

Historical Evolution and Genesis of the Shina Language: A Desk-Based Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This paper investigates the nature of contact with languages and their final stages in the Shina area of Gilgit-Baltistan, based on existing research in the region. Based on existing research in the region, the paper investigates the nature of contact with languages and the endangerment of languages in Shina area of Gilgit-Baltistan. Two main features make the Shina language one of the most historically important and linguistically complex languages of northern South Asia, namely, her historical continuity, and her wide array of complex linguistic forms and variants. Shina is spoken in parts of Gilgit-Baltistan, in the region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in smaller pockets in IJAK and in northeastern Afghanistan and retains vestiges of ancient Indo-Aryan elements, but at the same time has had to adopt elements of continuous contact with Persian, Kashmiri, Pashto, Burushaski, and Urdu. This paper systematically reviews and locates history and origin of Shina from the perspective of basic research that has been done in the area (Leitner (1893), Grierson (1919) to current sociolinguistic studies. Four main currents of influence have been identified from the literature analysis for Shina, which are deep Indo-Aryan roots, isolation, prolonged contact and endangerment due to socio-political dominance of Urdu and English. Finally, the paper reviews existing documentation and the current revitalization efforts undertaken for the language, and stresses the importance of community-based language specific strategies and institutional assistance for the survival of the language.

Keywords: Shina Language, Dardic, Indo-Aryan, Language Contact, Language Endangerment, Gilgit-Baltistan, Linguistic Documentation.

Introduction

The Shina language has a high position among the Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European language family, Dardic sub-group. It is the dominant vernacular of both Gilgit-Baltistan and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, as well as the Kunar and Nuristan provinces in the northeast of Afghanistan (Grierson, 1919; Radloff&Backstrom, 1992). It has been moulded by centuries of change of political boundaries, contact with other cultures and geographical isolation in the Karakoram and Hindu Kush mountain ranges and has experienced continuous contact with external influences while at the same time retaining its archaic linguistic characteristics (Bailey, 1924; Bashir, 2003; Jettmar, 1980). According to contemporary estimates, there are about 1.25 lakhs of speakers of Shina nowadays, as compared to the relatively small numbers of speakers recorded from India by Grierson (1919) in the Linguistic Survey of India. This expansion has been achieved as a result of growing boundaries and population change, but the process of urbanisation and the socio-economic based shift towards Urdu and English is

constraining inter-generational transmission, especially in the urban context (Attahir Hussain & Zia, 2019). Shina has therefore been placed on UNESCO's list of endangered languages (2010) and documentation and revitalization efforts are therefore needed urgently.

Shina speakers see their native language, not as a linguistic device, but rather as a treasury where cultural identity can be found. Oral traditions put Shina into the area before the diffusion of Pashto and Persian has taken place (Leitner 1893). The deep-rootedness of Shina is confirmed by the linguists who identify it as one of the most conservative Dardic languages, with having retained such archaic features of Indo-Aryan as retroflex consonants, complex verbal system etc. which has been eroded in other Dardic languages (Bailey 1924) and Bashir (2003)). The language has a layered history as can be heard in terms of dialectal variation. As the administrative and cultural hub, and the language spoken there, it is a kind of regional standard of language in Gilgit District. The Astore Valley language 'Astori Shina' has some different phonological and lexical characteristics which are due to its greater geographic isolation (Radloff&Backstrom, 1992). The phonetic and lexical similarity with Kohistani and the Pashto language shows in Kohistani Shina; and there is the Tibetic influence on Balti in Baltistani Shina which is visible in the cultural contact that occurred over many centuries. The dialect continuum is further complicated by less-documented varieties spoken in Ladakh and in the north-eastern part of Afghanistan. The historical evolution and genesis of Shina is important for two related reasons, viz., (a) to understand the historical prehistory and basis of the historical development of Shina, and (b) to inform its conservation planning. This paper reviews the current scholarly literature to outline the nature and the elements used to define Shina, as well as trace the course of the forces that have helped to shape its evolution and evaluation the state of its conservation.

Objectives

- 1) To locate the historical origin/ancestry and development of the Shina language in the context of its family (Indo-Aryan) and with respect to its subgroup (Dardic).
- 2) To study the effect of contact languages, such as Persian, Kashmiri, Pashto, Burushaski, Urdu, and Balti on Shina's vocabulary, grammar and syntax over time.
- 3) To identify how geographically isolated status has helped maintain archaic features of the Shina phonology and morph-syntax not found in related languages.
- 4) To examine the current crisis faced by Shina, or threats of change that concern it, such as language shift, low literacy, absence of a standardized orthography and educational marginalization, and to evaluate the active documentation and revitalization programmes in progress.

Methodology

The researcher uses a desk based research and qualitative study related to the evolution and origin of the Shina language. This can be done because the research questions focus on historical, cultural and structural language development and therefore are not on primary work collected data. The methodology used is systematic literature review, thematic analysis and purposive selection of sources.

Systematic Literature Review

The major data collection tool is a systematic desk based review that includes institutional reports, regional language surveys, peer-reviewed journal articles, and monographs, all within the scholarly literature. Leitner's Dardistan (1893), Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India (Volume VIII) (1919), and a Grammar of the Shina Language by Bailey (1924), are some basic texts. They are supplemented by newer scholarship, such as that of Radloff and Backstrom (1992), Bashir

(2003), Zoller (2005), and Schmidt (2008) which offers the linguistic and sociolinguistic analysis more recently.

Thematic Analysis

The collected literature was used and analyzed for common and specific themes through a qualitative thematic analysis. The following themes are apparent: (i) Shina's Indo-Aryan origins and the genetic placement in the Dardic subgroup; (ii) the importance of geographic isolation for the maintenance of older features of the language; (iii) the interaction between languages, contact and contact-induced change; and (iv) recent contact endangerment and revival. Building on the work by Fischer (1996), Bashir (2003) and Schmidt (2008), Shina is designated as a contemporary form of Dardic. Despite the obvious difference with the traditionally quantitative method, this approach is interpretive and emphasizes depth of analysis in what is essentially a form of historical linguistics and language documentation.

Purposive Source Selection

The sources were purposively selected to represent the periods, methods and locations. Pioneering work of Leitner, Grierson and Bailey gives historical context and mid-twentieth-century scholarship work of Jettmar (1980), Dani (1989) and Biddulph (1980) extends the sociohistorical record. The two presented in the present time signal include more sociolinguistic and endangerment perspectives such as the ones offered by Ahmed and Akhtar (2021), Hussain and Zia (2019) and Shah and Ali (2022). The layered selection makes for a methodologically coherent study and conclusions that cover the entire history of the Shina language and the present situation of the language.

Literature Review

Ours is a relatively long tradition of scholarly research on Shina, ranging from colonial times to present day, from documentation to sociolinguistic study. This review is organized around the theme into 4 categories: Basic and historical research on the sociolinguistic status of languages and language contact, Geographical, anthropological, and historical analysis of language contacts, Language structures and contact, and Sociolinguistic issues in contact языке in the present.

Foundational and Historical Scholarship

The beginning of systematic study of Shina is in the work of Leitner (1893), his *Dardistan: The Land of the Dard Tribe*, which deals in a comprehensive manner with the ethnological and ethno-linguistic aspects of the language and customs of the Dard peoples of the northern part of British India, as well as their sociopolitical organizations. Geographical and cultural isolation had helped maintain in Shina its primitive qualities, such as its archaic phonology and grammar, which were able to distinguish it clearly from other Indo-Aryan languages of the subcontinent, said Leitner. Some future sociolinguistic notions of language and group identity are anticipated by his characterization of Shina as a cultural identity marker/touch point, besides being a communicative medium. Grierson (1919) working by way of elaboration upon Leitner's work, presented the first comprehensive typological classification of Shina in the Dardic subgroup, the 'Linguistic Survey of India (Volume VIII)'. Despite centuries of outside influences, Grierson was able to carefully record the phonology, grammar and lexicon of the language, including the preservation of ancient Indo-Aryan features (IAE). The way in which he used comparison – integrating and contrasting common and divergent features between Dardic languages – paved the way for subsequent scholars to develop and refine their analytical approach. Significantly, Grierson detected the factor of geographic remoteness as the main factor which keeps Shina's distinctiveness.

The *Grammar of the Shina Language* by Bailey (1924), is an essential reference work. Its systematic description of Shina morphology and syntax laid the bases for the description in

comparative and historical studies. His work stands as the foundation rock of the academic structure of the Shina language, with the assistance of his peers, Leitner, Grierson and Bailey. The context of a text can be either geographical (place) or anthropological (cultural) and historical. Geographic; Anthropological and Historical contexts of a text. In Jettmar's (1980) *Bolor and Dardistan*, Shina's history is located within the historical geography of the Bolor region, and different migration movements, trade contacts and interactions between the different ethnic communities influenced the vocabulary as well as the syntax of Shina. What is noteworthy about Jettmar's research is that he showed "not only was the Karakoram and Hindu Kush scenery a 'spectator', but it was an active participant in the linguistic history of Shina creating ambience for innovation and conservatism." Jettmar is supplemented by Biddulph's (1980) *Tribes of the HindooKoosh*, which has ethnographic information on the cultures of the Shina speaking peoples. Biddulph reported lexical borrowing from Persian and Kashmiri, and attributed these borrowings to the commerce and administrative contact with them; he placed the borrowing in the context of more general linguistic flexibility and conservatism. However, a most extensive historical record of Socio-political power forces which have influenced Shina's development has been provided by Dani (1989) in *History of Northern Areas of Pakistan*. Dani shares what he considers to be Shina's genetic connections with the Dardic branch of Indo-Aryan heritage, and chronicles how the language has maintained contact with Persian in times of Persian use as the language of administration of the region. He highlights the effects of administrative contact, which yielded a fairly large amount of Persianisms in areas of administration, commerce and communication between people, and states that the main grammatical structure of Shina service remained almost unchanged — pointing to the structural continuity of the language.

1. Provide information describing language structure (including phonology, morphology, and syntax).
2. Give information about language structure, such as phonology, morphology and syntax.

The most systematic, comparative study of Shina's genetic relations to the Dardic group is the one by Fischer (1996) *Languages of the Dardic Group: A Historical Perspective*. Using this method, Fischer has shown that "Cultivated Dardic" languages, such as Shina, Khowar and Kashmiri, are all of Indo-Aryan affiliation, despite the great linguistic differences observed between them, which seem to have arisen due to geographic isolation, political division, and different contact histories. His analysis of the decomposition of phonological and morphological systems over periods of time led to a historically oriented phonology for the Dardic group of language that rooted Shina's conservative traits and innovative borrowings in an intelligently researched framework.

The *Languages of the Northern Areas* (Radloff and Backstrom 1992) is the most thorough overview of the diversity of Shina dialects. Through their documentation of the Gilgiti, Astori and Kohistani Shina they made it clear that these languages differed in significant ways throughout the variation continuum and that these differences reflect the fact that they are geographically isolated, have varying histories of contact, and differ in the multi-language experience of their speakers. However, Radloff and Backstrom highlighted another danger to Urdu – its continued dominance in an increasingly range of educational and administrative fields – and the accompanying resultant of declining intergenerational transmission of Urdu.

This was extended by Radloff's (1999) follow-up sociolinguistic survey which recorded the effects of multilingualism on Shina-speaking communities and the special vulnerability of the language in situations where it faces competition from Burushaski (and Wakhi), Urdu and English. Strand (2001) places Shina in the regional context of linguists and changes that saw a variety of languages come into contact with one another, resulting in the borrowing of lexical items from Persian, Kashmiri and Urdu. Importantly for the understanding of dynamics of contact-induced change in

the presence, but absence, of structural convergence, Strand's study on Shina and its appropriation of borrowed elements will be of great general utility. Bashir's (2003) article on The Indo-Aryan Languages in the volume puts together Shina's historical, structural and sociolinguistic perspectives. The presence of Persian/Kashmiri borrowings in the daily, agricultural and administrative speech, as well as her use of the grammatical integrity of the Shina language, which she has managed to preserve, to balance the story of language dilution has brought fresh insights to the study of the Indo-Persian language. Language changes are also discussed in terms of the role political changes, migration and trade play in the development of a language in Bashir.

Zoller (2005) does a detailed comparison of the phonetics and grammar of Shina and other languages spoken throughout the Hindu Kush region, and includes a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the Hindu Kush languages. In his analysis of the vowel harmony, consonantal inventories and the verbal and nominal morphology of Shina, which is a very useful and regionally responsive typological basis for the study of this language, brings into context its unique features. Zoller's discovery of linguistic relics in Shina that differentiate it from both its closest neighbours, the Dardic languages, and the other languages with which it has been in direct contact, the very important descriptive work that has been one of the most important contributions to date.

The present book focuses on community level processes of borrowing, code switching and language shift of the Shina language of the Northern Pakistan (Zebb 2006 Language Contact and Change in the Shina Language of Northern Pakistan). Zebb's documentation of particular instances of phonological, lexical, and syntactic change as the result of Kashmiri, Persian, and Pashto contact resulted in the most finely-drawn picture of contact-induced change to Shina available; in his analysis, loanword incorporation was constrained by structure, not arbitrary importation.

Schmidt's (2008) Languages of the Hindukush defines and classifies Shina as one of the most commonly used languages of the area — and compares it with other data to fit within a regionally-based typological overview. By focusing on structural integrity despite contact, Schmidt's observations are in line with those of Fischer (1996) and Bashir (2003), and it highlights the significance of structural properties in Shina's resilience. This unit covers the contemporary sociolinguistic problems and revivals. In this unit students will learn about the contemporary sociolinguistic problems and revivals. Recent scholarship has been more focused on the sociolinguistic pressures of possible endangerment of Shina and the institutional responses that are needed to deal with these pressures. Namoos's (2015) book, Gilgit and the Shina Language, provides a historical and a social analysis; it also makes note of the fact that there is no standardized orthography for the language which is a structural impediment to the language's formalization in the educational sphere, as well as for literature. Namoos draws special focus on the intergenerational shift towards Urdu and English amongst the younger speakers and sees this shift as a direct threat to the very survival of Urdu. The sociolinguistic critique by Khan and Jan (2020) further picks up the Namoos discourse to suggest how Urdu and English have effectively marginalized Shina, and how political will at institutional level is needed to change the situation. They demand that Shina is regulated and included in the formal education system as prerequisites for meaningful revitalization.

In her Dardic perspective-analysis of grammatical change in Shina: A case of morphosyntactic convergence with dominating languages (2018), Zaman has recorded a sustained multilingualism yielding to the morpho-syntactic convergence of Shina with the dominating languages, which if left unbridled undermines Shina's structural distinctiveness. Both his macro and micro perspectives of the analysis of grammaticisation make it a valuable contribution to the relevant research. Zia and Hussain (2019) offer the most up-to-date and thorough modern sociolinguistic discussion, which looks at the risks of multilingualism and the facilitative side of multilingualism. They claim that declining of Shina in institutional world by Urdu and English language contact has also

enriched the lexical richness of the Shina language. Their work on 'agency' by native speakers and governmental support for community-based preservation is reflective of the current state of the literature on endangered language revitalization. Instead Ali and Baig (2020) pay attention to the methodology of documentation, claiming that for good oral tradition preservation in Shina it is not enough to merely record the language, mediation by the use of tools such as music, traditional martial, literary, or religious texts (as might be used in documentation of oral traditions in other cultures) is essential. They are demanding a standardized writing system, audio-visual archives and active participation in process of documentation by native speakers, which is indicative of international best practices in documentation of endangered languages (cf. UNESCO, 2010). The latest synthesis is by Ahmed and Akhtar (2021), which took a broad look at the issues of the inaction of language policy in Pakistan in general and Shina in particular. They believe that the sociolinguistic challenges for Shina are structural and not incidental, and understanding and solving this will take coordinated actions in the educational, legislative and the community sectors. Applying Strand's (2001) theory to lexical borrowing, Shah & Ali (2022) go a step further and bring up more contemporary data regarding current contact with regional/ national languages and discuss the implications for Shina's future lexical growth.

Discussion

All the literature mentioned above brings together on four main points that can be discussed synthetically.

The ancient Indo-Aryan origins and Dardic affiliation.

The genetic relationships of Shina to the Dardic subgroup of Indo-Aryan are unmistakable, and have been firmly established throughout the literature. Even in Grierson's work from 1919, which established the foundations for the classification of Shina, through to Fischer's comparative historical work (1996), scholars have agreed that it has its origin in ancient Indo-Aryan branch traits that arrived in the northwest of the subcontinent during early ethno-genesis of Indo-Iranian populations. What makes Shina different from all Indo-Aryan languages of the plains is its retention of old Indo-Aryan phonological and morphosyntactic phenomena that have vanished, or been greatly lost, from the other Indo-Aryan languages of the plains, such as retroflex consonants, complex verbal agreement morphology, and nominal case distinctions (Bailey, 1924; Zoller, 2005).

Geographic isolation as a Conserving Force

One topic that constantly comes up in the older colonial scholarship, as well as in modern theories on linguistics is the part the Karakoram-Hindu Kush terrain plays in the conservation of language. The absence of access to the linguistically dominant languages (usually Chinese, Kirpan and Panchen) by many valleys where the Shina language is spoken ensured that archaic structures have been preserved (Jettmar, 1980; Dani, 1989). This isolation was not inextricable as trade connections with Central Asia, Kashmir and Persia linked the area together regularly, though forays were rare. This linguistic profile (archaic core grammar with a significant amount of borrowing from other languages) is similar to what has been encountered in other geographically peripheral language communities around the world.

Language contact and structural resilience

A large amount of lexical borrowing exists in the lexicon of Shina from Persian, Kashmiri, Pashto, Urdu, Burushaski and Balti from various periods throughout the history of Shina. It is the language's structural robustness, however, that is especially remarkable: although this is a highly acculturated language, the overall morpho-syntactic structure of Shina has remained largely intact (Bashir, 2003; Schmidt, 2008; Zebb, 2006). This trend is indicative of the fact that historically

Shina speakers have proven good agents of language contact and have been good at adopting foreign vocabulary in their indigenous pragmatics and structural frames instead of complete structural convergence. A more contemporary form of pressure, however, can be said to exist due to the dominance of Urdu and English as paper languages, and this long-term resulting impact of the shift in language of paper needs a deeper study, which is not being conducted on it at present.

The Endangerment of Shina Language and the need for revitalization

There is Scholarly consensus; and it is endorsed by the classification of Shina's status as an 'endangered language' in UNESCO's 2010 classification. The most fundamental reasons behind Urdu's dominance in formal domains, its lack of a standardized orthography, the economic incentives that push the younger generation towards the use of Urdu and English and the institutional recognition of the Urdu language are well-documented (Hussain & Zia, 2019; Khan & Jan, 2020; Namooos, 2015). The literature further aligns on the core pillars of an effective action namely: Normalization of orthographic rules and the written literature, formalization of the Shina language in the education system, community based production of multimedia documents of oral literature and legal recognition (Ahmed & Akhtar, 2021; Ali & Baig, 2020). What is lacking in the current scholarship is a proper measurement of relative effectiveness of these strategies in particular socio-political environment of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Conclusion

Shina is an important historical and a complex language belonging to the Dardic branch of the Indo-Aryan family of languages. Over the centuries, it has developed unique characteristics as a result of geographic isolation, cultural exchange and the influence of different political powers, becoming both Old Indo-Aryan and Modern in its usage, with a vast Persian vocabulary and a vast amount of lexical material from Kashmiri, Pashto, Urdu and other contact languages. Prior to this lies the basic documentation by Leitner (1893), Grierson (1919) and Bailey (1924), documenting a descriptive and comparative framework for future scholarship to occur. This linguistic in the light of broader socio-political history of the Karakoram and Hindu Kush region is provided by the historical and anthropological evidence enunciated by Jettmar (1980), Biddulph (1980) and Dani (1989). Schmidt (2008), Zoller (2005), Bashir (2003), Radloff and Backstrom (1992) and Fischer (1996) have had differing approaches to discussing Shina's internal architecture and the dynamics of contact-induced change and progressively narrowed conceptions of contact-induced change for Shina. Each of these is trying to narrow the conception of contact-induced change for Shina, in structural linguistic analyses that are variously formulated, of Fisher (1996) and Radloff and Backstrom (1992) to Bashir (2003), Zoller (2005) and Schmidt (2008). In this rich history, the abounding threat to Shina is not a 'disaster' but rather the symptom of infrastructural socio-political dynamics which have escalated over time in the midst of a growing urban population and expanding state education and media. The findings of Hussain and Zia (2019), Ahmed and Akhtar (2021) and others have made it abundantly clear that the fight for this language's salvation must be both documented and coordinated, in terms of individual, institutional and legislative efforts, among the communities and the relevant political and educational authorities.

There are several areas for future studies. The first is that a comprehensive comparative study of Shina dialects would lend a complete picture to the internal variability and contact history of this language, of which the less studied Ladakhi and Afghan varieties will certainly be a part. Secondly, comprehensive sociolinguistic studies that investigated actual domain of language use, attitudes of language users and potential intergenerational transmission in various communities would form the basis of the science behind language revitalization planning. Thirdly, applied research on the development and use of a standardized orthography is needed, since lack of an orthographic system is always mentioned as some structural barrier to formalization. Overall, the narrative of Shina is

that of South Asia's highlands, which demonstrates exceptional resilience under the combined pressure of geography, politics and socio-economic pressures, and should not go ignored when it comes to academic and institutional interest.

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