

DIGITAL REVITALIZATION OR DILUTION: ANALYZING DIGITAL DISCOURSE OF POTOHARI LANGUAGE IDENTITY ON YOUTUBE CHANNELS

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Abstract

Potohari remains an under-documented and institutionally neglected regional language in Pakistan. It is frequently misclassified as a dialect of Punjabi, which has led to its marginalization in both national language policy and educational domains. The research identifies the cultural dilution and language erosion due to the lack of institutional support, educational representation, and intergenerational transmission as primary factors contributing to the endangerment of regional languages. Digital platforms like YouTube are emerging as grassroots spaces for linguistic expression, though there is limited scholarly investigation into their role in reversing language shift or sustaining ethnolinguistic identity. This study employs Rodney H. Jones' (2015) Discourse Data Analysis (DDA) in conjunction with Leanne Hinton's Language Revitalization Theory (2001) to examine how Potohari language and identity are constructed and sustained in digital spaces, particularly through YouTube. How do YouTube users construct and express Potohari linguistic and cultural identity in digital discourse? And in what ways do YouTube comments reflect efforts to revitalize and maintain the Potohari language in the digital space? This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design, using elements of digital discourse analysis to investigate language attitudes and identity construction in user-generated YouTube comments on Potohari-language content. Two YouTube channels that feature Potohari language content specifically folk dramas, comedy skits, interviews, and language phrases were purposively selected. The users of this language are found across the globe in diaspora and they feel the strong urge to have separate identity of Potohari which is sometimes merged with Punjabi or with Pahari language and on that they seem to spread their voice on digital platforms. The findings affirm that Potohari speakers are actively involved in both identity construction and language revitalization through YouTube. The data analysis shows the efforts as part of a bottom-up, community-led revival, rooted not in state policy but in emotional labor, metalinguistic awareness, and intergenerational consciousness among the digital users. Future inquiries could adopt longitudinal approaches to track the evolution of language use over time. Investigating the role of youth, diasporic communities, or local influencers as digital agents of language revitalization. Such studies would contribute to a richer understanding of how localized linguistic identities are being reshaped and reasserted in the age of digital globalization.

1. Introduction:

This study examines Potohari language endangerment in the context of Pakistani regional languages expansion and erosion. Language and identity in the digital age are performed, visualized, and circulated across a range of multimodal platforms. YouTube, in particular, has emerged as a dynamic space where regional and minority languages—often absent from institutional discourse—gain new avenues for expression and visibility. Within this context, the Potohari language, historically marginalized in mainstream Pakistani discourse, acquires a revitalized cultural presence through videos, user comments, visual symbolism, and shared narratives. The dominant languages Urdu and English in the linguistic communities of indigenous people have greatly affected the inter-generational transfer of Potohari language particularly on the account of socio-economic factors that cause language shift. The diasporic population seems to initiate the efforts to preserve language, ethnolinguistic pride, cultural identity, through participatory digital engagement through different means of social media platforms. These efforts are resulting in significant revitalization of Potohari language and cultural content on such platform engaging the audience globally. The speakers of Potohari language see this connection as an attempt to voice their genuinely separate identity which has been mistakenly considered as a dialect of Punjabi.

This misconception is taken as an ideological stance toward linguistic decolonization or resistance to state-imposed lingua francas in digital discourse. Hinton (2001) highlights how language survival depends on intergenerational transmission and the community's own creative strategies for maintaining cultural continuity. In this context, digital platforms like YouTube serve as emerging sites for informal language learning, identity affirmation, and sociocultural participation. Studies in digital ethnolinguistics have further reinforced this view, showing that minority language speakers increasingly turn to online spaces to produce, circulate, and interact with content in their native tongues (Tagg, Seargeant, & Brown, 2017). Digital Census 2023 as mentioned in The News includes basic questions about gender, age, religion, marital life, nationality and 'mother tongue'. According to this form, 14 languages have been included as mother tongue in this census. These languages include Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Kashmiri, Saraiki, Hindko, Brahvi, Shina, Balti, Mewati, Kailash and Kohistani. There is a separate box for the 'other' languages. There are about 60 other languages in Pakistan which have been put under the 'other' category. Languages like Khowar, Gujar, Torwali, Gawri, Brushaski, Wakhi, Gawarabati, Palula, Dameli, Ormuri, Dhatki, Marwari, Pahari, Beteri, Mankiyali, Ushojo, Kati, Kamviri et al are not mentioned in the form. Potohari language face systematic neglect in both policy and practice, resulting in reduced usage and prestige among younger speakers. Potohari has reached 5-6 level on GIDS scale, this linguistic shift reflects broader patterns of language displacement and aligns with the findings of a large-scale intergenerational study conducted in the Islamabad-Rawalpindi region (Depleting Cultural Heritage Study, 2020). Utilizing the UNESCO Language Vitality and Endangerment framework, the study documented a significant decline in the use of Potohari within the home domain across three successive generations, signaling a critical stage of ethnolinguistic erosion. The research identifies the cultural dilution and language erosion due to the lack of institutional support, educational representation, and intergenerational transmission as primary factors contributing to the endangerment of regional languages. The users of this language are found across the globe in diaspora and they feel the strong urge to have separate identity of Potohari which is sometimes merged with Punjabi or with Pahari language having said that they seem to spread their voice on digital platforms. Youtube channels are created by Local production houses to create local content in the Potohari language by potohari people. These channels have gained some viewership across the borders and significant efforts have been shown by the content creators to preserve or revitalize this language digitally.

This study incorporates the analytical framework of Digital Discourse Analysis (DDA) developed by Jones (2015) for examination of how meaning is created not only through language, but also through visual layouts, interactional features, and the design of digital texts. This allows for analyzing the interplay of text, visuals, and user engagement on YouTube. This study also employs the theoretical lense of Leanne Hinton to explore how the Potohari language is represented and performed by native speakers on YouTube. It investigates the role of digital platforms in either revitalizing or eroding Potohari linguistic identity, while also examining audience engagement and participation to change and create a perception, and how resistance and revitalization are enacted through discourse based on Hinton's theoretical lense (2001). Drawing on these theories the research addresses two key questions related to representation, platform influence, audience interaction, and linguistic-cultural dynamics.

1.2 Research Questions:

1. How do YouTube users construct and express Potohari linguistic and cultural identity in digital discourse?
2. In what ways do YouTube comments reflect efforts to revitalize and maintain the Potohari language in the digital space?

1.3 Research Gap

Despite being spoken by millions across the Potohar Plateau and its diaspora, Potohari remains an under-documented and institutionally neglected language in Pakistan. It is frequently misclassified as a dialect of Punjabi, which has led to its marginalization in both national language policy and educational domains (Rahman, 1996; Shackle, 1979). The lack of standardized orthography, absence in curricula, and limited state recognition contribute to its increasingly vulnerable status, particularly among younger speakers who are shifting toward Urdu and English in both formal and digital spaces (Hussain & Ali, 2020). While digital platforms like YouTube are emerging as grassroots spaces for linguistic expression, there is limited scholarly investigation into their role in reversing language shift or sustaining ethnolinguistic identity. This gap necessitates focused research on how such media platforms can be harnessed for community-led revitalization efforts, digital documentation, and the revalorization of Potohari as a distinct linguistic and cultural heritage.

2. Literature Review

The presence of dominant languages such as English and Urdu affect the prestige and utility of regional and indigenous languages across educational, economic, and social spheres like Potohari face growing marginalization. This tension is especially visible in societies of Pakistan, where linguistic ladders and state policies have historically favored a narrow set of state selected-national or global languages at the expenditure of regional diversity. By drawing upon foundational theories of language shift (Fishman, 1991), grassroots revitalization (Hinton, 2001), and digital discourse analysis (Jones, 2015), this literature review situates Potohari's current sociolinguistic trajectory within broader debates on language endangerment, multilingualism, and the role of technology in cultural preservation.

2.1 Potohari Language

Potohari (also spelled Pothohari, Pothwari) is an Indo-Aryan language rooted in the northwestern Punjab region of Pakistan. It is part of the Lahnda (Western Punjabi) dialect cluster, often seen as a transitional language between Punjabi and Hindko. Developed from Apabhramsha Prakrits of the northwestern subcontinent (c. 6th–13th century CE). Shares linguistic features with Punjabi (especially Majhi dialect), Saraiki, and Hindko. Historically used in oral traditions such as folklore, poetry, and storytelling, e.g., *Baaran Maah* and *Qissas*. British colonial linguists classified Potohari as a Punjabi dialect, contributing to its lack of independent recognition. Its rich oral tradition wasn't codified into standardized literature or education. Potohari is primarily spoken in the Potohar Plateau of northern Punjab, Pakistan. Main districts include: Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Chakwal and some parts of Attock. Some parts of Gujrat, Mianwali, and even Azad Jammu & Kashmir (e.g., Mirpur, Bhimber). It also has diasporic presence. Strongest in the UK, especially among Mirpuri communities in Birmingham, Bradford, and Luton. Number of Speakers Estimates vary due to classification issues. 15–18 million (Ethnologue and SIL approximations) often subsumed under Punjabi in official records and censuses.

Pakistan's national census (e.g., 1998, 2017) does not list Potohari as a separate language. Speakers usually tick "Punjabi" or "Other", skewing the data. In Azad Kashmir, especially Mirpur, many call it Mirpuri, though it is largely the same as Potohari. Linguistic Features Phonology and Lexicon are closer to Hindko and Saraiki than Majhi Punjabi. Rich in native vocabulary and phonemic differences. Retains older Indo-Aryan structures absent in urban Punjabi. Historically Shahmukhi (Arabic script) is used but no formal written traditions are found. Literary efforts are increasing but remain largely oral.

2.2 Revitalization and Digital Discourse

Leanne Hinton's (2001) grassroots language revitalization framework emphasizes the critical role of community-led initiatives in sustaining endangered languages, particularly through informal domains such as family, storytelling, and media. Rather than relying solely on institutional efforts, Hinton highlights how language survival depends on intergenerational transmission and the community's own creative strategies for maintaining cultural continuity. In this context, digital platforms like YouTube serve as emerging sites for informal language learning, identity affirmation, and sociocultural participation. Studies in digital ethnolinguistics have further reinforced this view, showing that minority language speakers increasingly turn to online spaces to produce, circulate, and interact with content in their native tongues (Tagg, Seargeant, & Brown, 2017). Through videos, thumbnails, comments, and replies, speakers not only engage with their heritage language but also resist dominant linguistic norms that often marginalize regional identities. This aligns with the framework of Digital Discourse Analysis (Jones, 2015), which posits that identity is performed through multimodal practice including- language, visuals, and social interaction-in digital environments. In the case of Potohari, digital spaces become critical in countering language shift by enabling speakers, especially those in diasporic or urban settings, to participate in the preservation and revitalization of their linguistic heritage. YouTube content and user engagement act as bottom-up mechanisms of revival, allowing Potohari speakers to assert cultural pride, transmit language to younger generations, and re-establish community ties in an increasingly digital world.

2.3 Language Shift, Death, and Revitalization

Language shift and death have long been central concerns in sociolinguistics, with extensive scholarship addressing the causes, processes, and consequences of language loss (Denison, 1977; Dorian, 1977, 1980, 1981, 1987, 1989; Gal, 1978; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). These phenomena are especially critical for minority and indigenous languages that face erosion under dominant linguistic regimes. One of the most influential contributions to this discourse is Joshua Fishman's (1991) *Reversing Language Shift*, which introduced the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) to assess and counteract language loss, emphasizing intergenerational transmission as the key to linguistic survival. Fishman posits that effective revitalization must begin at the home and community level, particularly at GIDS Level 6 and below, while higher levels necessitate institutional support (Fishman, 2001). This framework has since been expanded and critiqued to address its limitations in capturing the dynamic trajectories of language development and decline, and the need for additional levels to reflect both extinct and global languages (King, 2001).

2.4 Community-based efforts for revitalization

Following Krauss's (1992) urgent call to action, various community-based language maintenance efforts emerged, especially in North America, where digital and educational innovations were introduced to stem the tide of language loss. Although some scholars argue for a more optimistic view, the global trend toward linguistic homogenization remains alarming, especially for

languages without state recognition or educational support. These theoretical insights are directly applicable to the case of Potohari, a minority language in Pakistan often subsumed under Punjabi, whose digital revitalization on platforms like YouTube signals a grassroots response to intergenerational disruption. In this context, Fishman's GIDS provides a useful lens for situating Potohari's current status possibly around Level 6 where home-domain use is weakening, yet community members show active engagement in informal revitalization efforts. As such, the digital sphere not only functions as a space of performance and resistance, but also as a modern mechanism for reversing language shift in the absence of institutional support.

Rana (2019) documented how community elders in Gujar Khan and Rawalpindi had started informal storytelling sessions, poetry circles, and folk performances to sustain linguistic traditions, particularly targeting youth engagement. Digital spaces have also emerged as crucial platforms for this revival. Ahmad (2021), in a thesis from the University of Punjab, highlighted how YouTube channels like "Explore Potohar" and "Potwar Gold" are not only curating linguistic content but also generating interactive spaces where diasporic and local users engage in language affirmation, transmission, and emotional solidarity. These community-driven efforts, although fragmented and unsupported by formal institutions, reflect a growing bottom-up movement to assert Potohari as a distinct linguistic and cultural identity, aligning with Fishman's (1991) focus on home-domain transmission and self-initiated revitalization in threatened language communities.

2.5 Rise of Bilingualism and Multilingualism

While globalization has undoubtedly enhanced connectivity and international collaboration, it also poses significant challenges to linguistic diversity, potentially leading to the erosion of cultural and linguistic heritage (Abbasi et al., 2020). A recurring pattern observed is that speakers of indigenous languages who migrate to urban centers for better education or employment often shift toward dominant languages, reducing the use of their mother tongue in daily interactions. This shift can lead to language attrition, a gradual decline in native language proficiency, and in severe cases, even language death. Aronin (2018) notes that historically, languages and specific communicative skills played vital roles in supporting social and cultural life, with multilingualism serving as a complementary—though not essential—feature of human societies. In many communities, particular languages held localized advantages that shaped their utility and dominance.

Dewaele (2015) introduced two nuanced measures for assessing multilingualism—based on self-reported language use frequency and perceived proficiency in oral and written communication. These metrics help differentiate between individuals who know many languages but function mostly monolingually, and those who engage actively and regularly across multiple linguistic and cultural spheres, thereby providing a more accurate representation of multilingual competence.

However, as Komorowska (2012) observes, multilingualism need not entail mastery of wholly distinct languages. An individual using both a standardized language and a vernacular or dialect can also be regarded as multilingual. Moreover, the pursuit of full fluency across all known languages is often unrealistic, complicating efforts to define rigid linguistic boundaries (p. 332). Historically, languages like Latin were taught less for communication and more as a means of cognitive training.

In recent decades, research has increasingly highlighted the cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism, including enhanced creativity, cognitive flexibility, problem-solving ability, and mental agility—all outcomes of the regular mental shifts involved in managing more than one language (Komorowska, 2012, p. 336). Nevertheless, multilingualism also presents certain

drawbacks. Aronin and Laoire (2004) discuss how frequent code-switching, morphological blending, and confusion in using similar-sounding words from different languages are common. They emphasize that proficiency levels across languages can fluctuate over time, which not only affects language dominance but also impacts cultural identity (pp. 21–22).

Mufwene (2020) highlights the socioeconomic pressures that often lead parents to forgo transmitting their native language to their children. Economic incentives or desires for assimilation into dominant linguistic cultures can result in intergenerational language gaps. Due to fear of stigma or perceived irrelevance in their social context children may also exhibit reluctance to learn their heritage language. Bilingualism and multilingualism considerable bring notable benefits, at the same time they can also trigger linguistic competition, wherein one language dominates and others diminish.

This dominance can gradually undermine the presence and relevance of minority languages, pushing them closer to extinction. The consequences of this linguistic power struggle are most acutely felt by regional and indigenous languages. Casanova and Jones (2013) aptly describe the 'dominant language' as the one most favored by bilingual or multilingual speakers, often seen as more prestigious or advantageous so it is essential to explore the dual nature of bilingualism and multilingualism. While they enrich communication and cultural exchange, they also introduce hierarchies that marginalize the minority or less dominant languages.

As it has been researched by Qureshi Hashmi (2024) in her exploration of the Saraiki language, the dominance of English and Urdu in Pakistan not only sidelines local languages but also threatens the ethnolinguistic identity of their speakers. Her research emphasizes how national and global language preferences, if unchecked, can accelerate language endangerment among culturally rich yet marginalized linguistic communities in case of Siraiki language.

2.6 Dominant Language: Socio economic challenges

Due to economic expansion, technological advancement, and transnational cultural exchange- a handful of dominant languages elevated to global prominence, often at the expense of local and minority languages (Aronin, 2018). As these dominant languages continue to gain ground, linguistic uniformity it becomes a growing concern for the rest. Smaller or minority languages, particularly those without institutional backing or state recognition, are increasingly vulnerable to marginalization, with some on the verge of extinction. This phenomenon frequently manifests as a language shift, wherein speakers, motivated by social mobility or economic advantage, begin to adopt a more globally recognized language. In doing so, they may gradually abandon their ancestral tongue- a process that disproportionately affects minoritized and indigenous languages as discussed by Phillipson. (2012).

The loss extends beyond mere vocabulary or grammar to the greater loss of culture and traditional wisdom.. As Maheshwari (2023) highlights, indigenous languages are not only tools of communication but repositories of community-specific worldviews, traditional wisdom, and cultural knowledge systems. One of the most prevalent factor of their decline, is the pressures of global homogenization, which signifies the erosion of unique epistemologies passed down through generations. This is not only a linguistic issue but a cultural one which is responsible for undermining the narratives, values, and social structures embedded within these languages. Schmidt (2008) similarly emphasizes that language forms the core of cultural identity, and its disappearance results in a estrangement in the continuity of collective memory and self-expression (p. 4).

The halt between the global and the local becomes even more distinct in bilingual or multilingual societies, where language choice is seldom neutral. Haidar and Fang (2019) argue that dominant languages are often viewed not only as practical tools but as symbols of modernity and upward mobility (p. 3). Their prestige tends to outshine local varieties, even those rich in heritage and history. As such, speakers may gradually distance themselves from regional languages, perceiving them as less valuable in a globalized context. Anchimbe (2007) records that this shift places local languages in a dangerous position, forcing them to navigate the conflicting demands of integration into the global economy and the preservation of cultural identity (p. 166).

Majidi (2013) highlights the idea that indigenous languages serve as vital threads within the larger fabric of cultural diversity. Their fading has implications that ripple across identity, heritage, and knowledge transmission. The challenge, then, is not merely to preserve languages as isolated artifacts but to sustain the social ecosystems in which they thrive. This requires a more inclusive vision of globalization—one that values linguistic plurality as a core component of cultural resilience. Saarikivi and Marten (2012) contribute to this perspective by pointing out that language loss does not occur uniformly. Rather, it is shaped by how linguistic knowledge interconnects with group identity, community values, and specific socio-historical contexts (p. 156). Recognizing these nuances is essential to crafting meaningful strategies for language maintenance in an increasingly interconnected world.

2.7 Language Shift

It is clearly evident that survival or decline of a language is not dictated solely by external pressures, but is also deeply influenced by the internal dynamics of the speech community itself. One of the key factors in this context is the demographic strength of the linguistic group. Indrayani (2011, p. 31) notes that smaller linguistic minorities are inherently more vulnerable to language decline due to their limited numbers, often dominated by the dominant presence of larger language communities. This demographic imbalance intensifies their vulnerability and plays a significant role in the varying trajectories of minority languages.

Other than demographic factors, Socio-economic situations play a critical role but frequently neglected one in discussions of linguistic endangerment. Language choices are often shaped by employment prospects and the perceived market value of specific languages. As Lee et al. (2010, p. 95) explain, access to economic opportunities tied to dominant languages can drive individuals to prioritize them over their native languages, leading to a gradual shift in language use within communities.

The educational sector also serves as a foundation in the preservation or decline of minority languages. When educational systems accommodate instruction in indigenous or minority languages, they not only reinforce linguistic continuity but also instill a sense of cultural pride and identity. Johnson and O'odham elder (2003, p. 13) emphasize that educational policies which validate and promote linguistic diversity can greatly enhance language vitality. Conversely, exclusion of minority languages from formal education often accelerates language attrition, as younger generations lose the opportunity to learn and use their heritage language proficiently.

Furthermore fluency in dominant languages is rewarded economically whereas minority languages often struggle to maintain everyday relevance. As Atifnigar, Safari, and Rafat (2021, p. 2) argue, these pressures frequently overwhelm weaker languages, ultimately resulting in what is termed "language death." Ahearn (2017) identifies two primary paths to language death: the physical disappearance of a language's speakers, and the cessation of language use across generations, halting transmission entirely. Asif (2005) draws an important distinction between

"language shift"-the active adoption of another language in place of one's mother tongue in daily life-and "language loss," which refers to the gradual erosion of competence in the original language due to the acquisition of another. Zahid, Ghani, and Yasir (2018) caution against excessive reliance on second languages in everyday communication, as this behavior may inadvertently expedite both language loss and eventual language death.

In response to these challenges, the role of psychological and social motivations in shaping speaker attitudes is influential as Karan (2011) highlights that positive language attitudes can drive revitalization efforts and reinforce ethnolinguistic identity. This process, referred to as "reversing language shift," involves a deliberate and sustained commitment by community members to maintain and use their native language. Mufwene (2020) echoes this view, underscoring the importance of individual agency in reversing language decline, where consistent use of the mother tongue becomes a social responsibility in preventing language endangerment.

The broader literature on ethnolinguistic vitality and minority language maintenance continues to underscore several core determinants of language survival. UNESCO emphasizes variables such as group size, generational transmission, educational support, and labor-related dynamics in assessing language vitality and risk (Johnson & O'odham elder, 2003). In this regard, Gordon (2019, p. 435) observes that language change within minority communities does not follow a uniform path; rather, it reflects a range of outcomes influenced by the unique cultural, social, and psychological conditions present within each group.

2.8 Identity conservation

The discourse on language loss must be balanced with an equally critical examination of language preservation, which is fundamentally tied to the safeguarding of cultural and linguistic identity. In this context, UNESCO emphasizes the centrality of intergenerational language transmission as a key factor in the continued vitality of a language (Johnson & O'odham elder, 2003, p. 4). The sustainability of a linguistic tradition largely depends on the effectiveness and consistency with which language is passed down from one generation to the next. Communities that foster such transmission are more likely to preserve their linguistic heritage, while those experiencing disruptions- often due to social transformation or external sociopolitical pressures-are at greater risk of linguistic decline.

The role of language as a powerful marker of identity, shaping both individual and collective self-perception is mentioned by Kamau (2022). This viewpoint is further reinforced by Torres and Pablo (2018), who examine the complex linguistic identities of Mexican migrants in the United States, illustrating how language continues to function as a core element of cultural expression amid displacement. Additionally, Abbasi and Zaki (2019) categorize a global trend wherein shifts in language use are regularly driven by socio-economic aspirations and perceptions of prestige. This pattern has been particularly apparent in multicultural and multilingual societies such as London, Malaysia, and Singapore, where language choices are influenced by a range of psychological, social, marital, and geographical factors.

2.9 Urdu and English: Threat to regional languages

Pakistan's state presents a striking example of the challenges faced by regional languages in multilingual societies. Jansen et al. (2013) point out the concerning state of linguistic diversity in the country, warning that although Pakistan's four provinces collectively speak over forty languages-making multilingualism a potential national strength. These languages are often shelved in the pursuit of national and global linguistic dominance. According to the 2017–2020 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS6), Pakistan's linguistic landscape is rich, with 14 languages in

active use. Despite Urdu holding the status of the official language, it ranks only as the fourth most commonly spoken first language. Punjabi is the most widely spoken (39.2%), followed by Pashto (16.1%) and Pothohari (13.7%) (Jansen et al., 2013).

English, as an official language, and Urdu, as the national language, function as the mainstream mediums of communication and serve as *lingua franca* across diverse linguistic communities in inter-regional contexts (Shah & Anwar, 2015). This dual dominance has contributed to the marginalization of regional languages, which struggle to maintain relevance amidst the growing prestige associated with English and Urdu. Urban populations, in particular, show a marked preference for using these dominant languages, often at the expense of their indigenous tongues (Abbasi & Zaki, 2019).

Khan (2023) notes that English has maintained its global dominance for over a century, a status reinforced in South Asia during the colonial era through the establishment of English-medium education (Haidar & Manan, 2020, p. 242). However, it is not only English that poses a threat to regional languages—Urdu, too, contributes to linguistic displacement. As Raheem (2015) explains, both Islam and Urdu have come to symbolize national unity in Pakistan, significantly shaping the country's language policies and sociolinguistic dynamics. These factors collectively deepen the tension between linguistic heritage and the sociopolitical power of dominant languages.

2.10 Ethnic identity of the regional languages

Pakistan's rich linguistic diversity mirrors its deep-rooted cultural plurality and the complex interplay of histories that shape its ethno-national identity (Shaikh, 2009, interview with Shaikh). Within this dynamic context, the nation exemplifies the ongoing processes of identity construction and reconfiguration, negotiated through its varied linguistic communities. For speakers of regional languages, ethnic identity is intricately tied to their mother tongues, which form the foundation of their ethnolinguistic identity. According to Sachdev and Bourhis (1984), the strength of this identity is influenced by the group's collective language attitudes and behaviors, particularly in situations of intergroup contact.

Despite their cultural richness, regional languages—whether spoken by numerical minorities or majorities—consistently face challenges in preserving their ethnolinguistic vitality across political, economic, and educational domains (Zaidi, 2016). The responsibility for sustaining and revitalizing these languages rests significantly with the speaker communities themselves. Gonzalez et al. (2018) argue that maintaining a strong ethnolinguistic identity requires communities to cultivate and express positive attitudes and beliefs about their native languages.

2.11 Prioritization of ethnic identity over national identity

Pakistan is not unique in confronting the challenges posed by ethno-national identity; rather, it is part of a broader global phenomenon. Historically, the concept of ethnic identity has been deeply rooted in human civilization, with early thinkers like Herodotus contributing significantly to its conceptual development by categorizing groups along ethnic lines (Khan, Azeem & Tabassum, 2018). This enduring legacy is particularly evident in Pakistan, where ethnic affiliations frequently take precedence over national identity. Such a tendency has led to the perception that Pakistan struggles to maintain a unified national character (Khan, Azeem & Tabassum, 2018, p. 33). The tension between ethnic and national identities in Pakistan is reflected in several regional dynamics. In Sindh, for instance, the institutional support for the Sindhi language has prompted Urdu speakers to emphasize their distinctiveness by identifying as "Muhajir." Similarly, the Pashtun community has actively asserted its ethnic identity, culminating in the successful renaming of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). In Balochistan, some sub-

nationalist factions advocate for greater autonomy as a means of safeguarding their cultural and ethnic heritage. Meanwhile, in Punjab, Potohari speakers have initiated demands for the recognition of a separate province named after their ethnolinguistic group. Comparable identity negotiations are also underway among the Hazara community, which seeks provincial recognition, and the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, who continue to campaign for full provincial status.

2.12 Potohari language and the ethnolinguistic vitality

This study centers on the Potohari language and the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Potohari-speaking community. Recognized as one of Pakistan's regional languages, Potohari is often classified among the country's majority languages due to the substantial population that speaks it. Predominantly used in northern Punjab, the language holds significant sociolinguistic relevance. The classification of Pahari-Potohari as a dialect of Punjabi has historically stemmed from external linguistic categorizations, most notably by George Abraham Grierson. In his extensive linguistic survey of British India conducted over a century ago, Grierson grouped Pahari-Potohari under the umbrella of "Northern Lahnda." Though, contemporary scholars and linguists increasingly challenge the accuracy of his classifications, pointing to the fluid and overlapping nature of language boundaries in the region. Despite these academic reviews, such critical insights have yet to fully infuse public understanding (Nazir, 2020). Pothohari, a language spoken predominantly in the northern regions of Punjab, including Rawalpindi, Chakwal, and Jhelum, occupies a complex space in the Pakistani linguistic landscape. While traditionally viewed as a dialect of Punjabi, several linguistic studies (Ibrahim & Awan, 2020; Tabassum et al., 2020) argue that Pothohari exhibits distinct phonological and lexical features, warranting recognition as a separate language within the Lahnda continuum.

The intergeneration transmission of Potohari language is the core issue in its dilution. Also phonological impact of Pothohari on second-language acquisition further reinforces its distinctiveness. Tabassum et al. (2020) documented substantial mother tongue interference in the English pronunciation of Pothohari speakers, indicating a persistent phonological system that operates independently from standard Punjabi or Urdu. Such findings support the argument for recognizing Pothohari as a separate linguistic entity.

2.13 Endangerment of Potohari language

How modernization and cultural integration contribute to language dilution, modification and shift in the Pothohar region is examined by Ibrahim and Awan (2020). Their study revealed a marked preference for Urdu and English in formal and educational domains, contributing to the marginalization of Pothohari. These dynamics are further illustrated by Qaisar Khan's (2021) ethnographic research, which found that bilingual Pothohari and Pahari families often abandon the heritage language in favor of upward mobility through Urdu or English—a trend most pronounced among urban, literate communities.

Pothohari has received minimal institutional support despite constitutional provisions allowing for the promotion of regional languages (Article 251(3) of Pakistan's Constitution). The Pakistan Academy of Letters (PAL) has historically excluded Pothohari from national literary recognitions such as the Kamal-e-Fun award (2016), although recent efforts like its inclusion in Punjab Assembly speeches (2024) indicate symbolic acknowledgment.

Fishman's endangerment scales, the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) places Pothohari likely at Stage 5 or 6, where the language is used orally by adults but rarely acquired by children (Fishman, 1991). This endangerment status is supported by both academic and

community-based data, including sociolinguistic surveys and educational studies showing poor retention among school-age speakers.

Language endangerment in the context of Pakistan is studied by Qayyum, Qayyum, and Qayyum (2020), in their study published in the *Global Social Sciences Review (GSSR)*, focusing particularly on the sociolinguistic dynamics that marginalize minority languages. Their research identifies the lack of institutional support, educational representation, and intergenerational transmission as primary factors contributing to the erosion of regional languages. The study underscores that minority languages like Pothwari face systematic neglect in both policy and practice, resulting in reduced usage and prestige among younger speakers. The authors argue for a multidimensional revitalization approach, encompassing policy reform, community involvement, and curricular inclusion, to preserve linguistic diversity and prevent cultural homogenization.

2.14 Intergenerational attitudinal shift

The policy and practice of policy doesn't only cater for the expansion and revitalization of any language unless the speakers, community of that minority language take grassroots level initiative as proposed by Hinton. Anjum and Siddiqi (n.d.) discuss the intergenerational attitudinal shift toward the Pothwari language and its culture, highlighting its critical role in the language's vitality and sustenance. Their empirical study, conducted across three generations of Pothwari speakers in regions such as Murree, Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Gujar Khan, and parts of Kashmir and Islamabad, reveals a significant decline in positive attitudes toward the use and transmission of the language. The research highlights that the language's endangerment is not only a result of external sociopolitical pressures but also due to internalized perceptions and diminishing linguistic pride within Pothwari-speaking families. The findings confirm that shifts in language attitudes across generations directly correlate with language use and its gradual transmission patterns, specifically making attitudinal change a pivotal factor in assessing ethnolinguistic vitality and designing language maintenance strategies.

In the above discussion it has been established that, language dilution factors are persistent with a pattern of ethnolinguistic marginalization of Pothohari language, be it a dialect or separate language the endangerment of this language is causing a language shift or more towards extinction, both structurally and attitudinally. Though it is apparent that the language maintains symbolic cultural value, its lack of formal recognition, declining transmission, and substitution by dominant languages. This signals the urgency of preservation efforts as per the framework of Revitalization framework suggested by Hinton. The literature not only validates the endangered status of Pothohari but also frames its revitalization as a critical cultural and educational imperative.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design, using elements of digital discourse analysis to investigate language attitudes and identity construction in user-generated YouTube comments on Pothohari-language content.

3.2 Data Selection

Two YouTube channels that feature Pothohari language content specifically folk dramas, comedy skits, interviews, and language phrases were purposively selected:

- Explore Pothohar
- Potwar Gold

Videos were selected based on the following criteria:

- Published between 2022–2025

- At least 1000 views and 50+ comments
- Representative of different Potohari content genres

3.3 Data Collection method

Using manual sampling and comments collection of the top 50- 200 user across 4 videos were extracted and anonymized. Each comment was read and selected only those which share the same content, researcher filtered out unnecessary comments such as help appeals and advertisements etc.

3.4 Data Analysis Method:

This study adopts Digital Discourse Analysis (DDA) as proposed by Jones (2015) to analyze multimodal digital elements of user-generated content on YouTube, focusing on the Potohari language use and revitalization. This framework enables an investigation of how language and interactional features collectively construct identity and social meaning in digital spaces. Hinton's (2001) Grassroots Revitalization is visible in the emotional investment, correctional dialogue, cross-border solidarity, and historical memory construction.

3.5 Analytical Framework (Jones, 2015 & Hinton, 2001)

This study employs Rodney H. Jones' Discourse Data Analysis (DDA) in conjunction with Leanne Hinton's Language Revitalization Theory to examine how Potohari language and identity are constructed and sustained in digital spaces, particularly through YouTube comments. DDA provides a methodological lens to analyze the linguistic and multimodal features of digital discourse-such as code-switching, regional expressions, emojis, and interactional patterns -within their social and technological contexts. Simultaneously, Hinton's revitalization framework offers a theoretical basis for interpreting these practices as forms of grassroots language maintenance and cultural affirmation. Her emphasis on community-based, informal, and emotionally grounded approaches to revitalization is particularly relevant in analyzing how users engage with Potohari language online. Expressions of pride, regional belonging, and cultural nostalgia-evident in comments- reflect the symbolic and affective functions of language use that contribute to its digital survival. By integrating DDA's attention to digital interaction with Hinton's revitalization principles, this framework captures both the structural patterns and sociocultural meanings of Potohari discourse in online environments.

This framework aligns well with digital discourse analysis and multimodal ethnolinguistic research comprising the answers of this research. Data screen shots are presented in annexures section.

4. Data Analysis

A. From the channel Potowar Gold

The analysis presets the audience interaction on the *Potowar Gold* YouTube drama series, with a focus on multimodal discourse which also shows ethnolinguistic pride, cultural identity, and participatory digital engagement.

Channel: *Potowar Gold*

Genre: Drama Comedy

Dataset: Selected viewer comments and replies

1. Comment by Bs21

"Best of Luck Sanghori proud of Potowar dada and dadi"

Language Use & Bilingual Identity:

The hybrid use of English and culturally specific terms (e.g., "dada and dadi") reflects digital bilingualism, common among diasporic and local youth navigating both global and regional

identities online. The comment becomes a linguistic site of code-mixing, signaling flexibility and cultural hybridity.

Ethnolinguistic Pride & Cultural Anchoring:

Phrases like “proud of Potowar” signify a clear expression of affiliative identity. This reflects emotional investment in Potohari representation, where the media content is not only entertainment but also a vehicle for community pride and recognition.

Intergenerational Cultural Intimacy:

Referencing “dada and dadi” indexes respect for elder figures and traditional familial values, which are central in Potohari culture. Their inclusion in media dramatizations invites emotional resonance and nostalgia, reinforcing cultural continuity.

Digital Discourse Function:

This comment operates as a performative act of solidarity and affirmation. By extending well wishes (“Best of Luck”) and declaring cultural pride, the user actively participates in constructing a shared, affirmative Potohari identity in the digital realm.

Comment 2 by AR: *“Ye konsa gaon hai?”*

Comment 3 by Chaand: *“Anyone knows the name of this beautiful village and place, nice drama.”*

Channel Reply: *“It’s Pind Milkan.”*

Viewer’s reply provides village name before the channel’s official response.

Digital Multilingualism & Audience Diversity:

The simultaneous use of Urdu and English demonstrates multilingual fluency typical in online Pakistani discourse. Such code-switching broadens accessibility and reflects the layered linguistic landscape of Potohari audiences online.

Ethnolinguistic and Geographic Anchoring:

The naming of *Pind Milkan* attaches the fictional narrative to a real locality, enabling place-based identity assertion. These references legitimize the Potohari landscape within the broader media domain, countering its historical marginalization in mainstream media.

User Engagement & Collective Knowledge Sharing:

The fact that a fellow viewer provided the village name before the official channel reply illustrates participatory culture. It reflects how digital spaces allow users to co-create meaning and sustain cultural memory collectively.

Cultural Aesthetics & Representation:

The description of the village as “beautiful” and the drama as “nice” reflects a positive evaluation of rural aesthetics, which challenges dominant urban-centered narratives in Pakistani media. This revalorization of rural Potohar strengthens localized pride and visibility.

Multimodal Affordances:

The village’s scenic depiction, visual storytelling, and cultural markers in the video elicit geographically specific audience responses. The interaction between visual cues and textual commentary reveals how language, landscape, and narrative co-produce meaning in digital Potohari discourse.

Comment 4: by ali 70 : “Punjab and Punjabis complete culture” a comment negates this perception by saying

Comment 5: Response to ali 70 by VM: Not Punjab, its potohar region, azad Kashmir”

Linguistic Layer : Language Use and Identity Marking

Ali70's comment constructs a monolithic Punjabi identity, implying that the cultural expression in the video is representative of all of Punjab and Punjabis. VM's response functions as a corrective identity marker, reclaiming regional identity by rejecting the Punjabi label and replacing it with Potohari and Azad Kashmiri identity. The use of "Not Punjab" is emphatic and disaligns the speaker's identity from the majority discourse.

Interactional Positioning (Dialogic Nature):

The exchange is inherently ideological- Ali70 aligns with majority discourse (Punjabi centrality), while VM positions themselves as a voice of regional resistance. VM is not just replying; they are reclaiming a silenced identity, asserting linguistic and cultural boundaries. The platform allows this corrective dialogue, a key affordance of YouTube as an interactive space.

Semiotic and Indexical Meaning:

The original comment indexes a broader national narrative-Punjab as the cultural heart of Pakistan. The reply indexes regional marginalization and the need for linguistic/cultural specificity, which aligns with themes of language endangerment and invisibility of Potohari speakers.

Digital Context/Affordances:

On YouTube, such comment threads allow minority speakers to resist mainstream representations. The threaded reply structure creates a visible, nested challenge to dominant narratives, highlighting grassroots-level identity negotiation. If this is a repeated pattern across videos, it signals a digital movement toward micro-ethnolinguistic assertion.

B. From the channel: Explore Potohar

6. Comment by TS:

"Salaam brother, us Dadyali Azad Kashmiris living in the UK for 75 years still speak like this and I am making sure my son aged 9 still speaks this language of his ancestors... keep up the great work!"

7. Comment by Alexis:

"As a Pakistani Punjabi living in Europe I am definitely gonna teach my kids my mother tongue Potohari and not Urdu. Thank you so much for making videos like these. I appreciate them so much."

Linguistic Layer: Identity Construction through Language Use

TS's comment performs a diasporic identity: "Dadyali Azad Kashmiris in the UK for 75 years" constructs a transnational ethnic identity rooted in both place of origin and longevity in the diaspora. The phrase "*language of his ancestors*" draws on ancestral linkage, creating ethnolinguistic continuity across generations. Similarly, Alexis identifies as a "*Pakistani Punjabi in Europe*" but makes a strategic linguistic distinction by emphasizing Potohari over Urdu—"my mother tongue Potohari and not Urdu"—signaling a conscious resistance to national linguistic homogenization.

Interactional Layer: Audience Alignment and Purpose

Both comments align with the video's purpose—to showcase and validate Potohari language. Users use the comments to publicly declare their language ideologies, showcasing themselves as active agents in language transmission. These are performative acts of language loyalty, intended not just for the content creator, but for the broader viewing community.

Platform Affordances: Digital Visibility and Language Maintenance

YouTube's public comment section acts as a space for cultural affirmation, especially for marginalized or endangered languages in this case Potohari. These comments serve a dual function

such as affirming cultural identity in a diasporic context, where language loss is often a concern. Reinforcing intergenerational transmission, evident in both commenters' emphasis on teaching their children. YouTube enables a global digital language community where linguistic efforts that are often invisible (especially for minority languages) become documented, endorsed, and shared.

Indexicality and Symbolic Meaning

The commenters' geographic distance from Pothohar is contrasted with their linguistic and cultural closeness to it. Language becomes a symbolic anchor of identity, bridging spatial dislocation (UK, Europe) with cultural rootedness (Dadyal, Pothohar). The explicit rejection of Urdu by Alexis indexes an ideological stance toward linguistic decolonization or resistance to state-imposed lingua francas.

Analysis of Comments 8- 13:

Comment 8 : by [5581](#) Pothohari speaker from IN

Comment 9 : Reply to 5581: lots of love ap ko pothohari kesy ati h

Comment 10: by [hr5581](#) Mumbai mei ek jagah hai "Pothohar Nagar" ke naam se , jaha par partition ke baad bahut saare Sikh refugees jo Rawalpindi & POJ&K se aaye the unko udhar Abad Kiya tha .

Comment 11: by [gaming67677](#) Likh k dikhaayen Pothohari Language men kuch !

Comment 12: by [chradio](#) : dovo nu pothwari aundi hegi, kahnu tusaan hindu-urdu ch gal karri jand

Comment 13: by [zfasial5824](#) : [@chradio](#) we don't say hegi in pothohari, that's doabi or standard Punjabi

Text: "5581 Pothohari speaker from IN"

Linguistic Identity Performance: The speaker explicitly identifies as a Pothohari speaker from India, which asserts transnational identity. The use of the Indian flag emoji emphasizes national belonging while also marking minority linguistic identity in contrast to dominant languages (Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi). Sociolinguistic insight is visible how diasporic Pothohari speakers are asserting linguistic affiliation across national borders, contributing to cultural continuity and visibility online.

Comment 9 (Reply to Comment 8): Text: "lots of love ap ko pothohari kesy ati h"

Language Engagement: Urdu-English mix reflects a transitional digital code, typical in multilingual South Asian contexts. This reply shows curiosity and emotional engagement, signaling the rarity and surprise associated with Pothohari fluency among Indian users. This kind of engagement fosters cross-border solidarity and revitalization interest, echoing Hinton's (2001) principle of emotional attachment in grassroots efforts.

Comment 10:

Text: "Mumbai mei ek jagah hai 'Pothohar Nagar' ke naam se..."

Historical Referencing: This comment anchors Pothohari identity in Partition history, asserting place-based memory and migration narratives. **Multimodal Relevance:** While text-based, the reference to a geographic site invokes collective memory and cultural legitimacy, vital for revitalization narratives. **Cultural Continuity:** Demonstrates how digital spaces act as archives of displaced identities, reinforcing the diasporic rootedness of Pothohari speakers.

Comment 11: Text: *“Likh k dikhaayen Pothohari Language men kuch !”*

Oral-Written Tension: The comment functions as a provocative prompt, testing the authenticity or visibility of Pothohari in written form. This highlights one of the core issues in Pothohari revitalization that is lack of standardized script or orthography.

Revitalization Barrier: This skepticism underscores a linguistic insecurity in public discourse and challenges the digital literacy of endangered languages.

Comment 12:

Text: *“dovo nu pothwari aundi hegi, kahnu tusaan hindu-urdu ch gal karri jand”*

Translation : *“Both of them know Pothohari, why are you speaking in Hindi-Urdu?”*

Code-Switching Critique: The speaker challenges the use of dominant languages in a Pothohari-centered thread, reinforcing language loyalty and authenticity policing. Acts as a digital form of language activism, aligning with Hinton’s idea of peer reinforcement in revitalization. The phrase suggests a collective Pothohari identity that demands linguistic coherence, reflecting pride and preservation instincts.

Comment 13:

Text: *“we don’t say ‘hegi’ in Pothohari, that’s Doabi or standard Punjabi”*

Micro-Correction: A user corrects another’s dialect usage, distinguishing Pothohari from Punjabi variants like Doabi. This reflects active linguistic boundary maintenance, a key sign of language awareness and ownership in endangered communities. These corrective interactions show how YouTube functions as a space of linguistic negotiation and codification, supporting grassroots standardization.

Comments 13-26

Comment 13 by PunjabiM510 Pothwari is sweetest Dialect of Punjabi Language Donot spread Propoganda

This comment has generated discussion with 8 replies to this:

Comment 14: reply to Comment 13 by AK_FC

No we're pothwari we don't want anything to do with Punjab

Comment 15 : by Zakoo_Jin @AK_FC absolutely, Pothohar is different from panjab and Pothwari culture and lands are beautiful

Comment 16: by PunjabiM510_@AK_FC : Lo G nava Kata khol lo Lala Pothwari is dialect of Lahnda Punjabi (Western Punjabi) same as Saraiki/multani, Hindko, Pahari, Dani, Awankari

Comment 17: by PunjabiM510 @Zakoo_Jin :Pahari-Pothwari is classified within Lahnda (Western Punjabi) and is transitional between Hindko in the west and Majhi in the east. The Punjabi poet, Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, wrote in a mix of Majhi and Pothwari.

Comment 18: by chradio @AK_FC : Pothwari is a Punjabi language and culture, but the best one :) one can have their own identity within an overarching culture. this is just linguistics. pothwari is a punjabic language

Comment 19: by Mahdoeo @PunjabiM510 : Lahnda is a language family to say all Lahnda languages are Punjabi is false we are Pahari-pothwari ethnically different from you guys we dont share any nasal features or tribes we have our own history culture and identity

Comment 20 : by taji2897 : I am a Dogri speaker from jammu , the old potohari words which you are using , around 90% of them are used in our Dogri too
(Again this comment has generated 4 replies)

Comment 21: by myBH : Pothwari is different from Dogri. your language is more similar to Punjabi or Hindi.

Comment 22: by account2579 : because both dogri and pothohari are dialects of wider diverse punjabi language and not languages themselves

Comment 23: by MYBH : @account2579 not true. Pothwari is its own language

Comments Analysis (Comments 13–23)

Comment 13:

PunjabiM510: *"Pothwari is the sweetest Dialect of Punjabi Language. Do not spread propaganda."*

Ideological Stance taken in this comment positions Pothohari as subordinate to Punjabi, aligning with linguistic assimilation. Labeling alternative views as "propaganda" reflects conflict over linguistic identity. Serves as a discursive spark, inviting corrective and identity-assertive replies.

Comment 14 (AK_FC Reply):

"No we're pothwari we don't want anything to do with Punjab."

Identity Reclamation: Strong disassociation from Punjab underlines linguistic and ethnic boundary marking. Emotionally charged tone reveals resistance against perceived linguistic erasure, resonating with Hinton's notion of community-level assertion.

Comment 15 (Zakoo_Jin):

"Absolutely, Pothohar is different from Punjab and Pothwari culture and lands are beautiful."

Geolinguistic Pride: Emphasizes regional uniqueness and landscape, supporting the cultural-nationalist framing of Pothohari. Implies that digital discourse is also performative of emotional ties to place and heritage.

Comment 16 & 17 (PunjabiM510):

Argues from linguistic taxonomy, citing *Lahnda (Western Punjabi)* and classical figures (e.g., Mian Muhammad Bakhsh). Attempts to validate a dialectal classification using historical-linguistic arguments. This specifically highlights digital discourse epistemic authority vs. local lived identity- this shows a key tension in digital discourse.

Comment 18 (chradio):

"Pothwari is a Punjabi language and culture, but the best one :) One can have their own identity within an overarching culture."

Hedged Reconciliation: Attempts to negotiate middle ground-unity within diversity. Tone is friendly but ideological, reflecting a multiculturalist discourse rather than linguistic autonomy.

Comment 19 (Mahdoo):

"Lahnda is a language family... we are Pahari-Potwari, ethically different... our own history, culture and identity."

Ethnolinguistic Differentiation: Pushes back against linguistic reductionism by asserting cultural and historical specificity. Hinton's frame embodies bottom-up revival driven by collective memory and cultural continuity.

Comment 20 (taji2897 – Dogri speaker):

"As a Dogri speaker from Jammu, 90% of old Pothohari words are used in Dogri too."

Cross-Linguistic Recognition: Establishes interregional linkages and mutual intelligibility. Pan-Regional Revival Potential encourages solidarity among endangered language speakers, per Hinton's model.

Comment 21 (MYBH Reply):

"Pothohari is different from Dogri. Your language is more similar to Punjabi or Hindi."

Correction & Boundary Reassertion: Emphasizes Pothohari distinctiveness. Multilingual Contestation reinforces the idea that digital spaces are arenas of classification and identity policing.

Comment 22 (account2579):

"Because both Dogri and Pothohari are dialects of wider diverse Punjabi language and not languages themselves."

Reductionist Stance: Reiterates the dominant classification narrative, likely based on census/academic framings. These views commonly invite opposition, as seen in the next comment.

Comment 23 (myBH Reply):

"Not true. Pothohari is its own language."

Final Affirmation: Ends the thread with a clear assertion of linguistic independence, reflecting grassroots voice.

5. Findings and Conclusion

Research Question 1: How do YouTube users construct and express Potohari linguistic and cultural identity in digital discourse?

The analysis reveals that YouTube users construct and assert Potohari identity through discursive resistance, regional pride, linguistic correction, and symbolic self-labelling. These expressions are shaped by a dynamic interplay of language, visual symbols, and interactional engagement-key features captured through Digital Discourse Analysis (Jones, 2015).

For instance, in Comment 8, the user explicitly identifies as a "Pothohari speaker from IN", visually marked with the Indian flag emoji. This choice both performs a transnational Potohari identity and subverts geopolitical boundaries, reinforcing the diasporic relevance of the language. Such expressions, analyzed through DDA, highlight how digital platforms enable users to craft nuanced and situated linguistic identities.

Further, Comments 14 and 15 demonstrate discursive distancing from Punjabi identity, as users reject Punjabi categorization and instead affirm the distinctiveness of Pothohar culture, language, and landscape: "We're Pothohari—we don't want anything to do with Punjab" (Comment 14). This is a clear performance of ethnolinguistic differentiation, aligning with Hinton's (2001) observation that endangered communities often reassert their identity through non-institutional, emotionally charged narratives.

In Comments 18 and 19, the conflict deepens. While one user attempts a reconciliatory linguistic framing ("Pothwari is a Punjabi language, but the best one"), another user challenges it by emphasizing ethnic and phonological differences, stating "we don't share nasals or tribes" (Comment 19). These interactions show how YouTube operates as a negotiated space of linguistic boundaries, where identity is actively constructed, policed, and defended.

Finally, the emergence of linguistic correction (e.g., Comment 13: "we don't say hegi in Pothohari... that's Doabi") demonstrates a metalinguistic awareness, with speakers consciously distinguishing Pothohari from neighboring varieties—an act of identity work that also serves to resist language dilution.

Research Question 2: In what ways do YouTube comments reflect efforts to revitalize and maintain the Potohari language in the digital space?

Evidence from the dataset clearly shows that YouTube acts as a grassroots digital domain for language revitalization, aligning with Hinton's (2001) model, where non-institutional, community-driven platforms become spaces for sustaining endangered languages.

Comments like **20** (by a Dogri speaker) highlight shared vocabulary across languages, revealing not only linguistic overlap but also cross-cultural curiosity and connection, fostering a sense of regional alliance that can support revitalization. This is echoed in Comment 12, where a user critiques others for not using Pothohari in Pothohari-dedicated spaces: "Why are you speaking in Hindi-Urdu?"—a clear example of language loyalty enforcement, an essential revitalization behavior described by Hinton.

In Comment 11, a challenge is issued: "Likh k dikhaayen Pothohari Language men kuch!" This request for written Pothohari pushes the community to develop orthographic visibility, touching on a core problem in language maintenance: the absence of standardized script. Despite the provocative tone, the comment catalyzes awareness about Pothohari's limited textual representation, a critical issue in language endangerment.

Moreover, comment threads (13–19) illustrate public debate over classification, revitalization, and cultural ownership. These discursive confrontations do not reflect fragmentation alone but point to a deep-rooted communal engagement with identity and survival-central themes in both DDA and Hinton's frameworks. The fact that these debates generate multiple replies (8+ in some cases) shows that Pothohari is not passively disappearing—it is being contested, revived, and reimagined in real time by its speakers.

The findings affirm that Pothohari speakers are actively involved in both identity construction and language revitalization through YouTube. Utilizing the analytical tools of Digital Discourse Analysis, we observe multimodal performances—linguistic, visual, affective—that serve to reinforce Pothohari's distinctiveness. At the same time, drawing on Hinton's (2001) theory, we see these efforts as part of a bottom-up, community-led revival, rooted not in state policy but in emotional labor, metalinguistic awareness, and intergenerational consciousness.

Thus, YouTube is not merely a platform for entertainment; it becomes a living archive and activist space for the Pothohari language. The implications of this study suggest that digital media can amplify endangered languages, provided that communities continue to engage, negotiate, and reclaim their linguistic futures in such shared virtual arenas. Across all comments, a consistent theme emerges: the digital space functions as a platform for cultural reaffirmation, identity performance, and community dialogue. The use of bilingual language, references to real places, and affectionate nods to familial and aesthetic elements illustrates how YouTube drama becomes a site for ethnolinguistic revitalization.

Audience comments not only validate the media content but also actively participate in constructing and circulating Pothohari identity—transforming viewers from passive recipients to cultural co-constructors. This underscores the importance of viewer commentary in understanding digital language practices and the sociolinguistic vitality of regional languages in online environments. These comments exemplify how diasporic Pothohari speakers use digital discourse to assert their linguistic identity, resist language shift, and promote intergenerational language maintenance. YouTube, in this context, functions not just as a content platform but as a discursive site of cultural resistance and identity performance. The act of commenting is a public ritual of belonging, signaling Pothohari's survival—not through institutions, but through individual and family-level commitment enabled by digital media. Users use the comments to publicly declare their language ideologies, showcasing themselves as active agents in language transmission.

Language becomes a symbolic anchor of identity, bridging spatial dislocation (UK, Europe) with cultural rootedness (Dadyal, Potohari). This also presented a linguistic site of code-mixing, signaling flexibility and cultural hybridity. The digital space functions as a platform for cultural reaffirmation, identity performance, and community dialogue. The use of bilingual language, references to real places, and affectionate nods to familial and aesthetic elements illustrates how YouTube drama becomes a site for ethnolinguistic revitalization. Alexis identifies as a “*Pakistani Punjabi in Europe*” but makes a strategic linguistic distinction by emphasizing Potohari over Urdu—“my mother tongue Potohari and not Urdu”—signaling a conscious resistance to national linguistic homogenization.

Future Research Recommendations

As this study highlights how YouTube comments contribute to the symbolic and sociolinguistic revitalization of Potohari, future research can expand this exploration across broader digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, or Facebook, where multimodal storytelling and oral performance further shape language practices. Comparative studies between different endangered regional languages in Pakistan—such as Hindko, Seraiki, or Brahui—can also provide deeper insight into the digital dynamics of language shift and maintenance. Additionally, future inquiries could adopt longitudinal approaches to track the evolution of language use over time, or ethnographic methods to study how digital engagement influences offline language practices within communities. Investigating the role of youth, diasporic communities, or local influencers as digital agents of language revitalization also holds significant potential. Such studies would contribute to a richer understanding of how localized linguistic identities are being reshaped and reasserted in the age of digital globalization.

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