linguistic strategy to create a private communicative space that excludes non-Pashtun speakers. Meanwhile, 20% remained





neutral, 16% disagreed, and 10% strongly disagreed, suggesting that while a minority does not associate Pashto use with privacy maintenance, the majority clearly does.

3.1.6. *Conscious Commitment to Keeping Pashto Alive in Multilingual Settings*

The fifth sociolinguistic factor explored in this study examines the degree to which Pashtun students consciously believe in the importance of maintaining Pashto in multilingual environments. Respondents were presented with the statement "I believe it is important to keep Pashto alive in multilingual settings." The responses from 50 Pashtun students revealed one of the strongest agreement trends observed across all the questionnaire items.

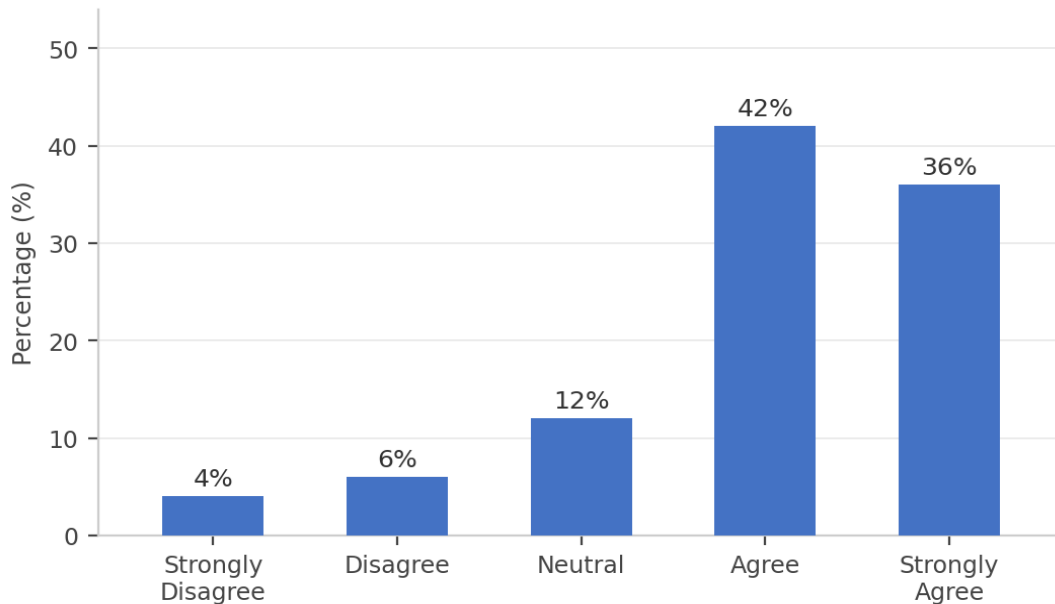


Figure 5: Participants' Responses to the Statement "I Believe It Is Important to Keep Pashto Alive in Multilingual Settings" (n=50)

The data shows that 42% of respondents agreed and 36% strongly agreed with the statement, collectively representing an overwhelming 78% of the total respondents. This is the highest combined agreement rate recorded so far in this analysis, reflecting a deeply rooted and conscious commitment among Pashtun students toward linguistic preservation. Only 6% strongly disagreed, 12% remained neutral, and a negligible percentage disagreed, indicating that resistance to this belief is considerably minimal within the sampled population.

These findings are most powerfully interpreted through Language Preservation Theory, particularly as developed by David Crystal in his influential work *Language Death* (2000) and further supported by UNESCO's Framework for Endangered Language Preservation. Language preservation theory argues that the survival of a minority or heritage language depends not only on institutional support but critically on the attitudes, beliefs, and conscious efforts of its native speakers. When speakers actively believe in the value of maintaining their language, they are more likely to use it consistently across social domains, transmit it to younger generations, and resist language shift toward dominant languages.

The overwhelming 78% agreement in this data directly reflects Crystal's argument that speaker attitude is the most powerful force in language preservation. Pashtun students at COMSATS University are not passive recipients of language shift — they are conscious agents who recognize the threat that multilingual and multiethnic environments pose to Pashto and





actively affirm their belief in its survival. This conscious commitment translates into deliberate language choices in social settings, making preservation not merely a cultural aspiration but an active sociolinguistic behavior.

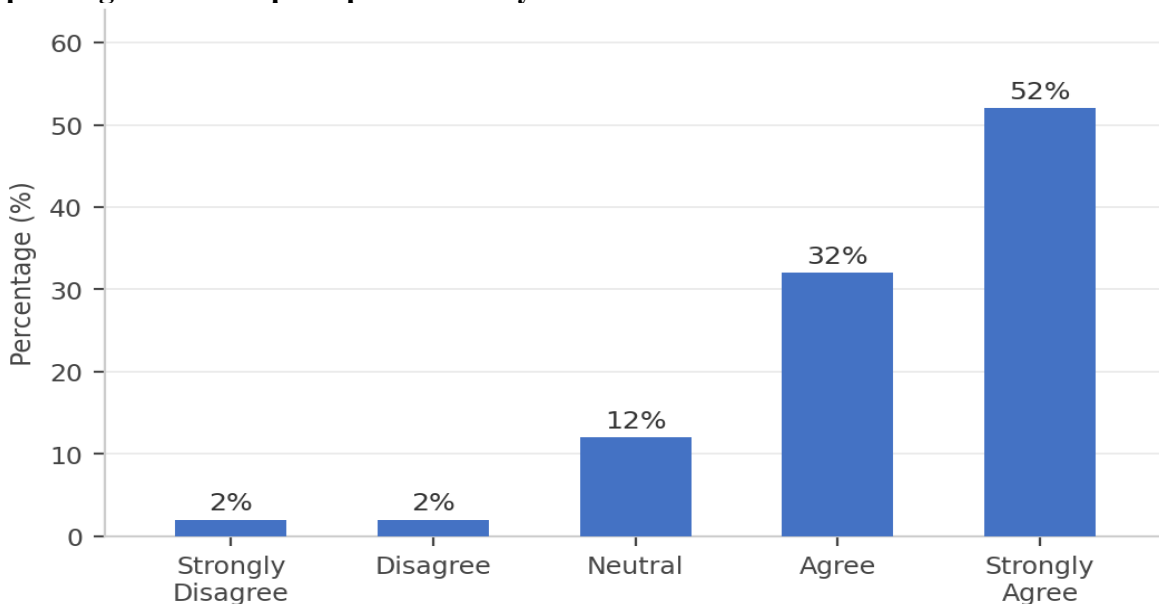
Comparing these findings with those of the second factor, which examined whether using Pashto in social gatherings helps preserve the language for future generations, a clear and consistent pattern emerges. In that factor, 76% of respondents agreed that social use of Pashto contributes to its preservation. In the present factor, 78% affirm their personal belief in the importance of keeping Pashto alive. The near identical agreement rates across both items strongly suggest that preservation consciousness among Pashtun students is not situational but deeply internalized. Students not only recognize the role of social gatherings as spaces for language preservation but also carry a personal ideological commitment to linguistic survival.

This alignment between behavioral intention and personal belief is consistent with Fishman's Reversing Language Shift Theory (1991), which emphasizes that sustainable language preservation requires both community-level practice and individual-level ideological commitment. Together, these two factors confirm that language preservation is one of the most dominant sociolinguistic motivators behind Pashto use among Pashtun students in multiethnic social settings.

3.1.7. Pashto as an Expression of Pashtun Social Identity in Multiethnic Settings

Two questionnaire items were designed to measure the role of Pashto in expressing and reinforcing the social identity of Pashtun students in multiethnic environments. The first statement examined the direct link between speaking Pashto and identity expression, while the second explored whether public use of Pashto enhances respect and identity for Pashtuns. Together these two items provide a comprehensive picture of how language functions as an identity marker among the sampled population.

Speaking Pashto Helps Express Identity as a Pashtun



Item 1: Respondents' Responses Regarding Public Use of Pashto and Its Impact on Respect and Identity (n=50)

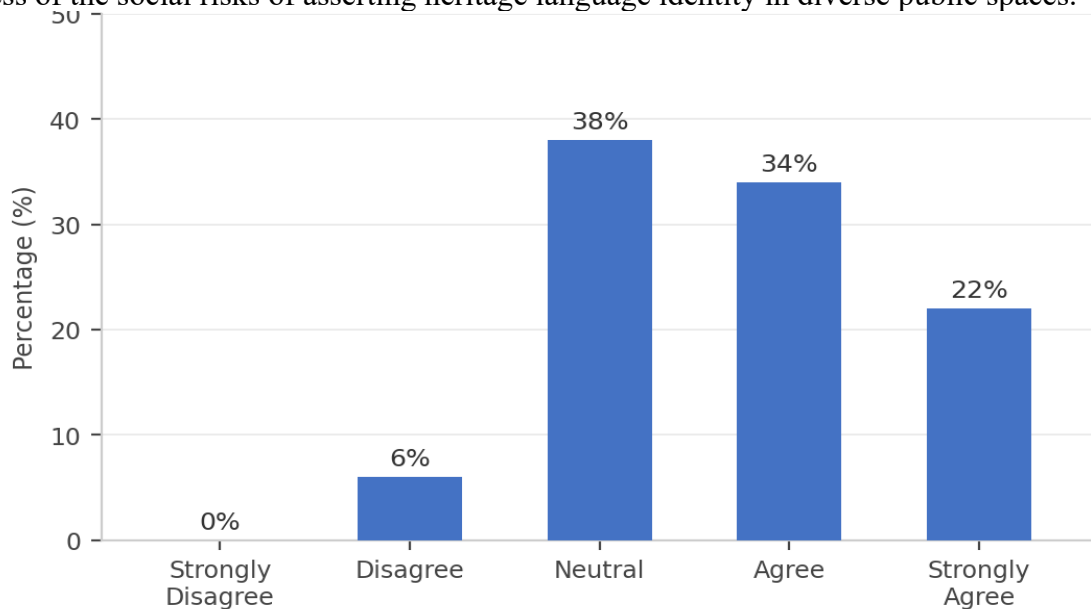




The first statement "Speaking Pashto helps me express my identity as a Pashtun" produced the strongest agreement rate observed across the entire questionnaire. A striking 52% of respondents strongly agreed and 32% agreed, collectively representing 84% of the total respondents. Only 12% remained neutral and none disagreed or strongly disagreed, making this the most unanimously endorsed statement in the study. This overwhelmingly positive response reflects that Pashto is not merely a communication tool for these students but a fundamental marker of their ethnic and social identity.

3.1.8. Using Pashto in Public Increases Respect and Identity for Pashtuns

The second statement "Using Pashto in public increases respect and identity for Pashtuns" revealed a more distributed but still predominantly positive response. 34% of respondents agreed and 22% strongly agreed, collectively representing 56% of the total respondents. Meanwhile 38% remained neutral, which is notably high, and only 6% disagreed, with none strongly disagreeing. The high neutral response suggests that while a majority acknowledges the identity and respect enhancing role of public Pashto use, a significant portion remains uncertain, possibly reflecting awareness of the social risks of asserting heritage language identity in diverse public spaces.



Item 2: Respondents' Responses Regarding Public Use of Pashto and Its Impact on Respect and Identity (n=50)

These findings are most effectively interpreted through Social Identity Theory, originally proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) in their groundbreaking work on intergroup relations. Social Identity Theory argues that individuals derive a significant part of their self concept from their membership in social groups. When group membership is salient, individuals actively engage in behaviors that reinforce and communicate their group identity, particularly in the presence of out-group members.

The 84% agreement in Item 1 is a powerful confirmation of Tajfel and Turner's argument. For Pashtun students, speaking Pashto in multiethnic settings is a conscious act of social identity assertion — it signals to both in-group and out-group members who they are, where they come from, and what community they belong to. Language here functions as what Tajfel called a social





identity marker, a visible and audible symbol of group membership that distinguishes Pashtuns from other ethnic groups in a diverse environment.

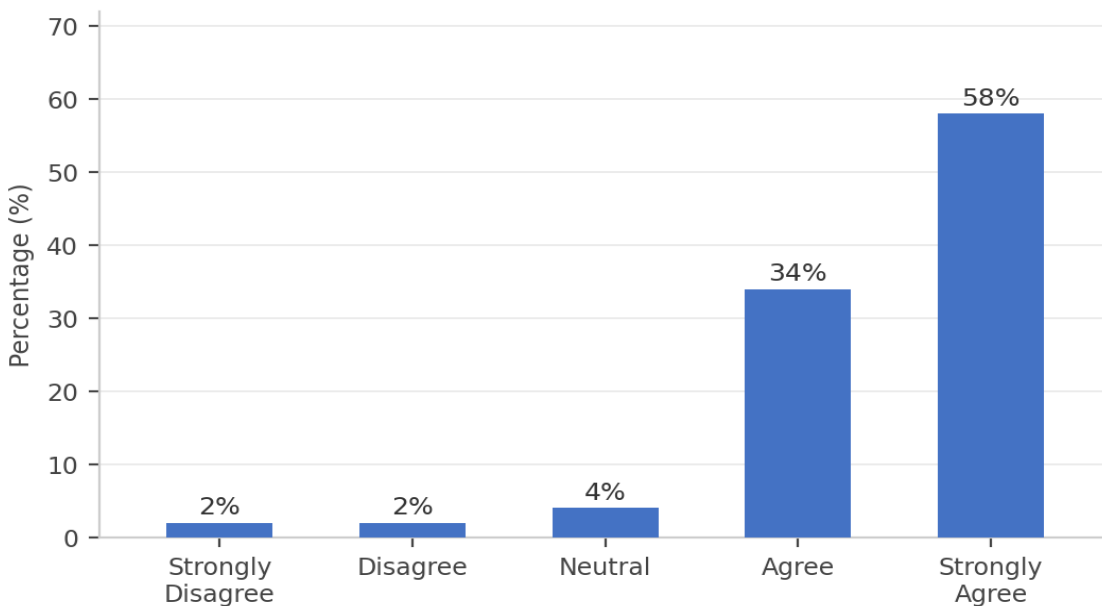
The comparatively higher neutral rate in Item 2, however, introduces an important nuance. While students strongly identify with Pashto as a personal identity marker, they are less certain about whether its public use universally enhances respect. This reflects Tajfel's concept of social identity threat — in multiethnic public spaces where other languages hold greater institutional dominance, asserting Pashto identity may feel socially risky or context dependent for some students.

Taken together, both items confirm that Pashto serves as a primary vehicle of social identity expression for Pashtun students, and that this identity function is one of the most powerful sociolinguistic motivators behind Pashto use in diverse social environments.

3.1.9. Pashto as a Reinforcement of Community Solidarity and Belonging among Pashtuns

Two questionnaire items were designed to measure the role of Pashto in strengthening the sense of community and solidarity among Pashtun students in multiethnic environments. The first statement examined whether speaking Pashto creates a feeling of community connectedness, while the second explored whether it actively strengthens solidarity among Pashtuns in multiethnic settings. Together these two items provide a comprehensive understanding of how Pashto functions as a communal bonding tool beyond its role as a mere communication medium.

3.1.10. Speaking Pashto Makes Me Feel More Connected to My Community



Item 1: Respondents' Responses Regarding Pashto as a Source of Community Connectedness (n=50)

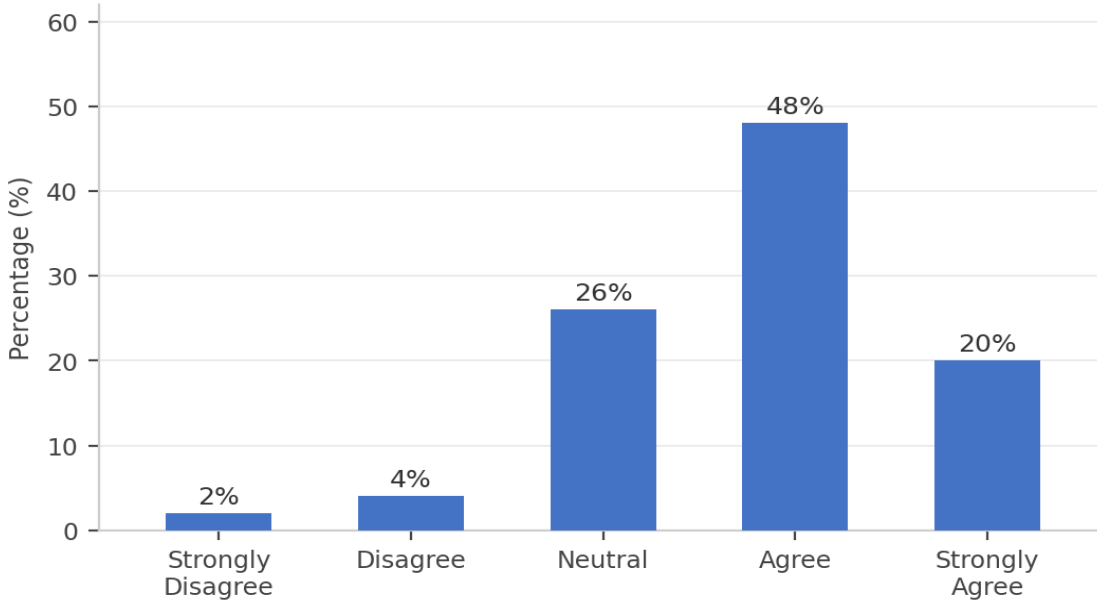
The first statement "Speaking Pashto with other Pashtuns makes me feel more connected to my community" produced an overwhelmingly positive response. An impressive 58% of respondents strongly agreed and 34% agreed, collectively representing 92% of the total respondents. This is the highest combined agreement rate recorded across the entire questionnaire, reflecting an almost unanimous consensus that Pashto plays a central and irreplaceable role in fostering a sense of community belonging among Pashtun students. The remaining responses were





negligibly small, with minimal neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree responses, further reinforcing the strength of this finding.

3.1.11. Speaking Pashto Strengthens Solidarity among Pashtuns in Multiethnic Settings



Item 2: Participants' Responses to the Statement "Speaking Pashto Strengthens Solidarity among Pashtuns in Multiethnic Settings" (n=50)

The second statement "Speaking Pashto strengthens solidarity among Pashtuns in multiethnic settings" also produced a strongly positive response. 48% of respondents agreed and 20% strongly agreed, collectively representing 68% of the total respondents. Meanwhile 26% remained neutral, suggesting that while a clear majority recognizes the solidarity strengthening function of Pashto, a notable portion remains uncertain about the extent to which language alone drives group solidarity in diverse settings. Only a negligible percentage disagreed or strongly disagreed, confirming that outright rejection of this idea is rare among the sampled population.

These findings are most powerfully interpreted through Speech Community Theory, as developed by William Labov (1972) and further elaborated by Dell Hymes (1974) in his ethnography of communication framework. A speech community refers to a group of people who share not only a common language or variety but also shared norms, values, and communicative practices associated with that language. Membership in a speech community goes beyond linguistic competence — it involves a shared sense of identity, belonging, and solidarity that is actively reinforced through language use.

The near unanimous 92% agreement in Item 1 is a profound confirmation of Speech Community Theory. For Pashtun students, speaking Pashto with fellow Pashtuns in a multiethnic university environment is not simply an act of communication but a powerful ritual of community reaffirmation. Each instance of Pashto use in a diverse setting serves as a symbolic act that reminds speakers of their shared heritage, strengthens in-group bonds, and reaffirms their membership in the Pashtun speech community. This is particularly significant in a multiethnic academic environment where students are constantly exposed to other languages and cultures that may gradually erode their linguistic and cultural identity.





68% agreement in Item 2, combined with the 26% neutral response, adds an important dimension to this interpretation. While the majority recognizes Pashto as a solidarity strengthening tool, the relatively higher neutral rate compared to Item 1 suggests that solidarity is felt more at the personal and emotional level than at the broader group or political level. This is consistent with Hymes's argument that communicative solidarity operates most powerfully in intimate and informal social interactions rather than in formal or public multiethnic spaces where language choices are more carefully negotiated.

### 3.2. Qualitative Analysis of Interview Data

To complement the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 Pashtun students studying at COMSATS University Islamabad, Abbottabad Campus. The interviews aimed to explore the sociolinguistic factors motivating Pashto use among Pashtuns in multilingual social settings and to examine whether such linguistic behaviour reflects a deeper sense of ethnic identity and community solidarity. The qualitative data generated through these interviews was analyzed thematically, identifying common patterns and themes emerging from participants' responses in relation to both research questions.

#### 3.2.1. Thematic Analysis of Interview Responses: Factors Motivating Pashto Use among Pashtuns in Multilingual Settings

Following table presents the interview data:

**Table 1**

*Themes Emerging from Interview Responses on Factors Motivating Pashto Use among Pashtuns in Multilingual Settings*

| Theme                                | Description  | No. of participants |
|--------------------------------------|--|---------------------|
| <b>Comfort and Ease</b>              | Participants reported feeling more at ease and natural when communicating in Pashto among fellow Pashtuns in multilingual settings       | 22 out of 30        |
| <b>Pride and Linguistic Prestige</b> | Participants expressed a strong sense of pride in their mother tongue and considered using Pashto a reflection of their ethnic belonging | 21 out of 30        |
| <b>Privacy and Exclusivity</b>       | Participants indicated that using Pashto in mixed settings allows them to maintain conversational privacy from non-Pashto speakers       | 19 out of 30        |
| <b>Habitual Language Use</b>         | Participants noted that speaking Pashto among themselves is a deeply ingrained habit formed through years of daily use                   | 17 out of 30        |
| <b>Linguistic Familiarity</b>        | Participants acknowledged that Pashto is the language they are most proficient and fluent in compared to other available languages       | 21 out of 30        |

The thematic analysis of interview responses reveals several significant factors that motivate Pashtun students to use Pashto among themselves in multilingual settings. The most prominently reported factor was comfort and ease, identified by 22 out of 30 participants, suggesting that Pashto functions as a psychologically safe and naturally accessible medium of communication for its speakers. This aligns with the broader sociolinguistic understanding that individuals tend to gravitate toward the language in which they feel most relaxed and uninhibited, particularly in social interactions.

Pride and linguistic identity emerged as an equally strong motivating factor, with 21 participants acknowledging a deep sense of ethnic pride attached to their mother tongue. For these participants, speaking Pashto is not merely a communicative act but a conscious or subconscious assertion of their Pashtun identity in spaces where multiple languages and ethnicities coexist.





Similarly, linguistic familiarity was reported by 21 participants, indicating that a higher degree of proficiency and fluency in Pashto naturally directs speakers toward it over other available languages in their repertoire.

Privacy and exclusivity were cited by 19 participants as another notable motivating factor. The use of Pashto in mixed multilingual settings serves as a linguistic boundary, allowing Pashtun speakers to hold conversations that remain inaccessible to non-Pashto speakers, thereby creating a sense of in-group exclusivity. Finally, habitual language use, though the least frequently reported theme with 17 participants, nonetheless highlights the deeply rooted and automatic nature of Pashto use, reflecting years of consistent linguistic practice within the community.

Collectively, these themes suggest that Pashto use among Pashtun students in multilingual settings is driven by a complex interplay of psychological comfort, ethnic pride, communicative familiarity, strategic privacy, and ingrained linguistic habit, all of which contribute to sustaining Pashto as the preferred language of in-group communication.

3.2.2. Interview data on Pashto Use as a Reflection of Pashtun Identity and Communal Solidarity in Multilingual Settings

The table given below presents Interview data on Pashto Use as a Reflection of Pashtun Identity and Communal Solidarity in Multilingual Settings:

Table 2

Themes identified from interview responses of 30 Pashtun students

| Theme                               | Description  | No. of Participants |
|-------------------------------------|--|---------------------|
| <b>Communal Bond and Solidarity</b> | Participants reported that the use of Pashto among fellow Pashtuns significantly strengthens their interpersonal bonds and sense of community in multilingual settings | 28 out of 30        |
| <b>Pashtun Identity Assertion</b>   | Participants claimed that speaking Pashto in multilingual settings serves as a strong marker of their Pashtun ethnic identity and cultural belonging                   | 29 out of 30        |

The thematic analysis of interview responses presented in Table 4.2 highlights two dominant themes in relation to the second research question. An overwhelming majority of participants, 29 out of 30, identified Pashto use as a strong marker of Pashtun ethnic identity, indicating that language functions far beyond mere communication for this community. For these participants, speaking Pashto in a multilingual environment is a deliberate or instinctive act of affirming who they are, signaling their cultural roots and ethnic belonging in spaces where multiple identities coexist.

Similarly, 28 out of 30 participants reported that Pashto plays a significant role in strengthening communal bonds and fostering solidarity among Pashtuns in multilingual settings. This finding suggests that a shared language serves as powerful social glue, creating a sense of togetherness and mutual belonging among Pashtun students who find themselves in linguistically diverse environments. Collectively, both themes strongly indicate that Pashto use among Pashtuns is not merely habitual or functional but is deeply intertwined with their sense of identity and community, reinforcing the sociolinguistic significance of mother tongue maintenance in multilingual contexts.

4. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION





The present study set out to explore the sociolinguistic factors influencing Pashto language use among Pashtun students in multiethnic university settings, with particular focus on social identity, community solidarity, cultural pride, and language prestige.

With respect to the first research question, the findings identified several key factors that motivate Pashtun students to use Pashto in multiethnic settings. These include emotional comfort, linguistic familiarity, cultural pride, the desire for privacy from non-Pashtun interlocutors, and a strong sense of intra-ethnic solidarity. The quantitative data revealed that a significant proportion of participants agreed that Pashto serves as a preferred medium of communication among fellow Pashtuns, not merely out of linguistic habit but as a conscious choice rooted in cultural attachment and ethnic affiliation. These findings are consistent with Fishman's (1991) argument that language maintenance is driven by the deeply felt association between language and ethnic identity, and with Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic capital, which suggests that speakers invest in particular languages because of the social value and group recognition those languages carry. The institutional dominance of Urdu and English on campus, rather than suppressing Pashto use entirely, appears to have reinforced it as a marker of resistance and cultural distinctiveness among Pashtun students.

Turning to the second research question, the study found that the use of Pashto plays a significant and multifaceted role in the expression of social identity and the strengthening of community solidarity among Pashtun students. The qualitative data drawn from interview responses revealed that participants consciously employ Pashto to assert their ethnic identity, foster a sense of belonging, and reinforce bonds of solidarity with fellow Pashtuns on a diverse university campus. A large majority of survey respondents agreed that speaking Pashto strengthens solidarity among Pashtuns in multiethnic settings and that using the language in social gatherings contributes to its preservation for future generations. These findings resonate strongly with Tajfel and Turner's (1986) Social Identity Theory, which holds that individuals use language as a tool for affirming group membership and differentiating their in-group from out-groups, and with Giles's (1977) Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory, which emphasizes the role of language in sustaining a positive and distinct ethnic identity. Together, these theoretical perspectives help explain why Pashto continues to function as a vital social resource for Pashtun students even in environments where it holds no institutional prestige.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that Pashto language use among Pashtun students in multiethnic university settings is deeply embedded in processes of identity construction, ethnic solidarity, and cultural preservation. While the dominance of Urdu and English in institutional contexts poses real challenges to Pashto maintenance, the strong sense of cultural pride, emotional attachment, and community solidarity expressed by participants confirms that the language retains considerable social and symbolic value within this community. These findings contribute meaningfully to the broader sociolinguistic literature on minority language maintenance in South Asian contexts and underscore the need for further research into language policy, ethnic identity, and multilingual education within Pakistani higher education institutions. Future studies may benefit from expanding the sample size, incorporating additional campuses, and examining the role of digital communication in sustaining minority language use among younger generations.

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