

# A Study of Language Preference among the Children of Kashmiri Speech Community Living in Jizan Region, Saudi Arabia

Parvaiz A. Ganai

English Language Institute, Jazan University  
PO box 114, Jazan, Saudi Arabia  
E-mail: pganai@jazanu.edu.sa

Irshad A. Naikoo

English Language Institute, Jazan University  
PO box 114, Jazan, Saudi Arabia  
E-mail: inaikoo@jazanu.edu.sa

## Abstract

“A language dies when nobody speaks it anymore” (Crystal, 2000). He further says that the most common process leading to language death is one in which a community of speakers of one language becomes bilingual with another language, and gradually shifts allegiance to the second language until they cease to use their original, heritage language. Kashmir is a multilingual area where Kashmiri forms the mother tongue of majority of population; Urdu serves as the second language followed by English. This linguistic scenario changes when children reside in an international community. They shift from Kashmiri to other language/s due to less contact with their own speech community. As a result, the language preference changes according to their linguistic requirement. The present study aimed at investigating the linguistic effect on children residing in Saudi Arabia especially in Jizan region. In addition, the research focused on the intergenerational transmission of languages by exploring the reasons which languages, as their first and second, parents wanted their children to learn. The data for the present study was collected online by distributing online structured questionnaires to the target population. Several social media platforms were used to collect data. The preferred method of data collection ensured that there was an equal representation of the target population (children aged 6-16 years). The respondents were the Kashmiri children who study in different international schools in Jizan region of Saudi Arabia. The data was tabulated and analyzed by applying descriptive statistical methods. The research concluded that the target group is bilingual in Urdu and English. Though Kashmiri is the home language of the respondents, but it is not the first language (L1) of all. Urdu is the major language used in home context while as English remains the first choice for outside home situations. The use of Kashmiri is restricted to occasions like interaction with back home relatives.

**Keywords:** Kashmiri language, bilingualism, intergenerational, speech community, language shift.

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## 1. Introduction

Language is very closely associated with class, nation, culture and ethnicity, all components of a person's self-identity (Fishman, 1985; Caldas and Caron-Caldas, 1999). Linguistic-identity statements become more powerful when combined with ethnic, social, and religious groups. The pattern of language use in a multilingual society is a complex interaction of socio-linguistic, discursive and pragmatic factors. Sometimes the speaker has a preference for a particular language for certain conversational and discourse settings; on other occasions, there is adaptability between two or more languages in a single conversation. The existence of large numbers of people who speak more than one language but who do not exhibit native control in both languages raises the question of how proficient a person must be considered bilingual. Haugen (1953) suggests that bilingualism begins 'at the point where a speaker of one language can produce complete, meaningful utterances in the other language.' Diebold (1961) has even suggested that bilingualism has commenced when a person begins to understand utterances in a second language but is unable to produce utterances. Multilingualism is an individual's knowledge and use of two or more languages in their daily lives (Bot, 2019).

In multilingual communities, where there is more than one linguistic channel for information exchange, the choice of the channel depends on a variety of factors, and is usually unpredictable (Auer, 1995). There are language theories like Translanguaging which refers to the language practices of bilingual people. If you've ever been present in the home of a bilingual family, you will notice that many language practices are used. Sometimes the children speak one language and the parents another, even to each other! Often both languages are used to include friends and family members who may not speak one language or the other and to engage all (Garcia,

2011). Nevertheless, linguistic studies point out certain frequently observed patterns. For instance, certain speech activities might be exclusively or more commonly related to a certain language choice. For example, Fishman (1971) reports use of English for professional purposes and Spanish for informal chat for English-Spanish bilinguals from Puerto Rico. Apart from association between such conversational contexts and language preference, language alteration is often found to be used as a signaling device to imply certain pragmatic functions (Barredo, 1997; Sanchez, 1983; Nishimura, 1995; Maschler, 1991; Maschler, 1994).

Recently, theories of languaging (Jørgensen and Møller 2014; Swain, 2006), flexible bilingualism (Blackledge and Creese, 2010; Creese and Blackledge, 2010), super-diversity (Blommaert, 2012), translanguing practice (Canagarajah, 2013; Kimura and Canagarajah, 2018), and translanguaging (García and Li, 2014; Li, 2018) have arisen to reflect the super diverse realities of modern-day language users who utilize their individual linguistic repertoires in a flexible and creative manner, crossing the boundaries of what is traditionally understood as “a language” (Cited in Pietikainen, 2021). Theories of multilingualism are changing our perception of language rapidly. The previously widely held view of distinct languages or language variants as codes relevant to speech communities (Gumperz, 1982) is evolving. Researchers now acknowledge that neatly defined cultural groups are no longer the most relevant environments in which urbanized global citizens interact (Pietikainen, 2021).

Understanding and characterizing language preference in multilingual societies has been the subject matter of linguistic inquiry for over half a century (Milroy and Muysken, 1995). Research has established that language preference for bilingual children varies across environments. In a study of Mexican American middle school students, Marsiglia and Waller (2002) found that although bilingual students’ language preferences differed across environments (e.g., home, friends, and media), they spoke Spanish most at home. Similarly, Filipino- and English-speaking bilingual elementary students in the Philippines preferred English for media, school related communication, and religion but preferred Filipino for communication with friends and family (Ledesma & Morris, 2005). Language preferences may be affected by differences in multilingual expectations across settings and people (Soto & Yu, 2014). The Urdu-Kashmiri language contact situation has existed for a long time; thus, studying linguistic identities in contemporary Kashmir is ideal. It was found that as age group increases, the frequency for associating richness with Kashmiri increases, such that among lower age groups, the association of richness with the language decreases. (Bhat, 2016)

The Middle East is a super-diverse place that is the second home of people with different linguistic identities. This multilingualism is due in part to the presence of large numbers of expatriate workers. English is the dominant language in the Gulf even though Arabic is the national language (Siemund et al., 2021). Other languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, and Tagalog are widely spoken. Migration can have hugely different outcomes in terms of language contact depending on which parts of the communicative household require competence in the language of the receiving society, even when the same languages and the same societies are involved (Auer, 2020). As a result, it becomes a challenge to preserve the linguistic identity.

The present study aims to investigate the language preferences of school going Kashmiri children living in Saudi Arabia. Being in a multilingual society, the young children are in contact with different speech communities. As a result, language switching has become a norm for communication. Thus, the preference of language varies according to their need in a particular social environment.

## 2. Methodology

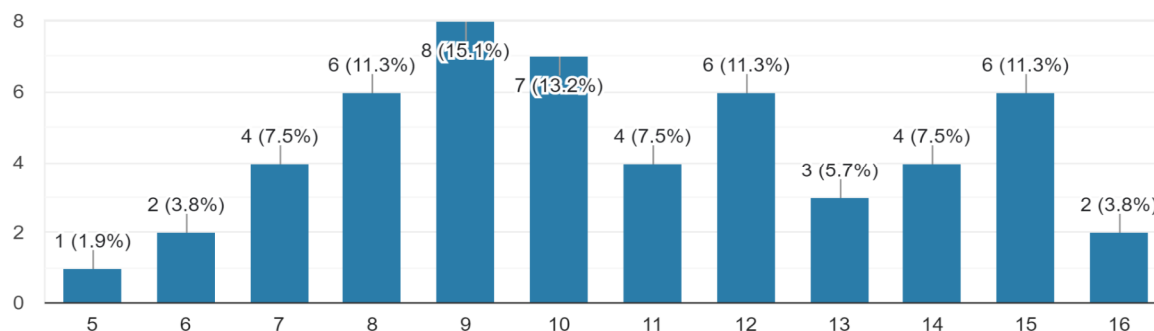
Online survey approach is far more significant than the use of interview or focus groups because it is faster and economical (Yeager et al., 2011). Furthermore, survey conducted online is welcomed by most of the young children because of their keen interest in internet. The data for the present study was collected online by distributing online structured questionnaires to the target population. The questionnaire was prepared with the consciousness that it should be user-friendly, reasonable and comprised of a simple interface that motivates the participant to fill in the survey. Several social media platforms were used to collect data because the online survey has an extensive reach through different networks, and it goes past the close peers who might be biased in their responses. The preferred method of data collection ensured that there was an equal representation of the target population (children aged 6-16 years). The respondents were the Kashmiri children who study in different international schools in Saudi Arabia.

The questionnaire was meant for students to sought information regarding the name (optional), gender, age-group, birthplace, residing country, languages known, languages spoken with parents and sibling, home country friends, residing country friends, and friends from other countries, medium of instruction in the school, languages spoken at school with teachers, classmates, same age group, above age group, and below age group, languages spoken outside the classroom, languages spoken outside the school, language spoken on phone with parents, friends, and relatives, preferred language while watching videos, playing video games, language used while chatting with friends, parents, and others.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the language preference of Kashmiri children living in Jizan region of Saudi Arabia. The data for this study was collected from 53 (25 male, 28 female) respondents and analyzed statistically. Figure 1 show the age of the respondents who took part in the survey. The percentage of respondents as per their age is: 1.9% (5 years), 3.8% (6 years), 7.5% (7 years), 11.3% (8 years), 15.1% (9 years), 13.2% (10 years), 7.5% (11 years), 11.3% (12 years), 5.7% (13 years), 7.5% (14 years), 11.3% (15 years), and 3.8% (16 years). The respondents were categorized as; a) age below 9 years, b) age 10–13 years, and C) above 14 years.

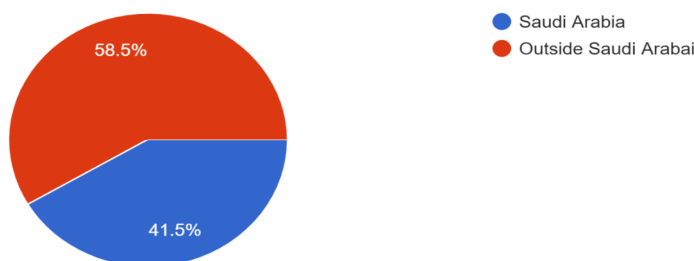
**Figure 1: Age of Respondents (N=53)**



The analyzed data was illustrated in both visual representation and descriptive form. The quantification of the data revealed the following results.

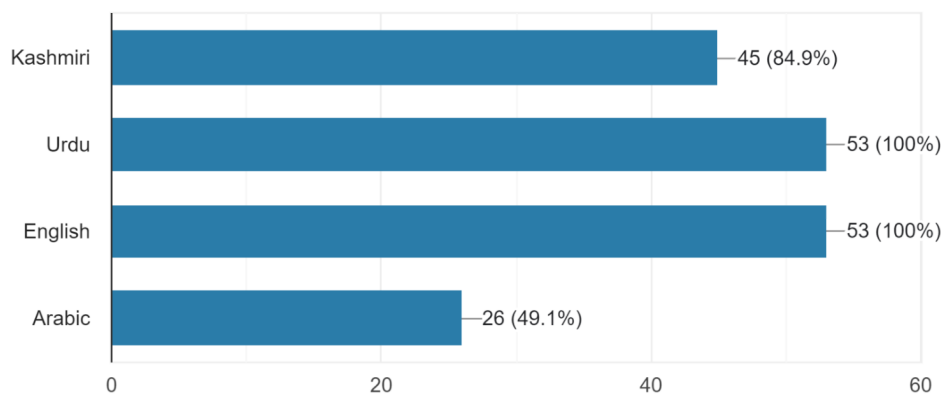
**3.1. Birthplace:** Most of the respondents were born outside Saudi Arabia (58.5%) whereas; the others (41.5%) were born in Saudi Arabia. It is because the job markets in the Middle East – particularly Saudi Arabia has witnessed growth in the last few decades. It became the prime destination for job aspirants all over the world. Kashmiri like other people were also attracted to pursue their career in Saudi Arabia. As a result, a good number of respondents are born here.

**Figure 2: Birthplace**



**3.2. Languages Known:** In many parts of the world it is just a normal requirement of daily living that people speak several languages: perhaps one or more at home, another in the village, still another for purposes of trade, and yet another for contact with the outside world of wider social or political organization (Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2015). Similarly, the respondents in present study are proficient in Kashmiri, Urdu, English, and Arabic. All the participants claim to be functionally bilingual in Urdu and English. There are 84.90% respondents who are trilingual in Kashmiri, Urdu and English, and 49.10% are quadrilingual in Kashmiri, Urdu, English, and Arabic. Due to the instantaneous spread of social media, the need of a lingua franca (English) has arisen to overcome the barriers between international communications and interactions. Moreover, the use of English as a foreign language and the language of education provided a rapid access to modern development in science, media, and technology. Therefore, English is also a prior choice of Kashmiri children living in multi-lingual and multi-cultural society. Urdu being a lingua franca in Indian sub-continent (especially India and Pakistan) is equally important for the communication among the children. Kashmiri is the home language of the most respondents, but it is worthy to mention here that it is not the L1 of all the respondents. Arabic is also spoken by a large group of respondents because they grew up in multilingual speech community with Arabic as major language.

**Figure 3: Languages Known**

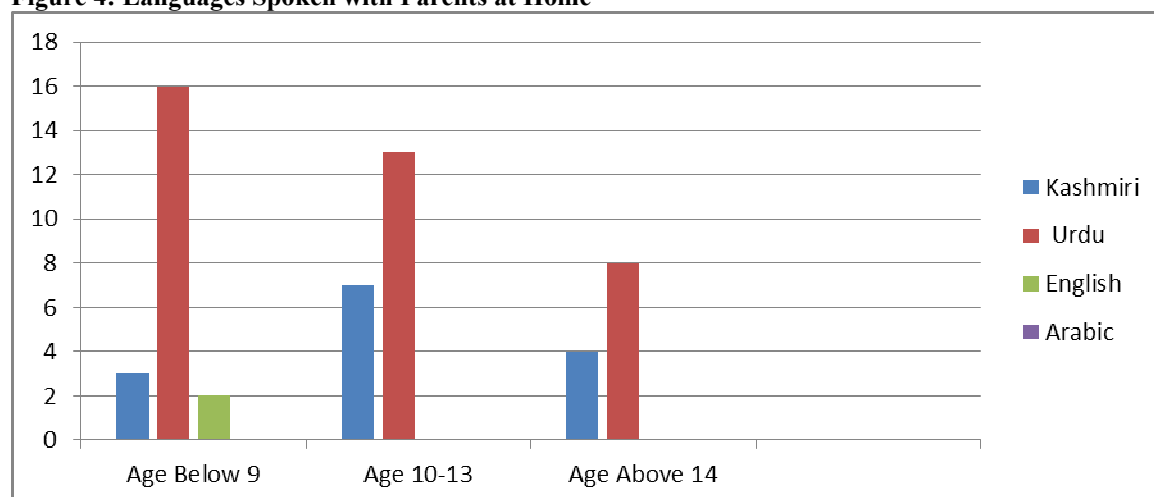


**3.3. Languages spoken with parents at home:** The present study reflects that Kashmiri children living in Saudi Arabia use different languages in varying environments. Besides this, they have a language choice to communicate with different people in different contexts. For example, 69.8% children speak Urdu, 26.4% speak Kashmiri, and 3.8% speak English with their parents at home.

The use of Urdu can be traced back to the fact that Urdu in Kashmir has a unique historical background. Unlike other non-native languages, it did not come along with the inhabitants who spoke it. The religious affinity was one of the significant factors that allowed the introduction and acceptance of Urdu into the Kashmiri speech community without any resistance. During the middle of the 18th century, there was an enormous increase in religious writings in Urdu. Urdu emerged as a language of Islamic revivalism (Bhat, 2017).

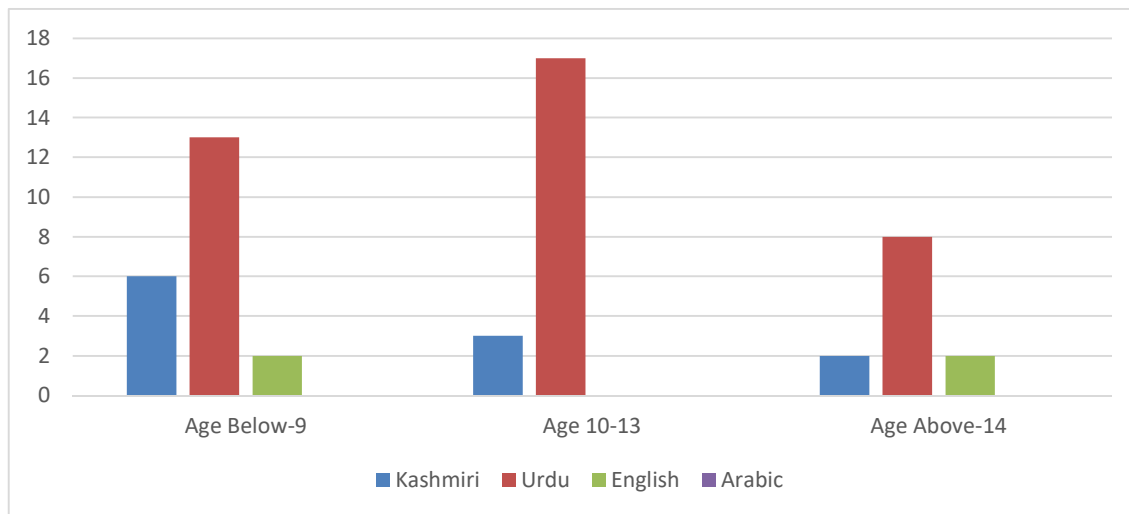
It is evident from figure 4, that Urdu is a major language used to communicate with parents by all age groups. The second major language for the communication is Kashmiri. However, the use of English language with parents is only reported in the below 9 age group. It is assumed that parents play an important role in deciding the language preference of their children.

**Figure 4: Languages Spoken with Parents at Home**



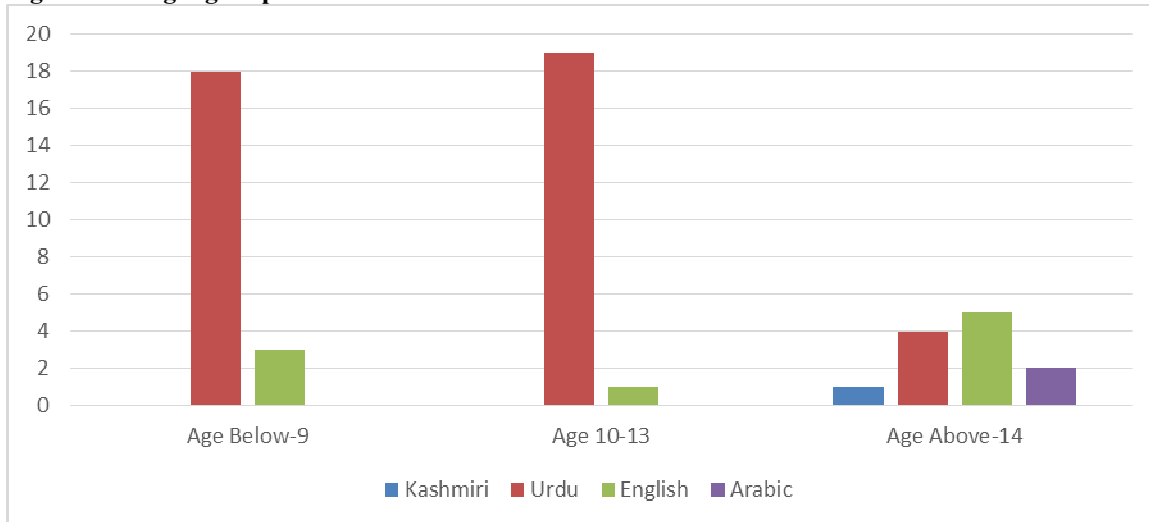
**3.4. Languages used with sibling at home:** Languages used with sibling at home show the similar pattern i.e., 77.7% speak Urdu with sibling, followed by Kashmiri (20.8%), and English (7.5%). This can be also explained by the fact that they are more proficient and comfortable in Urdu than any other language. The figure 5 clearly indicates that all the age groups speak Urdu followed by Kashmiri. English is spoken by below 9 and above 14 age groups with same frequency. However, it is not a preferred language choice for the age group (10-13).

**Figure 5: Language Spoken with Sibling**



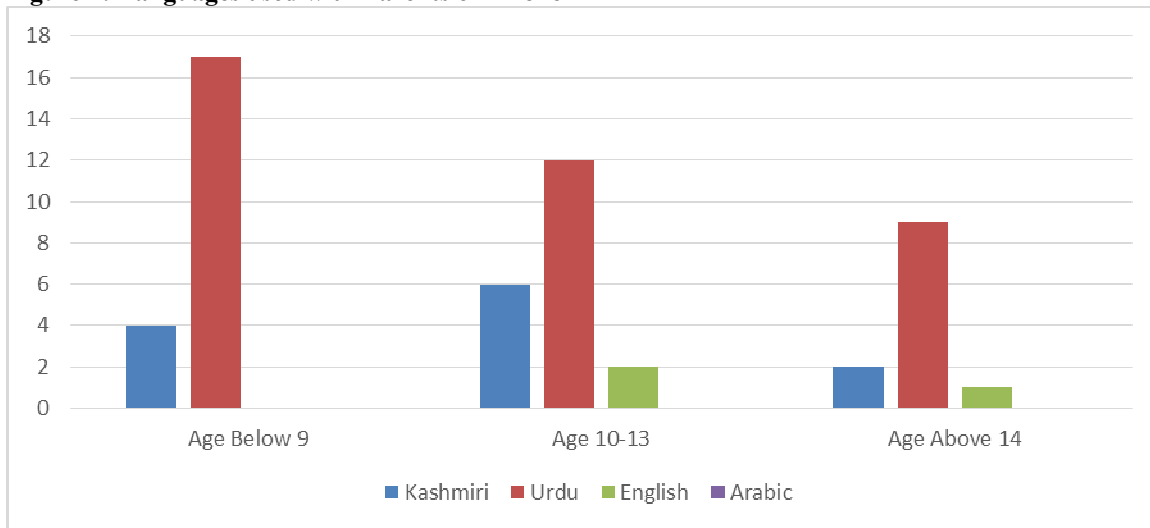
**3.5. Languages Spoken outside School:** It is always seen that there is a difference between the language use at the school and outside the school. In school, children are bound to follow the school’s language policy while outside the school; the choice is open for them. In this study, it is noticed that children used all the known languages (English, Urdu, Kashmiri, and Arabic) outside school but at school the preferred language is English. The most preferred languages for below 9 and 10-13 age group are Urdu (69.81%) and English (7.54%) outside school; the above 14 age group use English (9.43%), Urdu (7.54%), Arabic (3.77%), and Kashmiri (1.88%). Thus, Urdu is the most spoken language outside school, followed by English, Arabic, and Kashmiri respectively.

**Figure 6: Languages Spoken outside School**



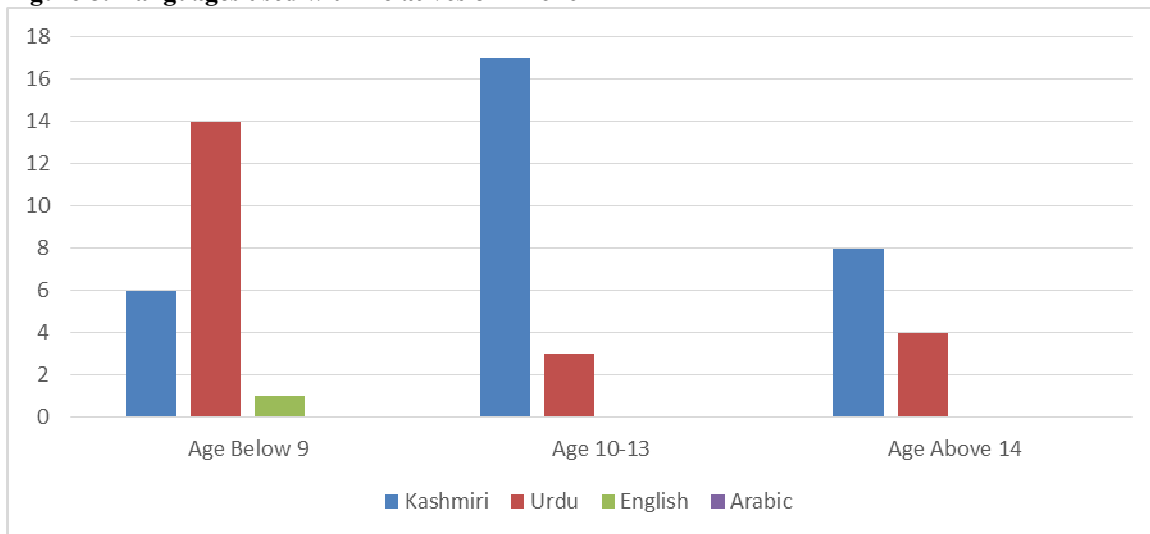
**3.6. Languages used with Parents on Phone:** The results show that Urdu is the preferred language used on phone with parents which is almost same as the language used at home. For example, 71.7% children speak Urdu, 22.6% speak Kashmiri, and 5.7% speak English with their parents on phone. It is evident that there is a slight difference between the frequency of language use at home and on the phone. The second preference is given to Kashmiri language followed by English. The fourth known language (Arabic) is not a choice for communication with parents at all.

**Figure 7: Languages used with Parents on Phone**



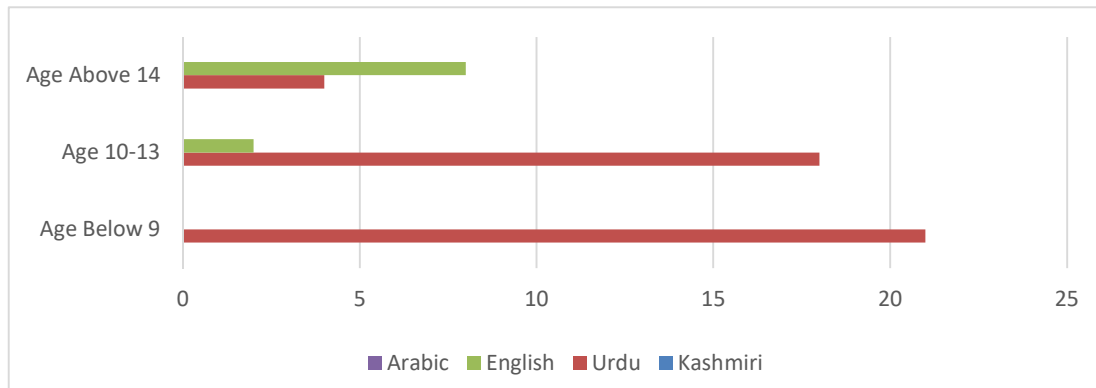
**3.7. Languages used with Relatives on Phone:** It is a well-known linguistic phenomenon that the competence and consciousness of language increases with the age. It is clear from the data that the use of Kashmiri language with relatives increases with age. The most preferred language used with relatives is Kashmiri (58.5%) followed by Urdu (39.6%) and English (2.9%). It is noticed that the age groups (10-13 and above 14) use Kashmiri in most of their communications as compared to the age group (below 9) who prefer Urdu language because of their less interaction with natives (Kashmiri).

**Figure 8: Languages used with Relatives on Phone**



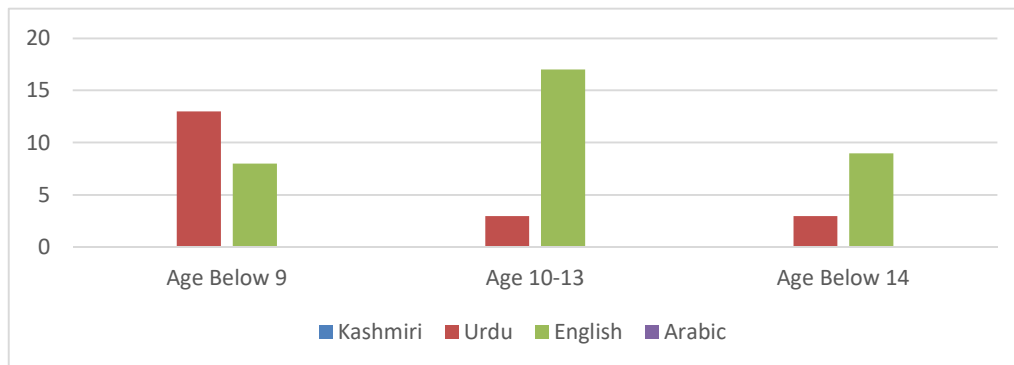
**3.8. Languages used with Friends on Phone:** The data reveals that Urdu (81.1%) is the most preferable language to communicate with friends on phone followed by English (18.9%). The respondents above 14 use English more often than Urdu; however, Kashmiri and Arabic are not used. It is believed that Urdu being first choice is because most of their friends are Urdu speaking. The language shift is required when they need to communicate with non-Urdu friends, so their choice remains English. It can be interpreted that the below 9 age group prefer Urdu speaking friends due to their language compatibility. Due to the expansion of social circle, the age group (10-13) speaks English with some of their friends in addition to Urdu. Conversely, the age group (above 14) makes English as their first choice.

**Figure 9: Languages used with Friends on Phone**



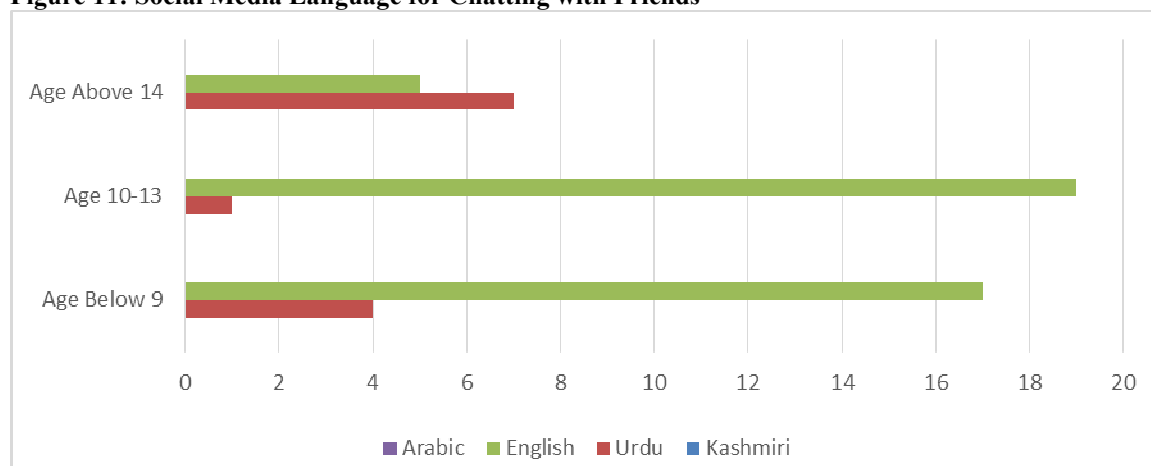
**3.9. Social Media Language for Chatting with Parents:** Undoubtedly, the written word carries a special status in comparison to an oral representation. Writing enables us to express ourselves in a more targeted, planned and often more precise manner. It is worth mentioning that for writing you need to learn a script of a particular language you want to use. It is a fact that more than half of the world’s existing languages do not have a written form. And it is not necessary that a person knows the written form of the language he/she speaks. Some languages have very difficult writing systems and cannot be easily learned even by natives. Due to the advent of technology, use of social media, and the need to communicate with far off people, the written form is more in use than the past. In this study, it is revealed that the most preferable languages used for chatting is English (65.16%) followed by Urdu (35.84%). It is assumed that the transliterated form (Roman Alphabet) is used for Urdu due to inaccessibility and complexity of the keyboard (Urdu).

**Figure 10: Social Media Language for Chatting with Parents**



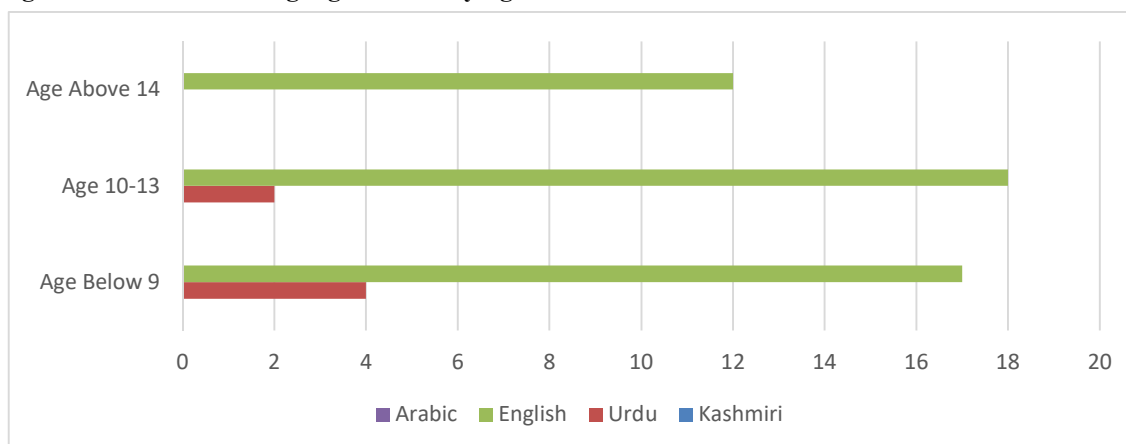
**3.10. Social Media Language for Chatting with Friends:** As evident from data, English (77.4%) is the most preferable language for chatting with friends. The second choice for chatting is Urdu (22.6%). The age groups (below 9 and 10-13) make English as their first choice for chatting which is otherwise for the age group (above 14). The later age group prefers Urdu (13.2%) and place English (9.43%) as their second choice.

**Figure 11: Social Media Language for Chatting with Friends**



**3.11. Preferred Language while playing video Games:** As online video games become more popular day by day, their adoption as a form of entertainment for all age groups has risen accordingly. Some of the most popular online video games allow players to communicate among themselves via voice chat or text chat. Since online video games have players from all over the world, players often find themselves in situations where they must use English as a medium of communication to compete or cooperate with the other players (Burak Emre, et. al., 2022). The data of this study reveals that the preferred language while playing video games is English (88.7%) followed by Urdu (11.3%). It can't be denied that most of the game development companies are U.S. based; as a result, English is set as the default language.

**Figure 12: Preferred Language while Playing Video Games**



The global spread of English has altered its status from being a homogeneous and standard language spoken by a few powerful countries into an international language or lingua franca spoken by a wide variety of speakers around the world (Llurda, 2004; Rose & Galloway, 2017). “If there is one predictable consequence of globalization of a language, it is that nobody owns it anymore” (Crystal, 1997). Seidlhofer (2003) stated that English is being shaped at least as much by its nonnative speakers as by its native speakers. The other studies affirmed that English does not belong only to native-speaking communities because the number of people who currently speak English as a second/foreign language exceeds that of native English speakers (Llurda, 2017; Marlina, 2018; Schuttz, 2019).

It is evident from table 1, that English is used in all situations e.g., formal, informal, face-to-face conversations, telephone call, social media, etc. The other major language that gets space in day-to-day communication is Urdu while only a few cases report Kashmiri language as a choice. There are situations like, interaction with other country friends, where respondents use only English. In certain conditions like communication with friends from home country, Urdu (90.60%) is used the most. The circumstances like languages spoken outside the class are also reported where both English and Urdu share the same proportion. In teacher-student interaction, English is mostly used but there are cases where they use Urdu to communicate. This can be supported by the fact that many teachers in schools are from Indian sub-continent.



**Table 1: Preference of Language in Different Settings**

	Kashmiri	Urdu	English	Arabic
Language spoken with friends from other the countries	-	-	100%	-
Language spoken with home country Friends	3.75%	90.60%	5.65%	-
Medium of Instruction in the School	-	-	100%	-
Language Spoken with teachers	-	11.30%	88.70%	-
Language Spoken at School	-	18.90%	81.10%	-
Language Spoken with Classmates	-	5.66%	94.33%	-
Language Spoken outside the Class	-	47.17%	52.83%	-
Language Spoken with Above Age Group	-	43.40%	56.60%	-
Language Spoken with Below Age Group	-	69.80%	30.10%	-
Language Spoken with Same Age Group	1.90%	49.05%	49.05%	-
Social Media Language for Chatting with others	-	5.7%	94.3%	-

#### 4. Conclusion

The linguistic scenario of Kashmir always attracted the attention of language experts to study the complexity of Kashmiri speech community who live in close contact with other languages of the sub-continent. Urdu serves as a bridge for communication with other speech communities while English, as a global language, helps to communicate with the rest of the world. Due to the advent of Islam, Arabic language also got some space in religious context. The present study was a preliminary study to investigate the language preference among the children of Kashmiri speech community living in Jizan region (Saudi Arabia) in different situations. The members of the target group are bilingual in Urdu and English. It elucidates that though Kashmiri is the home language of the respondents, but it is not the L1 (first language) of all. Urdu is the major language used in home context while as English remains the first choice for outside home situations. The use of Kashmiri is restricted to occasions like interaction with back home relatives. In comparison to in-person communication, telecommunication shows a slight variation in language choice. It is assumed that language attitude plays an important role in opting for the choice in a language contact situation. The preferred language for social media and use of technology is English. Furthermore, it is also a preference for playing online video games and watching online content. It is anticipated that the transliterated form (Roman Alphabet) is used for Urdu due to inaccessibility and complexity of the keyboard (Urdu).

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**1. Dr. Parvaiz Ahmad Ganai** has pursued his doctorate (PhD) from the Department of Linguistics, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India. He has presented/published many research papers at various national and international platforms. He has also published many articles on English, Kashmiri, and Kohistani languages. He has been associated with the Central Institute of Indian Languages Mysore and Urdu Teaching and Research Centre Lucknow (Ministry of HRD, Govt. of India). He is a reviewer of *Journal of Language, Literature and Education (JELLE)*. Previously, he was teaching at the Department of English, Government Degree College for Women, Baramulla, Kashmir. He has been teaching at English Language Institute (ELI), Jazan University, Jazan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since 2014. He is a member of Planning and Development, Re-evaluation, and We Care Unit at Jazan University.

**2. Dr. Irshad Ahmad Naikoo** has pursued his doctorate (PhD) from the Department of Linguistics, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, India. He has presented/published many research papers at various national and international platforms. He has also published many articles on English, Kashmiri and Balti languages. He has been associated with the Central Institute of Indian Languages Mysore and Urdu Teaching and Research Centre Lucknow (Ministry of HRD, Govt. of India). Previously, he was teaching at the Department of English, Government Degree College (Boys), Baramulla, Kashmir. He has been teaching at English Language Institute (ELI), Jazan University, Jazan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia since 2014. He is a member of Translation and Quality & Accreditation Committee at Jazan University.