

**DETERMINANTS OF LANGUAGE PREFERENCES AND ATTITUDES  
AMONG SHEIKHA GAL SPEAKERS OF KASHMIR: A CASE OF  
LINGUISTIC SUICIDE****Dr. Rahila Safdar**

Department of Linguistics, University of Kashmir, J&amp;K



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**Abstract:**

In this paper the term “linguistic suicide” is used to describe a situation where parents who are speakers of a minority language deliberately choose not to teach this language to their children and instead adopt a majority language in their personal domains. The focus of this research are language preferences and attitudes among Sheikha gal speakers in Kashmir. Sheikha gal is a language spoken by a community called shupriwatal in Kashmir. This language has neither literature nor a writing system, and is only spoken by the community members in confined domains. A total number of 60 informants from different age groups participated in this study. As it was hypothesized that social class, age and gender would be related to attitudes towards Sheikha gal, they were considered as independent variables in the study. The results indicated that, younger generation is losing their language, as the people of this community do not prefer to talk to their children in Sheikha gal and its prevalence is fading, as we go from the older to the younger generation.

**Key Words:** Language Attitude, Language Identity, Language Loss & Language Preference

**Introduction:**

Language use is determined by a set of demographic, social and cultural factors [1]. While studying minority languages it is important to determine external pressures which result in a particular choice of language, to find out how well minority language is learned in the community and to define the influence of the majority language on the minority language. The language functions as identity marker in society and thus, the main reason for the cessation of language transmission to next generation is the low prestige attached to the minority languages. In case of Sheikha gal most of its speakers consider the language unimportant and tend to ignore it. They prefer Kashmiri over their mother tongue for daily communication. The use of their mother tongue makes them feel inferior to the members of other communities and consequently they avoid using it even within their own community in the presence of outsiders. This attitude contributes to the decision by speakers to kill off their language and steadily replace it with more socially- and economically-dominant language. In any given situation, language loss is the result of the complex interplay of many different factors, both external and internal to the speech community. “Theory of language death” proposed by Sasse, lists various external factors that lead to language loss. These factors include cultural, historical, economic and political forces that have a profound effect on how a speech community behaves, creating internal conditions which shift patterns of language use towards a majority language or foster negative attitudes towards their own language. Language loss occurs as a result of a situation where parents fail to transmit the language to their children or deliberately choose not to transmit the language to their children. In both ways the interruption of language transmission is the first phase of language loss. Interrupted transmission leads to a lack of proficiency on the part of the younger generation, who then adopt the majority language as their home language and the language of child-rearing, resulting in the ultimate demise of the minority language [2].

**Methodology:**

A detailed questionnaire was designed for eliciting the variables of the socio-psychological data. The informants were divided into 3 different age groups. The total number of informants was 60 where minimum age of the informants was 13 years and the maximum age was 62 years (Mean age 30.1). The sample was divided into 6 groups - Young Males (YM), Young Females (YF), Middle-aged Males (MM), Middle-aged Females (MF), Old Males (OM) and Old Females (OF). The data was then analysed in terms of two major aspects:

- ✓ Linguistic profile
- ✓ Attitudes and views

**Linguistic Profile:**

All the informants selected for the study are native speakers of Sheikha gal with knowledge of other languages like Kashmiri and Urdu. However, all of them have not acquired these languages in the same context. Urdu is taught in schools from nursery till 10th class and is largely acquired from educational institutions and environment. Kashmiri on the other hand is the language of the majority around them and is used everywhere for different purposes.

**Contexts of Acquisition:**

The acquisition contexts of Sheikha gal are represented in Fig. 1.1 where H stands for Home, E for Environment (other than Home and School) and S for School.

It is clear from figure 1.1 that most of the informants from all the age groups have acquired Sheikha gal at home with OM taking lead. This represents the informality of the use of this language and its acquisition as a mother tongue and the native language. All the females claim to have acquired Sheikha gal from home and environment with 41% of YF claiming to acquire it through environment, which is highest across all groups. In the case of the males, most of them across all age groups have acquired this language from home, some males do claim to have learnt Sheikha gal from environment. As mentioned earlier, this language has no script and is not taught in schools, so none of the informants claimed to have acquired this language at school (both formally and informally). It is interesting to see how the acquisition of Sheikha gal at home declines as we move from Old aged group to Young age group. This decline can be attributed to parent’s choice of not transmitting this language to their children which is a key factor and a starter towards language loss.

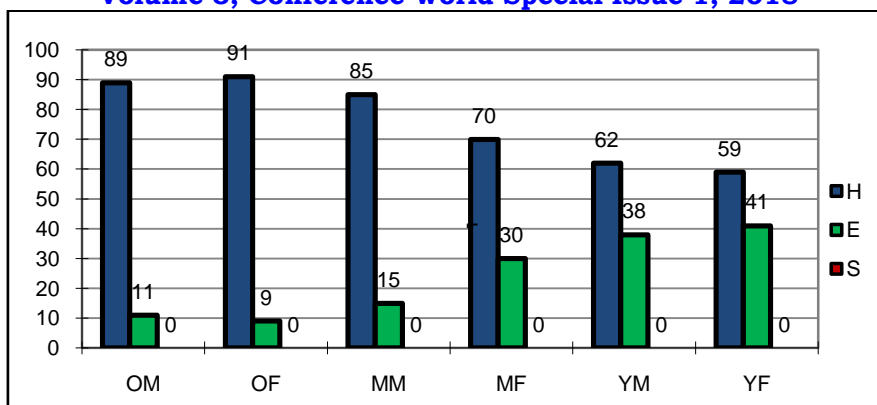


Figure 1.1: Acquisition Contexts of Sheikha gal

**Duration of Use:**

Another important domain of study is the duration for with the language is used. The span of time for which the informant used Kashmiri, Urdu and Sheikha gal was elicited.

All the day	5
More than half the day	4
Half the day	3
Less than half the day	2
A little	1

Table 1.1: Scale for duration of use of Sheikha gal, Kashmiri and Urdu

The duration of the use of Sheikha gal (S), Kashmiri (K) and Urdu (U) is depicted in the following graph:

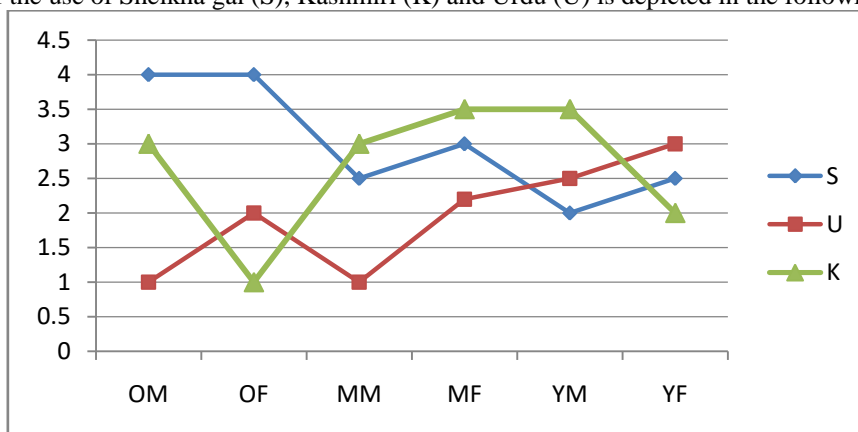


Figure 1.2: Duration of use for Sheikha gal, Kashmiri, Urdu

Figure 1.2 represents the duration of use of these languages. Old males (OM) and Old Females (OF) are observed to use Sheikha gal maximally, whereas Young Females (YF) use Sheikha gal minimally and claim to use Urdu more than Sheikha gal and Kashmiri. The Middle and Young age groups claim to use Kashmiri more than Sheikha gal which indicates a steady shift of language in Young generations. Urdu occupies the second position as a language mostly used by younger generation after Kashmiri with Young females (YF) making an exception with their claim of using Urdu maximally. Overall, it appears there is a clear divide between Old and Young generation over duration for which Sheikha gal is used. The young females probably seem to favour Urdu because of its comparatively higher social status and accessibility.

**Claimed Proficiency of Sheikha gal, Kashmiri and Urdu:**

The coding for these variables was done in the accordance with the following scale.

Very little	1
Moderate	2
Good	3
Very good	4

Table 1.2: Scale for levels of claimed proficiency in Sheikha gal, Kashmiri and Urdu

Figure 1.3 depicts the claimed proficiency of informants in Sheikha gal, Kashmiri and Urdu.

The Old aged group (OM, OF) claimed the maximum proficiency in Sheikha gal and minimum proficiency in Urdu with Kashmiri holding a strong position (even almost overlapping Sheikha gal at one point). It can be clearly seen in the graph that Urdu and Kashmiri curves are closely placed one above another starting from Middle aged males (MM) till Young males (YM) and jumps over Kashmiri at one point (YF axis). Sheikha gal can be seen at the lowest among curves, although it does appear to creep up steadily as we move from the younger to older generation. Again, the young females claim a higher proficiency in Urdu as compared to Sheikha gal like what was observed in the study of duration of use. It appears that across time Kashmiri seems to have entrenched itself well in the community and its accessibility both in the form of education (at primary level) and in the form of a lingua franca in this community surrounded by other linguistic communities. Urdu does appear to have risen in its role to be the language of greater interaction in the inter-community communication.

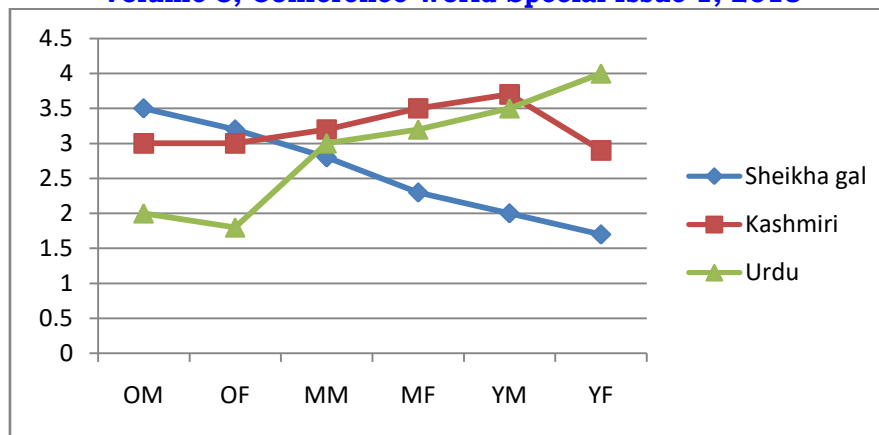


Figure 1.3: Claimed proficiency in Sheikha gal, Kashmiri and Urdu

#### Attitudes and Views:

Baker (1988) stated that the attitude of the speaker is one of the most important factors that lead to maintenance of a language. He defined attitudes as hypothetical constructs that are conceptual inventions hopefully aiding the description and explanation of behaviour". He added that "attitudes are learned predispositions, not inherited or genetically endowed and are likely to be relatively stable over time.

#### Stereotypes about Sheikha gal, Kashmiri and Urdu:

Table 1.3 represents the overall scoring patterns of the informants towards Sheikha gal, Kashmiri and Urdu speakers in terms of 9 attributes, which are Honest (H), Ambitious (A), Practical (P), Modern (M), Decent (D), Cultured (C), Intelligent (I), Respectable (R) and Friendly (F)

	Sheikha gal speakers	Kashmiri speakers	Urdu speakers
Honest (H)	12.5	9.15	12.3
Ambitious (A)	11.5	11.35	10.5
Practical (P)	10.4	11.6	11.5
Modern (M)	7.8	11.7	12.2
Decent (D)	11.2	11.1	11.9
Cultured (C)	9.7	10.3	11.6
Intelligent (I)	12.9	11	11.3
Respectable (R)	10.5	9.95	11.2
Friendly (F)	13.2	7.65	11.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>99.7</b>	<b>93.8</b>	<b>103.7</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>11.0</b>	<b>10.5</b>	<b>11.5</b>

Table 1.3: Stereotype scores for Sheikha gal, Kashmiri and Urdu speakers.

The overall scores obtained for stereotypes about Urdu speakers are the highest followed by the stereotypes of Sheikha gal speakers, and the lowest scores are for stereotypes of Kashmiri speakers. This indicates that informants rate Sheikha gal speakers better than only the Kashmiri speakers, but lower than Urdu speakers in that order. Interestingly, looking at the attribute "Intelligent" Sheikha gal speakers get the highest score followed by Urdu speakers. This kind of result can be an outcome of an attempt to maintain their identity as an intelligent community. Under the attribute 'Honest' Kashmiri gets the lowest score, which indicates that speakers think that Kashmiri speakers are least honest of all the speakers. In the attribute 'Friendly' Sheikha gal again scores highest followed by Urdu speakers. The lowest score of Kashmiri speakers can probably be attributed to the competition of this community with the local Kashmiri community in terms of different facilities. This community might be feeling that the Kashmiri community, being a majority, is impinging on their rights. Furthermore, the Kashmiri community also places itself on a higher pedestal than their community from a social status point of view. This can be a reaction to that. This kind of paradox that characterizes many situations where a minority language is threatened by a majority language is what Sasse (1992) refers to as a "schizophrenic" attitude among speakers of the minority language in which "the retention of the minority language is valued positively for one reason, and negatively for another".

#### Conclusion:

The overall conclusion that can be drawn pertaining to the linguistic status of Sheikha gal is that, a shift towards other languages like Urdu and Kashmiri is evident, and this shift is inversely proportional to age. Gender also seems to be playing a role, with the older females usually preferring their mother tongue and the young females least preferring their mother tongue. The language preferences are seen to be largely influenced by linguistic prestige as an attempt to attain higher social status. This can be attributed to the impact of the dominant languages like Urdu and Kashmiri where a mindset is created wherein it is assumed that proficiency in these languages is a prerequisite to get better jobs, conduct business, have prestige in the society and, finally, to be treated seriously. It was also observed that the speakers do have emotional attachment to their language which resulted in the positive rating for few attributes. At the same time they have interrupted the transmission of their language to children resulting in an evident language loss in younger generation. With no overt coercion involved, the greatest tragedy of language loss is that there are no immediate negative consequences, which are apparent to speakers until the process has reached an advanced stage, often beyond the point of no return. Lack of cultural continuity, identity crisis and social disintegration are only evident when they reach

extreme. Ironically, breaking the transmission of the language is often a deliberate choice and is under the control of the speakers who make this decision but, getting the language back is not. Speakers who decided to commit linguistic suicide will never be in a position to reverse this loss and their children with no full command over their mother tongue wouldn't be able to transmit it even, if they want to. Linguistic suicide is a least talked about situation but is most typical of minority linguistic groups who assume that the shift to a dominant language is in best interests of the next generation.

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