

Language Shift in Northern Pakistan: The Case of Domaakí and Pashto

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to the phenomenon of mother tongue change, which is known as the most common course of language death. The languages under consideration are Domaakí, with ca. 350 speakers in the Nager and Hunza Valleys, and Pashto, as spoken by permanent migrants in ca. 150 households scattered all over the Northern Areas.

By analysing and comparing the social environment of both speech communities the author attempts to illustrate the importance of the speakers' attitude towards their own mother tongue in the process of language shift.

Keywords

Language Shift, Northern Pakistan, Domaakí, Pashto, Endangered Languages, Sociolinguistics, Linguistic Minority

With more than two dozen languages spoken as mother tongues by communities permanently living in its territory, Northern Pakistan is endowed with an extraordinary linguistic diversity.¹ As none of the area's speech communities is permanently isolated from its neighbours, many, if not all of them, are affected by language shift.

REGIONAL SETTING

Language shift in Northern Pakistan is by no means a recent phenomenon. For example, since the Pashtun invasion of Swat and Bajaur in the 15th century, Pashto has spread there and in most of the adjoining valleys on the expense of other languages. One may even go further back

¹ A comprehensive list of languages spoken as mother tongues in Pakistan, including their main places of circulation and their approximate number of speakers is given by Baart 2003: 9.

in time and consider the evidence of place names to be found all over the Karakoram, which suggest that a large part of the territory long since covered by Shina and Indus Kohistani must once have been Burushaski-speaking (Zoller 2005: 19ff.; Lorimer 1937: 69).

More recent illustrations of a dominant language competing with a minority tongue include a number of Gawri-speaking villages in upper Dir Valley, in which the population is in the process of changing to Pashto (Zaman 2003a; Baart 2003: 4ff.); originally Kalashamun-speaking people living in South-East Chitral who now have (almost) entirely shifted to Khowar or to Palula (Cacopardo, A. M. 1991; Cacopardo, A. S. 1991); the Kundal Shahi-speaking community in the Neelam Valley of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which is changing to Hindko (Rehman/Baart 2005: 7ff.); as well as traditionally Ushojo-speaking households in the upper reaches of the Bishigram (Chail) Valley in Swat Kohistan, which are adopting Pashto (Zaman 2003b; Decker, S. J. 1992: 75ff.).²

SHIFT-INDUCING FACTORS

It is well known that language shift is the most common course of language death (cf. Campbell 1994: 1960ff.). However, even when occurring over a prolonged period of time and on a scale involving more than just a few households, not all situations of language shift will automatically bring a non-dominant language to the brink of extinction. In order to assess the actual grade of endangerment of a given shift-affected language and to make a meaningful statement about the possible risk of its disappearance a variety of additional, often closely interrelated factors will have to be taken into consideration. Among these factors are the social and economic environment of the speakers, their marriage practices, their educational level, their religious affiliation, their settlement patterns and many others.³

All these factors contribute to the formation of the speakers' outlook on life, their internal value system. It is on the basis of this value system

² Detailed investigations into language shift, bi- and multilingualism, and language maintenance in Northern Pakistan's speech communities can be found in O'Leary 1992; Decker, K. D. 1992a; idem 1992b; and Mørch 2000; cf. also Liljegren 2008: 21ff.

³ An exhaustive list of factors, inducing language endangerment, is provided by T. Tsunoda (2005: 57ff.). A convenient five-level classification model for languages in danger of disappearing is suggested by S. A. Wurm (1998: 192), who grades them into 1) potentially endangered, 2) endangered, 3) seriously endangered, 4) moribund, and 5) extinct.

that the speakers then develop what could be regarded as the main determinant of language shift: their attitude towards their own mother tongue. Attitude is crucially important, because it sets the speakers' mind towards using their traditional mother tongue or not using it, and thus, ultimately, defines their choice to stay with their own language or to move to another, dominant one (cf. Winter 1993: 313ff.).

Now, let us have a closer look at what the speakers' attitude may depend on and how it can change over time.⁴

The Domaakí Situation

A characteristic example, in which large-scale language shift is leading to a rapid numerical decrease of a speech community threatening the very existence of a minority language, is Domaakí (Do.).⁵

Do. is spoken by a few hundred people living in the Northern Areas of Pakistan. It is the traditional tongue of the Dóoma (sg. Dóom), a small ethnic group scattered in extended family units among larger host communities. According to local traditions, the Dóoma's ancestors came somewhere from the south; according to the Do. speakers themselves, their forbearers arrived in the Nager and Hunza Valleys from Kashmir, in separate groups and over an extended period of time via Baltistan, Gilgit, Darel, Tangir, Punial, and even Kashghar (Schmid 1997: 54ff.; Weinreich 1999: 203). In former times, Do. speakers traditionally worked as blacksmiths and musicians, but nowadays they are also engaged in a variety of other professions. In almost all places of their present settlement the Dóoma have long since given up their original mother tongue in favour of the surrounding Dardic Shina. Only in the Nager and Hunza Valleys has Do. survived until the present day.

Do. can be divided into two dialects: Nager-Do. and Hunza-Do. Although there are considerable differences between these two varieties, they are not so severe as to prevent mutual intelligibility. Already in the

⁴ Most of the following data and observations are based on the author's field studies in the Northern Areas of Pakistan; for Domaakí in the years 1995 to 2002, for Pashto between 1993 and 1997. Related publications, see Weinreich 1999, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2009.

⁵ The language name is based on the self appellation of the speakers, which in its turn is connected to Indo-Aryan *ḍōmba*- "man of low caste living by singing and music" (Turner 1966: 313; N 5570). From a historical point of view, Do. is a language of the North Indian Plains, affiliated to the Central group of New Indo-Aryan (Buddruss 1983). However, due to its long-standing separation from its place of origin and intense contacts with other languages it has lost or transformed many of its Central group related features. This now places Do. in many aspects much closer to its Dardic neighbours than to its Midland cousins.

1990s, all Do. speakers were proficient in the languages of their host communities, Burushaski and/or Shina. Many of them also knew Urdu, which they had learned at school or picked up while working in other parts of Pakistan.

The first information about Do. was provided in the mid 1930s by the renowned British researcher D. L. R. Lorimer who noted that the language was spoken by approximately 330 people living in more than 60 households. Although Lorimer already mentioned widespread bilingualism among Dooma men, mother tongue change does not seem to have taken place in his time (cf. Lorimer 1939: 5ff.). Around 50 years later, in the second half of the 1980s the total number of Dooma households was estimated at more than 100 units, and the number of speakers in Hunza alone at around 500 people.⁶ From this we can deduce that between the 1930s and the 1980s the number of Do. speakers was almost certainly increasing, which is fully in line with the general demographic development of the area (cf. Kreutzmann 2005: 8).

Unfortunately, due to language shift this rather encouraging picture has changed considerably over the last 20 years. Thus, according to the latest estimates, in 2004, Do. had only approximately 350 speakers left (Weinreich 2008: 299; Rahman 2003: 11). Based on these data, one can assume that in only a very short period the growth-oriented trend reversed towards a shrinking of the Do. speech community.

If this negative tendency continues, there is a high probability that in one or two generations all remaining Do. speakers will have shifted to Burushaski or Shina, and their original mother tongue, in the form of both of its dialects, will have ceased to exist as a living language.

Considering the speed with which Do. is losing ground, one cannot help wondering about the reason why speakers are shifting on such a large scale to the respective dominant language. And why they are doing this only now and not, for example, in Lorimer's time? The answer to this question is important not solely from an academic point of view, but also because only by identifying the Dooma's reason behind their

⁶ Different researchers provide different breakdowns: G. Fussman (1989: 50) estimates ca. 500 residents living in the Do.-speaking village Mominabad in Hunza, but has no data for Nager. P. C. Backstrom (1992: 79) mentions 70 Do.-speaking households in Mominabad. A. Schmid (1997: 19) counts 93 Dooma households in Hunza (Mominabad and other villages), 49 in Nager and 24 in Gilgit, but leaves it open in how many of them Do. was still spoken. In addition to this, H. Kreutzmann (2005: 10) gives in his table "Linguistic diversity in the Karakoram and Eastern Hindukush in 1991" under the heading "Domaaki" population numbers for the Yasin and Punial Valleys (305 and 188 persons respectively). However, these data relate to the social/ethnic background of the respondents, not to their actual language use.

choice to shift can one attempt to contain this shift. And only by containing this shift can Do. be prevented from disappearing.⁷



Pashtun Cobblers in Chilas Bazaar (Photo by Silvia Delogu)

Pashtun Choices

In order to find an answer to the above question I will look at the situation of another language, Pashto. Taking into consideration that Pashto has already been mentioned as a rather dominant tongue, which was, and still is, gaining influence at the expense of smaller idioms like Gawri, Ushojo and many others, this suggestion may come as a surprise. However, for the present purpose, we shall deal only with Pashto as used by Pashtun migrants within the confines of the Northern Areas, a region, where, in contrast to Kohistan and Chitral, for example, Pashto is not spreading to non-Pashtun communities. Consequently, Pashto

⁷ As this is not the place to discuss why one should be concerned about the ongoing disappearance of indigenous languages all over the world, I would like to refer to T. Tsunoda (2005: 144ff.) where this issue is examined in great detail. For me personally the most convincing argument is the one presented by Baart (2003: 6ff.) who is linking the preservation of linguistic variety to the empowerment of local communities and, through this, to the maintenance and promotion of sustainable economical development on a global scale. Very persuasive also P. Austin 2008.

speakers in the Northern Areas constitute just another small ethnic minority (less than 1% of the total population) and are left with no alternative but to adjust to their linguistic surroundings (cf. Weinreich 2009: 79ff.).

According to their way of life, Pashtuns in the Northern Areas can be divided into two categories—temporary migrants and permanent migrants.

In the mid-1990s, the area was frequented by several thousand temporary migrants who mostly acted as traders, craftsmen and employees in the service sector. All of them had come to the region after the opening of the Karakoram Highway in 1978. They worked in central bazaar places where they also set up their short-term households, but they kept their families back home in the NWFP (“North West Frontier Province”) or the Tribal Areas.

Most of the forbearers of the second category, the permanent migrants, had arrived in the Northern Areas since at latest the 19th century working as traders; others came as religious preachers or as fugitives in search of sanctuary. Their descendants in the mid 1990s maintained ca. 150 family households, both in urban centres and, to a somewhat lesser extent, also in rural locations. In contrast to their temporary counterparts who for communicating with the local population normally used Urdu, all permanent migrants, men, women and children alike, had mastered the languages of their respective host communities, mostly Shina and/or Khowar. Their original mother tongue they used only at home or in order to talk to Pashto-speaking neighbours and traders in the bazaar.

While the permanent migrants’ older generation was still more or less fluent in Pashto, younger people often showed a strong inclination towards the use of the dominant language. In fact, during the time of my research a number of households were clearly on their way to shift to the surrounding majority tongue. Others, although still referred to by their neighbours as “Pathan”, had already finalised this process and were by then fully using Shina or Khowar instead of Pashto. However, parallel to these shift-affected households there existed many others—sometimes even in the same settlements as the “shifters”—who did not show any sign of mother tongue change.

From my research it appeared that the most characteristic feature, which distinguished the shift-affected and the non-shift-affected households from each other was their economic situation.

All the “shifters” were making their living predominantly from agriculture and subsequently had a relatively low income. In the Northern

Areas, as in other places confronted with modernisation, the economic standing of a family can be considered as a major and often decisive factor in determining their social status. As far as their financial means were concerned, these low-income households did not differ much from their neighbours who like them were farmers living hand to mouth. The only trait, which in the eyes of their co-residents set them apart from the rest of the settlement and accorded them a comparatively lower social position was their “foreignness”—the fact that they as Pathans did not belong to the traditional population of the area. The most explicit, and in many cases the only, remaining sign of this “foreignness” was their distinctive language. Consequently, the concerned settlers perceived their original mother tongue Pashto as nothing but a hurdle, the last barrier that had to be removed on their way to a more favourable social position.

A totally different situation presented itself in the case of these permanently settled migrant families who, although also bilingual, still employed Pashto on an equal footing with the local majority tongue. The bread winners of almost all these households were traders or state employees. They lived primarily in the economic centres of the region, had a good, often above-average income and, linked to that, normally wielded a fair amount of social influence. In addition to this, their distinctive standing in the local community was strongly underpinned by the physical and financial presence of their temporary migrating compatriots, as well as by the popular perception of Pathans as hard-working but also brutal, stubborn and self-centred tribal worriers.

This combination of money, social influence and image made the Pashto speakers settled in the Northern Areas’ economic centres a social group seldom loved but generally held in respect and treated with a certain distance. Membership of this group was established through the identification of the relevant person as “Pashtun/Pathan”, which in turn was mainly based on his or her ability to speak Pashto. Consequently, for the concerned settled migrants the preservation of their mother tongue had turned into nothing less than a prerequisite for upholding their status in society.

Thus, the speakers’ attitude towards their original mother tongue depended on their perception of the usefulness of Pashto in determining their social position within their host community. For some migrants it had turned into a burden since it could be easily brought into play by their co-villagers as an argument for the speakers’ status as “outsiders” whose place was to be found on the lower half of the social scale. For others the preservation of Pashto became indispensable since

it served as an efficient tool to mark and maintain their position within a comparatively affluent, influential and respected population group.



Dooma Musicians in Hunza Valley (Source: www.pamirtimes/noor)

THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTITUDE

Now, let us look through the prism of these findings at the situation of the remaining Do. speakers. Similar to the Pashtun migrants they are also embedded in larger host communities by whom they are perceived and treated as “outsiders”. Moreover, until around 40 years ago Dooma were part of a social structure in which they as a group occupied the most inferior position available. They were compelled to live in specially designated places at the outskirts of the village and forced to perform, besides their traditional occupations as blacksmiths and musicians, all kinds of low and dirty work. Members of their host communities did not give their daughters to them in marriage, and most people would not even consider them worthy of sharing a simple meal with. In short, the Dooma’s position in the traditional society of the Nager and Hunza Principalities was such that visitors familiar with the situation further to the south, often felt reminded of the status of Hindu untouchables there.

All this came, at least officially, to an end in the first half of the 1970s with the deposition of the valleys’ traditional rulers and the full integra-

tion of Nager and Hunza into Pakistan. Taking advantage of their newly obtained social freedom, many Dooma men left their home villages in search of work, settling in the regional capital Gilgit and in other places. Besides this, with the passage of time, marriages with non-Do. speaking women (often Shina-speaking Dooma from Gilgit or Punial) became more and more frequent. In Dooma households cut off from the main part of the speech community such matrimonial unions clearly stimulated language shift, as the bilingual husbands easily switched to the mother tongue of their wives and, accordingly, contributed to establishing it as the main language of their common children.

However, just a small minority of Dooma men are married to non-Do. speaking wives, and language shift does not only affect isolated households somewhere in Gilgit, but also the compact Dooma settlements in Mominabad (Hunza) and Domyaal (Nager). So, if the shift is not mainly connected to geographical isolation from the main body of the speech community and/or to linguistic assimilation in mixed marriages, what could be the Dooma's motivation for giving up Do.? Could it be linked, as in case of the shift-affected Pashtun migrants, to the speakers' perception of their traditional mother tongue as an obstacle, which is blocking their way to a better life? I think, it could.

As much as the Dooma's oppressed situation in former times is regrettable from a modern, enlightened point of view, it had very clear advantages for the survival of their language. In the framework of the old system Dooma individuals were left with no choice but to be part of the ethno-linguistic group they were born into. Abandonment of the group and adoption of a new identity was unthinkable. In this traditional set-up the Dooma's original mother tongue fulfilled two vital social functions. First, it served as a means of demarcation from the hostile "others" and second, it assured the unity of the group. Accordingly, as long as the old system existed, Do. was indispensable and had to be maintained. This is the main reason why, notwithstanding the bilingualism, which was already widespread in Lorimer's time, the Dooma settled in the Principalities of Nager and Hunza stuck to their language.

After the abolition of the old system group boundaries became increasingly transparent, and it was more and more left to the individual to define his or her position vis-à-vis the group. All these changes clearly worked to the Dooma's advantage, as they allowed them to leave their predefined social corner and take their destiny into their own hands. However, although the Do. speakers' social conditions have considerably improved since the 1970s, Dooma are still considered by many members of their host communities as a kind of low casts. The resulting

discrimination has many faces. For example, all over the Northern Areas calling somebody a “Doom” is not perceived as a statement about the concerned person’s ethnic affiliation, as would be the case with designations like “Brusho”, “Shin” or “Kho”, but counts as a serious insult, which asks for an immediate response. In this way, even the Do. speakers themselves avoid their traditional self-denomination, and use their clan names instead.

Unfortunately, the surrounding society’s prejudiced attitudes do not exhaust themselves solely in verbal abuse. They also reflect on the availability of educational choices, job opportunities, and even bank loans. So, it will come as no surprise that the majority of Dooma would be all happy to get rid of their problematic group identity, in order to attain a social position which is based on their individual merits, and not allotted to them according to their ethnic background.

Similar to what was said about the Pashtun migrants, the most characteristic identity marker for the modern-day Dooma is their distinctive mother tongue. Of course, this has been very similar in the past, but under contemporary conditions Do. has turned from the useful ally of old into a liability. Nowadays, the language is perceived as obstructing a person’s chances for integration and upward mobility. And Domaakí’s gradual disappearance, of which its speakers are well aware, is regarded as a tolerable price to be paid for achieving these aspirations.

The strained relationship between the speakers and their original mother tongue finds its expression in many ways. It is articulated in common statements like “Do. is a bad language” or “We speak Shina (or Burushaski) now, this is our mother tongue”. It is evident from the fact that on the appearance of an outsider Do. conversation partners will automatically change into the dominant language, regardless if the latter is actually spoken by the outsider or not. And, it is even officially approved by Dooma community leaders in Hunza, who already in the 1990s actively encouraged young and old to use the local majority tongue while talking to each other.

In this context it seems only natural that most of the still fully Do.-speaking parents whom I encountered during my research had taken the conscious decision to communicate with their children in Shina or Burushaski.

NO FUTURE FOR DOMAAKÍ?

Now, let us conclude. It appears that the main reason behind the ongoing large-scale language shift affecting Do. is the speakers’ critical attitude towards it, which is based on the fact that they perceive their

traditional mother tongue as playing a negative role in determining their social position in society. This was different in the past but nowadays speaking Do. is regarded as bad and is avoided as much as possible.

At the same time, it is obvious, that the only chance for the survival of Do. lies in an increase of the remaining speakers' motivation to use it. As it appears from the Pashtun example, the motivation of (potentially) shift-affected households to stick to their traditional language was obviously boosted by the massive arrival of Pashto-speaking temporary migrants. Of course, in case of Do., as in the cases of most of the region's other endangered idioms, such a "natural solution" is out of the question.

But does this mean that Domaaki and the other languages are condemned to death? I don't want to think so. Over the last decades applied linguistics has developed ways and methods to increase language use through encouraging change in the attitude of the speakers. And, as demonstrated by the examples of seriously endangered and even moribund languages in Australia and the Americas, some of these techniques have proved to be very efficient.⁸ Now it is on us, linguists and remaining speakers, to decide which of these methods would be the most suitable for the languages we are concerned about, and how they can be adapted to, and implemented in, the context of Northern Pakistan. It will not be an easy task, but the clock is ticking, and, as we should always remind ourselves, to save a word is to save a world.

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⁸ For related case studies cf. Tsunoda 2005: 168ff.; see also Austin 2008.

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