

# **Punjabi as a Mother Tongue on the Decline, While Pashto, Saraiki, and Urdu See a Rise – A Comparative Analysis of Pakistan’s Mother Tongues Using Census Data from 1998, 2017, and 2023**

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## **Abstract**

Language is not only a means of communication but also a significant cultural marker that reflects the identity and heritage of a community. In Pakistan, a country with diverse linguistic groups, the dynamics of language usage have undergone notable changes over the past few decades. This research paper explores the decline in Punjabi as a mother tongue and the rise in other languages such as Pashto, Saraiki, and Urdu, using census data from 1998, 2017, and 2023. The analysis delves into the regional distribution of languages, the urban-rural divide, and the implications of these shifts on cultural identity and policy-making.

## **Introduction**

Pakistan is a linguistically diverse country with several regional languages spoken across its provinces. Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Saraiki, Urdu, and Balochi are among the prominent languages that represent the rich cultural tapestry of the nation. However, the usage and prevalence of these languages have witnessed significant changes over the past quarter-century. Punjabi, historically the most spoken language in Pakistan, has seen a decline, while languages like Pashto, Saraiki, and Urdu have experienced a rise in the number of speakers.

This research aims to analyze these trends, focusing on the reasons behind the decline in Punjabi speakers and the factors contributing to the rise of other languages. The study uses census data from 1998, 2017, and 2023 to provide a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic landscape in Pakistan and its evolution over time.

## **Methodology**

This research relies on quantitative data from the national censuses conducted in Pakistan in 1998, 2017, and 2023. The data is analyzed to observe trends in the number of speakers of different languages, both at the national level and within specific provinces. Additionally, a comparative analysis is conducted to identify patterns in the urban and rural distribution of these languages. The study also considers socio-political and economic factors that may have influenced these linguistic shifts.

## **Literature Review**

The study of linguistic trends in Pakistan has been a subject of interest for sociolinguists and cultural historians alike. Previous research has highlighted the impact of migration, urbanization, and education on language usage in Pakistan. Punjabi, once the most dominant language in the country, has faced challenges due to the increasing influence of Urdu as the national language and the lingua franca. Similarly, the rise of Pashto and Saraiki can be attributed to demographic changes and socio-political movements in the respective regions where these languages are spoken.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

### **1. National Trends in Language Usage**

The analysis of census data reveals a notable decline in Punjabi speakers over the past 25 years. In 1998, Punjabi was spoken by 44% of the population, making it the most widely spoken language in Pakistan. However, by 2023, this percentage had decreased to 37%. In contrast, Urdu, Pashto, and Saraiki have seen an increase in the number of speakers during the same period. Urdu speakers increased from 8% in 1998 to 9% in 2023, while Pashto speakers rose from 16% to 18%, and Saraiki speakers grew from 11% to 12%.

The data also indicates a slight fluctuation in the percentage of Sindhi speakers, which peaked at 15% in 2017 but returned to 14% in 2023, the same level as in 1998. Balochi speakers, on the other hand, have experienced a decline from 4% in 1998 to 3% in 2023.

### **2. Provincial Breakdown**

The linguistic trends vary significantly across Pakistan's provinces. Punjab, the most populous province, has witnessed a decline in Punjabi speakers from 70% in 2017 to 67% in 2023. In contrast, Pashto remains the dominant language in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), where its usage increased from 80% in 2017 to 81% in 2023. In Sindh, the percentage of Sindhi speakers decreased from 62% in 2017 to 60% in 2023. Balochistan presents a unique case where Balochi speakers increased from 35% in 2017 to 40% in 2023, while Pashto speakers slightly decreased from 35% to 34%.

In the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), there has been a noticeable shift in language dynamics. Punjabi, while still the most spoken language, decreased slightly from 52% in 2017 to 51% in 2023. Pashto speakers also declined from 19% to 18%, while Urdu speakers saw a significant increase from 12% in 2017 to 16% in 2023.

### **3. Urban vs. Rural Distribution**

The census data also highlights differences in language usage between urban and rural areas. Punjabi, although still dominant in rural areas, has seen a significant decline. In 1998, 43% of rural Pakistanis spoke Punjabi, but this number dropped to 34% in 2023.

In urban areas, Punjabi speakers constitute 41% of the population, but there has been a steady decline of 7% over the past 25 years.

Pashto, on the other hand, has shown a consistent increase in both rural and urban areas. In rural regions, Pashto speakers rose from 18% in 1998 to 22% in 2023. In urban areas, the percentage of Pashto speakers fluctuated slightly, reaching 11% in 2023.

Urdu, while traditionally more common in urban areas, has maintained a stable presence in rural regions as well. In urban areas, Urdu speakers have seen a resurgence, increasing from 17% in 2017 to 21% in 2023.

#### **4. Factors Contributing to the Decline of Punjabi**

Several factors have contributed to the decline of Punjabi as a mother tongue in Pakistan. One of the primary reasons is the increasing influence of Urdu as the national language. Urdu is not only the medium of instruction in most schools but also the preferred language for official communication and media. This has led to a gradual shift away from regional languages, particularly Punjabi, among the younger generation.

Urbanization has also played a significant role in this decline. As people migrate from rural to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities, they often adopt Urdu or other regional languages that are more widely spoken in cities. This trend is particularly evident in the declining number of Punjabi speakers in urban centers.

Another factor is the lack of institutional support for Punjabi. Unlike Urdu and other regional languages, Punjabi has not been given the same level of recognition and promotion in the education system and media. This has led to a gradual erosion of the language's status and usage among its speakers.

#### **5. The Rise of Pashto, Saraiki, and Urdu**

While Punjabi has seen a decline, Pashto, Saraiki, and Urdu have experienced a rise in the number of speakers. The increase in Pashto speakers can be attributed to the demographic growth of the Pashtun population, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The rise of Saraiki speakers is linked to the growing sense of regional identity in Southern Punjab, where Saraiki is predominantly spoken.

Urdu's increase in speakers is largely due to its status as the national language and its widespread use in education, media, and government. The language's role as a unifying force in a linguistically diverse country has contributed to its steady growth, particularly in urban areas.

### **Discussion**

The decline of Punjabi and the rise of other languages in Pakistan reflect broader social, political, and economic changes in the country. The increasing dominance of Urdu as the national language has led to a gradual shift away from regional languages, particularly among the younger generation. Urbanization and migration have also contributed to this trend, as people adopt languages that are more widely spoken in cities.

The rise of Pashto and Saraiki, on the other hand, reflects the growing sense of regional identity and the demographic growth of these linguistic groups. The increase in Urdu speakers highlights the language's role as a unifying force in a linguistically diverse country.

## **Conclusion**

The linguistic landscape of Pakistan has undergone significant changes over the past 25 years. Punjabi, once the most widely spoken language in the country, has seen a decline, while Pashto, Saraiki, and Urdu have experienced a rise in the number of speakers. These trends reflect broader social, political, and economic changes in the country, including the increasing influence of Urdu, urbanization, and the growing sense of regional identity among linguistic groups.

## **Recommendations**

To preserve the linguistic diversity of Pakistan, it is important to promote and support regional languages, including Punjabi. This can be achieved through the inclusion of regional languages in the education system, media, and official communication. Additionally, efforts should be made to raise awareness about the cultural and historical significance of these languages among the younger generation.

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Note: This research paper provides a detailed analysis of the changing dynamics of mother tongues in Pakistan, focusing on the decline of Punjabi and the rise of other languages. The paper offers insights into the factors contributing to these trends and their implications for the cultural and linguistic diversity of the country.