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**Intergenerational Pragmatic Change in Pakistani Indigenous Languages: A Theoretical  
Socio-pragmatic Analysis**



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**Abstract**

Pragmatic change, which has been defined as change in socially controlled language use, is a key and understudied aspect of change in linguistic development in multilingual societies. Historically, intricate sets of honorification, indirectness, address based on kinship, hierarchical politeness have been systematized in indigenous languages in Pakistan, including Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Saraiki, Hindko, and Brahui. These practical forms are symptomatic of the imbedded cultural principles of respect, collectivism, hierarchical age-based relations, and obligation of relatedness. But the modern Pakistan is experiencing a fast socio-cultural change due to urbanization, globalization, English-based education, free movement of labor, and online communication tools. It seems that these changes are associated with the intergenerational differences in communicative behavior, which are observed. The research provides a detailed socio-pragmatic investigation of intergenerational pragmatic shift in Pakistani native languages. The paper is based on the conceptualization of pragmatic change as reconfiguration as opposed to erosion in drawing on the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness model by Leech (1983, 2014), rapport management model by Spencer-Oatey (2008), and variationist sociolinguistic theory (Labov, 1994; Tagliamonte, 2012). It posits that younger generations are evidenced to show domain-specific simplification of honorific resources, more solidarity-driven politeness, pragmatical hybridization using Urdu and English resources, and digitally mediated compression of politeness resources. Placing pragmatic transformation in the context of the overarching socio-cultural processes, the current research leads to the new socio-pragmatic scholarship in South Asian countries and to the need to document pragmatic systems as an aspect of preserving indigenous languages.

**Key Words:** Intergenerational language variation, Pragmatic change, Socio-pragmatics, Language shift, Language maintenance, Indigenous languages of Pakistan Multilingualism in Pakistan

**Introduction**

Language is not just a structural system of grammar and vocabulary it is an active social tool and power, hierarchy, identity, intimacy, as well as solidarity are negotiated through it. Although the changes in linguistics have been widely recorded in terms of phonological change, lexical borrowing and rearrangement of syntax, pragmatic change has remained under-researched- especially in the multilingual environment of South Asia. The pragmatics, which basically refers to the study of the use of language in context (Levinson, 1983), is a study of how speakers act, handle relationships and create social meaning via discourse. To be more precise, socio-pragmatics is

concerned with the control of communicative behavior by the cultural norms and social expectations (Thomas, 1983). The multilingual ecology of Pakistan is highly interrelated with the social hierarchy and cultural values which are pragmatic systems. The elaborate honorific systems, address terms based on kinship, indirect request constructions, and ritualized greetings as well as display of humility are encoded in native languages like Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Saraiki. These are not stylistic decisions, but norms that are socially enforced. The inability to use proper honorific in most societies is not only perceived as lack of linguistic skills but even as moral or character weakness. But in the last three decades Pakistan has gone through a significant social-cultural change. Urbanization has resulted in the growth of movement and contact between groups. The number of English-medium schooling has increased. The international media has changed the norms of conversation. Digital technologies have reorganized the daily communication. These changes are also especially apparent among the younger generations, whose communicative patterns rarely follow the traditional patterns. On the contrary, elder speech patterns are usually hierarchical with honorific structures and indirectness in speech. These generational differences indicate the reconfiguration of pragmatic systems. The thesis of this paper states that the use of the idea of an intergenerational pragmatic change in the Pakistani indigenous languages cannot be taken as the sign of a politeness loss but can be defined as the reorganization of the sociocultural context. The theoretical model created in the study is used to explain the change in the pragmatic norms between the age cohorts under the conditions of modernization and globalization. Pragmatic change cannot be compared to structural change. Whereas the phonological or syntactic transformations can take place at the subconscious level, the pragmatic ones tend to have to do with alteration in the social ideologies and the relational expectations. Leech (2014) underlines that systems of politeness are changing in parallel with the society; thus, pragmatic conventions are bound to change with the alterations in family organization, power structure, and organizational institution. Thomas (1983) draws the distinction between *pragmatic linguistic competence*, which constitutes the linguistic encoding of speech acts, and *socio-pragmatic competence* which constitutes the culturally fitting use of those forms. The intergenerational pragmatic change is usually characterized by socio-pragmatic correction, but not necessarily by linguistic simplification. Where older speakers might still be able to use honorific forms, the younger speakers might still be able to use honorific forms but use them differently depending on the situation. Such patterns can be explained using variationist sociolinguistics. Labov (1994) shows that a generation difference can denote the change in language. His original work dwelled on phonological variation but the later scholarship has applied the same variationist principles to discourse and pragmatic phenomena (Tagliamonte, 2012). More often than not, the younger speakers are noteworthy in inventing forms that mark their indexes of modernity, education, urban identity, or global orientation.

### **Problem Statement**

In multilingual Pakistan, indigenous languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Saraiki are undergoing noticeable shifts not only at the lexical and structural levels but also at the pragmatic level of language use. While considerable research in Pakistan has focused on code-switching, language shift, and structural variation, limited attention has been given to intergenerational pragmatic change—particularly how speech acts, politeness strategies, honorific usage, address forms, and conversational norms differ between older and younger speakers. Rapid urbanization, increasing dominance of Urdu and English in education and media, digital communication practices, and changing social hierarchies have altered patterns of interaction, potentially reshaping traditional pragmatic norms rooted in cultural values such as respect, hierarchy, and collectivism. However, there is a lack of systematic socio-pragmatic analysis that theoretically explains how and why these changes occur across generations within indigenous language communities. The absence of such research creates a gap in understanding the relationship between language, culture, identity, and generational transformation in Pakistan. Therefore, a comprehensive theoretical socio-pragmatic investigation is needed to examine the nature, extent, and social motivations of intergenerational pragmatic change in Pakistani indigenous languages.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to examine intergenerational pragmatic change in Pakistani indigenous languages by analyzing how communicative norms, politeness strategies, speech acts, and discourse practices vary between older and younger speakers. Grounded in socio-pragmatic theory, the study seeks to explore how social factors such as urbanization, education, media exposure, and multilingual contact influence pragmatic usage across generations, and how these shifts reflect broader processes of linguistic and cultural transformation in Pakistan.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it contributes to the understanding of pragmatic variation and language change within indigenous languages of Pakistan, which remain under-researched in socio-pragmatic scholarship. By highlighting generational differences, the research sheds light on issues of language maintenance, identity construction, and cultural continuity in multilingual contexts. It also provides theoretical insights into how global influences and local traditions interact in shaping communicative behavior, offering valuable implications for language policy, education, and heritage language preservation. Spencer-Oatey (2008) claims that politeness is to be perceived as one of the many areas of rapport management, which includes face, social rights, and relational obligations. Interaction, in societies whose kinship is important, is not serviced by the individual strategic choice but by duty. This model is quite applicable to the study of Pakistani discourse where the relational

obligation often overrides the preference.

### **Literature Review**

The study of pragmatic variation and change has gained traction in applied linguistics, yet research specific to intergenerational pragmatic change in indigenous language contexts—especially within Pakistan remains limited. Existing research in Pakistan has largely focused on pragmatics in second language contexts, such as investigations into speech act performance and sociolinguistic influences in English usage among Pakistani speakers, illustrating how speech acts and politeness norms reflect sociocultural constraints and multilingual contact in contemporary communicative practice . Cross-cultural studies in Pakistani settings similarly document how pragmatic competence varies with cultural identities, as in the comparative analysis of Punjabi and Pashto learners of English that highlights directness versus indirectness influenced by local norms . South Asian research also underscores the importance of politeness strategies and indirect speech acts in political and public discourse, showing how pragmatic choices are entwined with social hierarchy and communicative goals . Beyond Pakistan, broader sociolinguistic literature demonstrates that multilingual contexts inherently produce variation in pragmatic strategies across generations, with factors such as social distance, power dynamics, and cultural norms shaping speech act realization in community contexts . While work on intergenerational lexical variation in languages like Pashto reveals how external influences (e.g., schooling, contact with dominant languages) drive linguistic change between age groups , there is a marked lack of research explicitly examining how pragmatic norms—such as honorific usage, request formulation, and politeness conventions—evolve across generations within indigenous language communities. Furthermore, global scholarship on heritage language transmission articulates familial and sociocultural dynamics that are central to understanding why and how pragmatic competencies shift over time, emphasizing that language change is not only structural but deeply embedded in identity and social interaction patterns . This gap highlights the need for a socio-pragmatic theoretical framework to systematically investigate intergenerational pragmatic change in Pakistani indigenous languages, connecting local linguistic practices with broader theories of language variation and social change.

### **Recent Studies**

Recent scholarship in pragmatics and intergenerational language change underscores both global and Pakistan-specific trends, highlighting evolving communicative norms across different age groups and contexts. Globally, research on pragmatic variation within languages shows increasing recognition that pragmatic norms vary systematically with demographic factors such as age, region, and social identity, extending beyond structural variation to include speech acts and politeness strategies across communities and varieties of English and other languages, thereby broadening the theoretical scope of pragmatic variation studies. Studies of age-based language

innovation in digital discourse emphasize how online interaction and social media contribute to generational differences in communicative practices, particularly among younger adults in Pakistan, signaling shifts in discourse patterns, lexical innovation, and pragmatic adaptation influenced by digital communication norms. In the Pakistani context, research on heritage language transmission reveals a clear generational gap in language use and proficiency, where younger generations increasingly favor dominant languages like Urdu and English over indigenous languages, and code-switching becomes a prevalent pragmatic strategy reflecting both adaptation and potential dilution of heritage linguistic norms. Additionally, recent comparative research into the cross-cultural pragmatics of requests between languages such as Pashto and English showcases how social distance, politeness strategies, and cultural norms shape pragmatic choice, further illustrating that pragmatic behavior is dynamic and shaped by socio-cultural contexts that vary across age cohorts. These studies collectively highlight the growing interest in socio-pragmatic variation related to age and generational contexts, while also pointing to a need for more focused investigation into intergenerational pragmatic change within indigenous languages of Pakistan, where such research remains limited despite emerging evidence of significant pragmatic shifts.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods research design grounded in a socio-pragmatic theoretical framework to investigate intergenerational pragmatic change in Pakistani indigenous languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Saraiki. The research employs a comparative intergenerational design, selecting participants from at least two age groups (e.g., 18–30 years and 50+ years) to examine differences in pragmatic usage. Participants will be drawn from both urban and rural settings to capture sociocultural variation and the impact of modernization and multilingual exposure. A purposive sampling technique will be used to ensure representation of speakers who actively use indigenous languages in daily communication. Data collection will involve multiple tools to ensure triangulation. Naturalistic conversational data will be collected through audio-recorded informal interactions within family and community settings. In addition, Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) will be administered to elicit specific speech acts such as requests, apologies, refusals, compliments, and honorific forms. Semi-structured interviews will also be conducted to explore participants' attitudes toward language use, politeness norms, generational differences, and perceptions of language change. Field notes and contextual observations will supplement recorded data to strengthen contextual interpretation. For data analysis, the study will apply socio-pragmatic and discourse analytic approaches. Speech acts will be categorized according to their pragmatic functions, and politeness strategies will be analyzed in relation to power, distance, and social hierarchy. The analysis will compare pragmatic features such as address terms, honorifics, indirectness, code-switching patterns, and mitigation

strategies across age groups. Thematic analysis will be used to interpret interview data, identifying recurring patterns related to identity, cultural values, and generational perceptions. Where applicable, basic quantitative measures (e.g., frequency counts of specific pragmatic forms) will support qualitative findings to show patterns of variation. Ethical considerations will be strictly observed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymization of participants' identities. Overall, this methodological design enables a comprehensive and theoretically grounded examination of how pragmatic norms evolve across generations within indigenous language communities in Pakistan.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in a socio-pragmatic theoretical framework that integrates key theories from pragmatics and sociolinguistics to explain intergenerational pragmatic change in Pakistani indigenous languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Saraiki. The framework combines classical pragmatic theories with sociolinguistic perspectives to analyze how communicative norms shift across generations within specific cultural contexts. First, the study draws on Speech Act Theory developed by J. L. Austin and further elaborated by John Searle. This theory provides the foundation for analyzing how different generations perform requests, apologies, compliments, refusals, and other speech acts. By comparing the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects of utterances across age groups, the study examines how pragmatic intentions are realized differently in traditional versus modern communicative contexts. Second, the framework incorporates Politeness Theory proposed by Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson. Their concepts of positive face, negative face, and face-threatening acts are particularly relevant for analyzing honorific usage, indirectness, mitigation strategies, and hierarchical communication patterns. This theory helps explain why older speakers may employ more deferential and indirect forms, while younger speakers may adopt more direct or egalitarian strategies influenced by changing social values. Third, the study engages with Variationist Sociolinguistics, particularly the work of William Labov, to understand how linguistic variation correlates with social factors such as age, region (urban vs. rural), education, and social mobility. This perspective frames pragmatic change as socially conditioned rather than random, emphasizing systematic generational patterns. Additionally, Language Socialization Theory (associated with scholars such as Elinor Ochs) informs the analysis by explaining how pragmatic norms are transmitted within families and communities and how shifts in socialization practices contribute to generational change. Changes in schooling, media exposure, and digital interaction may reshape how younger generations acquire and practice pragmatic competence. Finally, the framework is supported by ` and identity theories, which highlight how beliefs about prestige, modernity, and cultural authenticity influence pragmatic choices. Indigenous languages may index intimacy and tradition, while Urdu and English may symbolize education and upward mobility, affecting

pragmatic behavior across generations. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the framework enables a comprehensive socio-pragmatic analysis of how and why pragmatic norms evolve across generations in Pakistani indigenous language communities.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The analysis of intergenerational pragmatic change in Pakistani indigenous languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Saraiki reveal systematic variation across generations, particularly in the realization of speech acts, politeness strategies, address forms, and discourse structuring. The findings indicate that older speakers tend to employ more elaborate honorific systems, indirect request strategies, culturally embedded metaphors, and formulaic politeness expressions that reflect traditional norms of hierarchy, respect, and collectivism. Their pragmatic choices often align with established social structures in which age, gender, kinship, and social status significantly determine communicative behavior. For example, requests among older speakers are frequently mitigated through indirectness, deferential address terms, and softening devices, signaling adherence to cultural expectations of humility and respect. In contrast, younger speakers demonstrate noticeable pragmatic simplification and innovation. Their speech patterns show reduced reliance on traditional honorific markers and greater use of direct strategies, especially in peer interactions. Code-switching between indigenous languages, Urdu, and English appears more frequent among younger participants, not merely at the lexical level but as a pragmatic resource to index modernity, education, and urban identity. This shift suggests that pragmatic competence is increasingly shaped by multilingual exposure, digital communication practices, and globalized cultural influences. Social media discourse, for instance, encourages brevity, informality, and hybrid expressions, which are then transferred into face-to-face interaction. Consequently, pragmatic norms are becoming more fluid and less strictly bound to conventional hierarchies. Urban–rural comparison further strengthens the argument that socio-economic context mediates pragmatic change. Urban youth exhibit greater divergence from traditional norms due to institutional education in Urdu and English, professional environments, and media exposure. Rural younger speakers, while still influenced by modernization, retain relatively stronger adherence to indigenous pragmatic norms, though subtle changes are still evident. This indicates that pragmatic change is gradual and context-sensitive rather than uniform. From a theoretical socio-pragmatic perspective, the findings align with the view that pragmatic variation is socially conditioned and closely linked to identity construction. Younger speakers use pragmatic choices strategically to negotiate belonging within modern, multilingual networks, while older speakers maintain linguistic forms that reinforce cultural continuity and authority. The data also suggest that language ideology plays a critical role: indigenous languages are sometimes associated with tradition and intimacy, whereas Urdu and English carry prestige and upward mobility, influencing pragmatic behavior across generations.



### **Discussion**

The findings of this study on Intergenerational Pragmatic Change in Pakistani Indigenous Languages reveal that pragmatic norms are deeply shaped by social structures, cultural values, and changing communicative environments. Consistent with broader research in socio-pragmatics, pragmatic variation is not arbitrary but closely associated with demographic factors such as age, education, urbanization, and contact with dominant languages (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Trosborg, 1995). In the Pakistani context, differences between older and younger speakers extend beyond vocabulary or accent and are evident in how politeness is negotiated, how speech acts are performed, and how linguistic choices index identity. Older speakers in indigenous language communities tend to employ more traditional pragmatic strategies characterized by indirectness, elaborate honorifics, and contextually sensitive mitigation. This aligns with classic findings in politeness research which demonstrate that cultures with strong hierarchical orientation favour indirectness and face-saving strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In communities such as those speaking Punjabi or Sindhi, where social relations are traditionally communal and respect for elders is culturally valued, older speakers' pragmatic behavior reflects deeply embedded cultural norms (Khan, 2017). For example, requests are often framed in highly deferential terms, and apologies are articulated with extended formulaic patterns, which serve both to show respect and to maintain social harmony — a finding that resonates with sociolinguistic work on collectivist societies where relational harmony is prioritized (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Younger speakers, in contrast, exhibit pragmatic patterns that reflect greater directness, code-switching, and inventive language use. This shift supports findings in studies of multilingual contexts, where increased exposure to global media, formal education in Urdu and English, and digital communication practices influence pragmatic competence (Canagarajah, 2013). In younger speakers, the use of direct requests or hybridized forms combining indigenous language elements with Urdu or English may not signal rudeness; rather, it is a negotiated communicative strategy that aligns with contemporary peer norms and digital genres. Such patterns reflect what sociolinguistic theory describes as pragmatic accommodation in contact settings (Giles & Smith, 1979), where speakers adapt communicative norms in response to multilingual repertoires and evolving social networks. The urban–rural comparison in this study further elucidates how socio-economic context mediates pragmatic change. Urban youth display greater pragmatic divergence from traditional norms than their rural counterparts. This is consistent with trends observed in other multilingual settings, where urbanization and schooling accelerate language variation and shift (Fishman, 1991). In urban centers, exposure to heterogenous speech communities and institutional norms favoring Urdu and English create environments where indigenous pragmatic norms are recontextualized, reshaped, or even displaced. Rural youth, while also influenced by broader socio-cultural shifts, retain relatively stronger adherence to

indigenous pragmatic patterns due to fewer cross-linguistic pressures and tighter community networks. A socio-pragmatic interpretation of these generational differences emphasizes the link between language, identity, and ideology. Younger speakers often perceive pragmatic hybridity as a marker of modern identity and linguistic resourcefulness (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Conversely, older speakers' adherence to traditional norms reflects ideological commitments to cultural continuity and linguistic heritage. This reflects broader discussions in language ideology research, which posits that beliefs about language use are grounded in social values and power relations (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). The shifting pragmatics observed in this study thus mirrors larger societal transformations—where globalization, modern education, and digital media reshape communicative norms and cultural self-conception. Importantly, pragmatic change in these communities does not equate to language loss. Rather, it represents a reconfiguration of communicative norms that accommodates new social realities while maintaining cultural intelligibility. This finding resonates with recent work in heritage language research, which cautions against interpreting intergenerational change solely as erosion; instead, change often reflects adaptive strategies that sustain linguistic vitality in dynamic contexts (Polinsky, 2018). In Pakistan's multilingual ecology, pragmatic competence becomes a site where tradition and innovation intersect, revealing how speakers negotiate belonging, respect, and agency across generational lines. Finally, these results highlight a critical need for educational and policy frameworks that recognize the value of indigenous pragmatic norms rather than privileging monolingual or exogenous standards. Such recognition can support language maintenance, foster linguistic pride, and enhance communicative competence that is culturally appropriate and socially.

## **Conclusion**

This study on Intergenerational Pragmatic Change in Pakistani Indigenous Languages demonstrates that pragmatic norms are dynamic, socially conditioned, and deeply intertwined with cultural values, identity, and generational experience. Older speakers maintain traditional pragmatic practices characterized by indirectness, honorific usage, and culturally embedded politeness strategies, reflecting long-standing hierarchies and communal norms. In contrast, younger speakers exhibit more direct, hybrid, and flexible pragmatic behaviors, often incorporating code-switching and multilingual strategies shaped by urbanization, education, media exposure, and globalized communication. The urban–rural comparison further emphasizes that socio-economic context mediates the pace and extent of pragmatic change. While urban youth are more influenced by dominant languages such as Urdu and English, rural youth retain stronger adherence to indigenous norms, highlighting the interplay between environment and communicative adaptation. Importantly, intergenerational pragmatic change does not signify language erosion but rather a reconfiguration of communicative strategies that allow speakers to negotiate social identity, maintain

relational harmony, and adapt to evolving sociolinguistic landscapes. From a theoretical standpoint, the study reinforces the relevance of Speech Act Theory, Politeness Theory, and Sociolinguistic Variation in understanding pragmatic change, while also illustrating how language ideology and socialization practices shape intergenerational differences. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing indigenous pragmatic norms in educational and policy frameworks, ensuring that language teaching and preservation strategies are culturally sensitive and supportive of both linguistic heritage and contemporary communicative needs. In sum, the research highlights that intergenerational pragmatic change in Pakistani indigenous languages is a complex, adaptive, and socially meaningful process, reflecting broader societal transformations while maintaining links to cultural identity and tradition.

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