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Languages of Influence: Urdu, English, and Regional Vernaculars in Pakistan's Cultural Diplomacy Abroad

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative, tripartite analysis of how Pakistan's cultural diplomacy apparatus strategically deploys Urdu, English, and regional vernaculars to construct and project national identity abroad. Drawing on qualitative case-study methodology grounded in critical discourse analysis, the study examines official diplomatic materials, literary festival programming, investment promotion communications, and UNESCO heritage nominations alongside semi-structured expert interviews with cultural attachés and language promotion practitioners. The central argument proposes that Pakistan's linguistic diplomacy operates on an unspoken three-tiered stratagem wherein Urdu functions as an emotional binder for diasporic nationalism, English serves as a pragmatic facade for elite international legitimation, and regional vernaculars including Sindhi, Punjabi, and Pashto are mobilized as heritage anchors for geostrategic connectivity and civilizational outreach. Each tier addresses a distinct audience and performs a distinct narrative function. Urdu constructs a romanticized, unified homeland for diaspora communities through *mushairas* and literary commemorations, yet this emotional mobilization risks marginalizing second-generation migrants and non-Urdu-speaking diaspora populations. English projects state legitimacy and investor-friendly modernity through literary festivals, op-ed diplomacy, and digital investment portals, deliberately distancing Pakistan from Orientalist tropes while reinscribing the colonial hierarchies that originally installed English as the language of power. Regional vernaculars root Pakistan's identity in pre-Partition antiquity through UNESCO inscriptions and cross-border spiritual corridors, yet these languages remain neglected within domestic institutions even as they are deployed internationally for diplomatic purposes. The study identifies a fundamental contradiction underpinning this tripartite arrangement. The state draws instrumentally upon linguistic diversity for external projection while maintaining a domestic hierarchy that privileges Urdu and English over regional mother tongues. The resulting diplomatic posture projects fracture rather than pluralistic confidence, revealing the need for a coherent linguistic diplomacy policy that aligns international projection with domestic institutional commitment.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, Linguistic Hierarchy, Pakistan, Urdu, Regional Vernaculars.

Introduction

Pakistan's linguistic landscape presents a profound paradox for its international self-projection. The country is home to over 70 languages, yet its official architecture privileges a postcolonial elite language (English), a national lingua franca spoken natively by only 7.1% of the population (Urdu), while regional mother tongues such as Punjabi (38.8%), Pashto (18.2%), and Sindhi (14.6%) dominate the intimate spaces of home and community. This internal complexity does not remain neatly contained within national borders rather, it is projected onto the world stage

in fragmented and often contradictory ways. As Ali (2025) observes, for decades Pakistan's official narrative "imagined the nation as a unitary entity," interpreting cultural and linguistic differences "not as expressions of diversity but as contradictions to the ideal of nationhood." This foundational anxiety about internal plurality has left a durable imprint on how the state presents itself abroad. The result is a diplomatic posture that simultaneously celebrates a monolithic Urdu-Islamic identity for diasporic consumption while leaning heavily on English to signal modern state legitimacy to Western interlocutors, leaving the vast cultural capital embedded in regional languages largely untapped as a strategic resource (Ali, 2025; Fazal, 2025).

Cultural diplomacy, understood as the deployment of a state's cultural assets in support of foreign policy objectives, has emerged as a central mechanism of soft power in the twenty-first century (Konyrshin & Sydyknazarov, 2025). Language occupies a unique and often underestimated position within this diplomatic toolkit. It functions not merely as a neutral medium of communication but as a dense carrier of identity, historical memory, and political intent. When a state chooses to promote a particular language abroad through literary festivals, language-learning platforms, diaspora engagement, or international broadcasting it is simultaneously curating a specific narrative about who belongs to the nation, whose heritage is deemed worthy of global display, and what values the state claims to embody. The Ukrainian case offers a recent and instructive parallel as since 2014, Ukraine has strategically mobilized its language through platforms like Duolingo, the volunteer-driven *Ye-Mova* initiative, and state-coordinated audio guides in international museums, transforming Ukrainian from a national language under perceived threat into an instrument of global solidarity and soft power projection (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine & Ukrainian Institute, 2025). Conversely, Pakistan has not yet articulated a coherent linguistic dimension to its cultural diplomacy, even as scholars have noted that the state's broader foreign affairs apparatus remains weakened by a "structural credibility problem" and an enduring "perception gap" between domestic realities and international image (Malik, 2025).

This paper argues that Pakistan's cultural diplomacy operates on an unspoken, three-tiered stratagem that mirrors, and ultimately exports, the nation's internal linguistic hierarchies. The first tier deploys Urdu as an emotional binder, constructing a romanticized, unified notion of the homeland aimed primarily at diaspora populations in the United Kingdom, North America, and the Gulf States (Fazal, 2025). The second tier mobilizes English as a pragmatic facade, designed for elite international engagement and state-to-state legitimacy, projecting an image of a modern, articulate, and investor-friendly Pakistan to the corridors of power in Washington, London, and Brussels. The third tier, which operates at the margins of state policy, instrumentalized regional vernaculars Sindhi, Punjabi, Pashto as heritage anchors for niche geostrategic connectivity and civilizational tourism. This tier is the most delicate, as it subtly subverts the Urdu-centric national narrative and operates in proximity to contested zones of identity politics, as seen in the case of the Sindhi language movement or the symbolic politics of provincial culture days (Ali, 2025). Drawing on critical discourse analysis of diplomatic materials and semi-structured interviews with cultural attachés and policy practitioners, this study investigates the tensions, contradictions, and uncoordinated silences inherent in this tripartite arrangement. As Malik (2025) warns, Pakistan does not suffer from a shortage of compelling cultural stories; it suffers from a deficit of strategic storytellers capable of weaving linguistic diversity into narrative coherence. This paper identifies, analyzes, and critiques the fragmented logic underpinning Pakistan's languages of influence abroad, arguing that without

deliberate policy intervention, the state's linguistic diplomacy will continue to project fracture rather than the pluralistic confidence its diversity could command.

Literature Review

The conceptual architecture of cultural diplomacy rests fundamentally on Joseph Nye's paradigm of soft power, which he defined as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2004, p. 5). This framework has proven remarkably durable in international relations scholarship, yet its application to linguistic strategy remains notably underdeveloped. Nye himself acknowledged that a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policies constitute the primary resources of soft power, but the discrete role of language as both a carrier and a catalyst of these resources has rarely received systematic theoretical attention. The linguistic dimension of soft power operates at multiple levels simultaneously. A state that promotes its language abroad does not merely facilitate communication. It constructs an epistemic framework through which its cultural products, political narratives, and normative claims become intelligible and persuasive to foreign audiences. This process is intimately connected to what Anholt (2007) theorized as nation branding, a competitive identity strategy through which states seek to manage and enhance their international reputation. Anholt's Nation Brands Index measures global perceptions across six dimensions including culture, people, and governance, yet language remains an implicit variable in this model rather than an explicit object of measurement (Scottish Government, 2025). The cultural dimension of the NBI captures perceptions of heritage and contemporary cultural production, but it does not isolate the extent to which a nation's language functions as an independent vector of attraction. This gap is significant because language carries what Allen (2016) identified as a unique dual function in nation branding efforts. It simultaneously transmits nationally specific content while also serving as the medium through which deeply rooted cultural stereotypes and perceptions are activated and reinforced. A nation's linguistic projection abroad thus constitutes a particularly potent and durable form of brand communication, one that cannot be easily redesigned by marketing campaigns precisely because it is embedded in centuries of accumulated historical narrative.

The postcolonial condition introduces a layer of theoretical complexity that fundamentally distinguishes Pakistan's linguistic diplomacy from that of nations unmarked by colonial histories. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) established the foundational framework for understanding this dynamic through their articulation of abrogation and appropriation as the twin textual strategies of postcolonial writing. Abrogation refers to the rejection of the imperial centre's normative standard of language, while appropriation describes the process of reconstituting the colonial language to express a distinctly postcolonial experience and cultural identity. This theoretical apparatus was originally developed to analyze literary texts, yet its analytical power extends directly into the domain of cultural diplomacy. When a postcolonial state chooses English as a primary vehicle for international engagement, it engages in a complex act of simultaneous appropriation and submission. The language of the former colonizer becomes a tool for asserting modern statehood and elite competence on the global stage, but it also reinscribes a hierarchy in which proximity to metropolitan linguistic norms signals legitimacy. Rahman (1996) mapped this dynamic onto Pakistan's internal political landscape with meticulous precision, demonstrating that language conflict in the country has always been a proxy for contests over political dominance and resource distribution. His historical analysis revealed that the British colonial administration's decision to impose Urdu rather than Punjabi as the language of administration in Punjab after 1849 created a durable linguistic hierarchy that privileged a small Urdu-speaking elite while alienating the majority

Punjabi-speaking population from the language of power. This colonial genealogy has profound implications for Pakistan's cultural diplomacy. The state's international self-presentation in English does not represent a neutral choice of a global lingua franca. It channels a specific class position and a particular postcolonial anxiety about how the nation will be perceived by Western audiences. The Urdu that the state projects abroad as the emotional language of national belonging carries its own troubled history, having been instrumentalized during the Pakistan Movement as a symbol of Muslim identity in opposition to Hindi, a politicization that ultimately contributed to the Bengali language movement and the traumatic severing of the country's eastern wing in 1971 (Zahoor, 2025).

The Pakistani diaspora constitutes the most significant audience for the state's linguistic diplomacy, yet scholarly understanding of how language functions as a homeland connection for these communities remains fragmented. According to government estimates, over 10.80 million Pakistanis have moved abroad since 1990, with the largest concentrations residing in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and North America (Wikipedia, 2023). These communities are marked by extraordinary linguistic diversity, speaking English, Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi, and other languages depending on their regional origins and migration trajectories. The diaspora's relationship to language is neither uniform nor static. First-generation migrants often maintain strong competence in regional mother tongues and use Urdu as a pan-Pakistani lingua franca within community institutions. Second and third generations, particularly in Anglophone countries, frequently experience language shift toward English dominance while retaining varying degrees of receptive competence in heritage languages. This generational dynamic creates a fundamental tension for state-directed cultural diplomacy. Initiatives designed to mobilize diasporic nostalgia through Urdu poetry symposiums or Sufi music performances may resonate powerfully with older migrants who possess the linguistic and cultural repertoire to appreciate them, but they risk failing to engage younger diaspora members whose primary connection to Pakistan is mediated through English and whose understanding of Pakistani identity may be shaped more by global youth culture than by the symbolic repertoire of the Urdu-speaking elite. The state's approach to its diaspora has been characterized by what Malik (2025) described as a broader perception gap in Pakistan's international communication. The government celebrates the diaspora's economic contributions, particularly the record remittances that reached US\$33 billion in 2021, while offering a culturally monolithic vision of the homeland that does not reflect the linguistic heterogeneity of either the diaspora or the country it claims to represent. Pakistanis returning from the Middle East are often described as remaining close to Pakistani culture and fluent in Urdu, English, and their regional language, while those returning from Europe and North America may experience culture shock and find that their children have not learned Urdu (Wikipedia, 2016). This differential relationship to language across diaspora communities suggests that a one-size-fits-all linguistic diplomacy cannot effectively engage the full spectrum of overseas Pakistanis.

Existing scholarship on Pakistan's cultural diplomacy has examined a range of soft power assets including cuisine, music, sports, and religious heritage, yet the discrete and comparative role of language as a strategic resource remains conspicuously under-theorized. A recent study analyzing Pakistan's soft power efforts between 2018 and 2022 examined the contributions of government institutions and individual actors across domains such as religion, food, tourism, and culture, presenting a case for the potential of soft power to transform the country's international reputation despite frequent labeling as a failed state (CIAO, 2024). This work valuably maps the institutional landscape of Pakistan's cultural outreach, but it does not

interrogate the linguistic choices that structure all of these efforts. Every act of cultural diplomacy, whether a food festival, a music performance, or a religious exhibition, is mediated through language. The decision to present these cultural products in English, Urdu, or a regional vernacular is not a neutral operational detail. It constitutes a political choice that determines which audiences are addressed, which aspects of national identity are foregrounded, and whose cultural labor is rendered visible or invisible on the international stage. The comparative dimension of this linguistic analysis is entirely absent from the existing literature. No study has systematically examined how Urdu, English, and regional vernaculars are differentially deployed across Pakistan's cultural diplomacy apparatus, what institutional logics govern these choices, and what consequences flow from the privileging of certain languages over others. Fazal (2025) addressed this gap indirectly by arguing that Pakistan's language policy shapes national unity and that achieving balance among competing linguistic claims is essential for domestic cohesion. His analysis, however, stops at the nation's borders and does not extend to how these internal linguistic negotiations are projected internationally. The tripartite framework proposed in this study, distinguishing Urdu's emotional and diasporic function from English's elite legitimation function and regional vernaculars' heritage anchoring function, offers a novel theoretical lens for analyzing the fragmented logic underpinning Pakistan's languages of influence abroad. This framework synthesizes insights from soft power theory, postcolonial studies, and diaspora scholarship to address a gap that the existing literature has acknowledged only implicitly, the need for a comparative analysis of how a multilingual postcolonial state strategically deploys its linguistic repertoire in the service of cultural diplomacy.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and categorize the specific ways in which Urdu, English, and regional vernaculars are operationalized in Pakistan's official cultural diplomacy initiatives abroad.
2. To analyze the intended and perceived audiences, messages, and values associated with the use of each language tier (national, postcolonial, regional) in its international outreach.
3. To critically examine the potential tensions, contradictions, and domestic political implications created by projecting a linguistically stratified image internationally.
4. To assess the effectiveness of this multilingual projection in achieving Pakistan's broader soft power and diplomatic goals.

Research Questions

1. How is Urdu utilized in diaspora-oriented cultural programs, and what specific narrative of the 'homeland' does it construct?
2. What role does the English language play in Pakistan's elite cultural showcases (e.g., literary festivals, op-eds, art biennales) aimed at Western governments and international media?
3. In what ways are regional vernaculars (e.g., Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto) activated in cultural diplomacy, particularly concerning neighboring countries and heritage tourism, and what political boundaries do they implicitly negotiate?
4. What disparities and hierarchies are revealed in the funding, institutional support, and diplomatic framing of Urdu, English, and regional language initiatives?

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive case-study approach grounded in the principles of critical discourse analysis to examine how Pakistan's linguistic choices construct distinct

narratives of national identity abroad. Data collection proceeds along two complementary tracks designed to capture both institutional intent and practitioner experience. The first track involves purposive documentary analysis of official public diplomacy materials sourced from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Pakistan National Council of the Arts, and Pakistani embassies in London, Washington D.C., Beijing, and Doha, with the corpus comprising mission statements, event brochures, press releases, and social media content selected for their direct relevance to language-based cultural programming. The second track consists of semi-structured expert interviews conducted with former diplomats, cultural attachés, curators of Pakistani cultural festivals hosted internationally, and heads of language promotion bodies including the Urdu Science Board and provincial literary academies, whose firsthand involvement in crafting and executing linguistic diplomacy provides access to the strategic reasoning behind language selection. The analytical framework employs a thematic coding scheme organized around the conceptual trinity underpinning the study, with English coded as pragmatic-tool for elite legitimation, Urdu coded as emotional-binder for diasporic nationalism, and regional vernaculars coded as heritage-anchors for niche connectivity. Discourse analysis then focuses on the framing of each language, examining vocabulary choices, imagery, and the implicit national narrative each linguistic register constructs for its intended audience.

Urdu as the "Emotional Binder"

The Pakistani state's deployment of Urdu within its diaspora engagement strategy constitutes a deliberate project of national narration that seeks to construct a unified and romanticized "idea of Pakistan" beyond the nation's territorial boundaries. This project finds its most visible institutional expression in the state-sponsored *mushaira*, the classical Urdu poetry symposium transplanted systematically into diaspora contexts. The Pakistan High Commission in London actively cultivated this tradition through events such as the 2019 "Evening with Iftikhar Arif," where the High Commissioner explicitly framed Urdu promotion as essential to transmitting national heritage to younger British Pakistanis (Press Information Department, 2019). The diplomatic framing reveals the state's instrumental logic with clarity. Urdu literature is positioned not as one tradition among many but as the privileged custodian of a singular national heritage. The Consul General in Chicago echoed this sentiment during a 2025 *mushaira* in Illinois, praising diaspora efforts to promote Pakistani culture and Urdu while highlighting how such platforms bring together people from diverse backgrounds (The Diplomatic Insight, 2025). This rhetoric accomplishes a subtle elision wherein regional cultural diversity is acknowledged only to be subsumed within the unifying embrace of Urdu poetic tradition, with diaspora institutions becoming co-producers of state-sanctioned linguistic nationalism.

The emotional architecture of Urdu diaspora diplomacy draws power from the documented relationship between displacement, nostalgia, and the poetry of longing central to the Urdu literary tradition. Scholarly research has established that nostalgia functions as a primary affective mechanism through which overseas Pakistanis maintain connection to their country of origin (Khan, 2025). This nostalgia finds potent expression in Urdu poetry, where the experience of separation has been refined over centuries into a sophisticated emotional vocabulary. Commemorations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Josh Malihabadi activate an entire repertoire of shared cultural memory rather than merely celebrating individual poets. A literary session organized in Riyadh demonstrated this phenomenon's geographical reach, bringing poets from across the diaspora to pay tribute to Faiz while incorporating younger representatives into the organizational framework to ensure the reproduction of emotional attachment across generational lines (Siasat News, 2011). The memorialization of Josh

Malihabadi anchors diaspora connection in a narrative of sacrifice, his own migration mirroring the diasporic experience while the state's conferral of the Hilal-i-Imtiaz retroactively validates that journey as national service (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2018). This curated nostalgia constructs a homeland overwhelmingly identified with the Urdu-speaking cultural elite, potentially rendering invisible the equally rich but less mobilized poetic traditions in Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi.

The strategy that renders Urdu cultural diplomacy effective simultaneously produces marginalization along generational and ethno-linguistic fault lines that a romanticized unified narrative cannot accommodate. Research on younger Pakistani migrants in European contexts demonstrates that second and third-generation diaspora members increasingly navigate identities through English and host-country languages, experiencing gradual Urdu attrition that raises concerns about heritage language preservation (Syed, 2025). This shift means state-directed Urdu diplomacy may resonate with first-generation migrants yet fail to engage younger Pakistanis whose cultural references are mediated through global youth culture. Further tension emerges from the state's historical framing of overseas Pakistanis primarily as economic assets measured through remittance figures, with political parties cultivating diaspora networks principally for lobbying and fundraising (Saeed, 2025). This instrumentalization sits uneasily alongside cultural rhetoric of emotional connection, raising questions about the authenticity of the state's commitment to linguistic heritage beyond resource extraction. Ethno-linguistic complexity further complicates the Urdu-centric model, a reality made visible when UAE authorities introduced Friday sermons in multiple languages including Urdu, Pashto, Malayalam, Tamil, and English (Arif, 2024). This initiative acknowledged the diversity within Pakistani expatriate communities that the state's cultural apparatus has historically overlooked. The Muhajir identity occupying a central position within Pakistan's national story, as Naqvi (2025) has demonstrated, emerged not as natural linguistic unity but as a politically constructed ethnic identity formed through post-Partition migration and urbanization. The state's projection of Urdu as the natural emotional language of the diaspora thus rests upon a selective vision of national identity that elevates one community's cultural repertoire to universal heritage while leaving Pashto-speaking communities in the UAE, Punjabi populations in Canada, and Sindhi heritage activists abroad largely unrepresented within official cultural diplomacy.

English as the "Pragmatic Facade"

The Pakistani state's strategic deployment of English within its international-facing diplomacy constitutes a calculated performance of modernity and competence aimed squarely at the global political and financial elite. This instrumental logic finds its most concentrated expression in the programming choices of the country's flagship literary festivals. The 16th Karachi Literature Festival, held in February 2025 under the theme "Narratives of the Soil," constructed an English-dominant intellectual space designed for international consumption, featuring distinguished foreign guests including the French Ambassador, the United States Consul General, and the British Deputy Head of Mission (The Express Tribune, 2025a). The festival's keynote address, delivered by FS Aijazuddin and Asghar Nadeem Syed, celebrated literature's power in shaping societies while the presence of international diplomats underscored the event's orientation toward Western cultural authority and global literary markets. The 13th Lahore Literary Festival, convening at the Alhamra Arts Council with over 150 national and international delegates and sixty sessions spanning arts, literature, history, and sociology, mirrored this structure by positioning English as the default language of prestigious international exchange (The News International, 2025a). These festivals, while

including Urdu and regional language sessions, remain fundamentally exercises in what scholar Tariq Rahman identified as the teaching of a worldview through English-medium cultural production, a process that privileges Western epistemologies and positions Pakistan as a legible participant in global intellectual discourse (Kamran, 2025).

The function of English as respectability politics extends into the core apparatus of economic and media diplomacy, where linguistic choice becomes indistinguishable from the projection of state legitimacy. In July 2025, the Pakistani government launched AsiaOne.News, its first satellite-based English-language international news channel, explicitly positioning it as a soft power initiative to project the country's perspective to a global audience and counter what Islamabad perceives as biased international coverage (Ahmet Akalın, 2025). This strategic expansion into English-language broadcasting significantly increases Pakistan's reach into influential policy circles, diaspora communities, and opinion-makers across Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia, bypassing language barriers to directly engage the international diplomatic and journalistic space where English remains the dominant medium. The launch of AsiaOne represents an institutional acknowledgment that English functions as an indispensable tool for narrative warfare in an era where information warfare has become a decisive element of geopolitical competition. This deliberate English-first architecture is not a neutral accommodation of a global lingua franca but rather reflects what scholars have identified as a linguistic hierarchy rooted in the colonial past, where English became the language of governance, law, and education, a tool designed to create a local elite serving imperial interests (Kamran, 2025). The newly launched channel thus functions as a digital performance of state legitimacy, assuring global audiences that Pakistan is a rational actor within the international system precisely because it communicates in the language of global power, deliberately distancing the state from Orientalist tropes that might otherwise define its international image. The analytical significance of this English-mediated diplomatic posture lies in its identification of a primary audience fundamentally distinct from that of Urdu or regional vernacular cultural diplomacy. As Haseeb Ullah (2025) demonstrates through incisive analysis, English in Pakistan functions as an unofficial certificate of intelligence and authority, determining whose opinions are heard in meetings, whose grief registers in policymaking, and whose perspective is considered worthy of citation. This linguistic gatekeeping extends directly into the international arena, where the state's English-language diplomacy targets not the diaspora mobilized through Urdu nostalgia nor regional neighbours engaged through vernacular heritage, but the gatekeepers of international legitimacy. The 2022 floods exposed this dynamic with painful clarity, as global discussion of Pakistan's tragedy was dominated by urban, English-speaking analysts whose commentary was shared extensively by foreign media, while Sindhi, Balochi, and Pashto-speaking survivors of the catastrophe were visible only as images rather than as storytellers of their own experience. Kamran (2025) captures the fundamental contradiction succinctly, observing that language is never neutral but always carries cultural and political weight. The state seeks to project an image of confident, modern nationhood through a linguistic medium that simultaneously reinscribes the very colonial hierarchies that constructed Pakistan as peripheral in the first place. The championing of "narratives from the soil" voiced at the conclusion of the 2025 KLF sits in unresolved tension with the English-dominant platform through which such calls are amplified to international audiences (The Express Tribune, 2025b). The primary audience for this linguistic performance remains the global political and financial elite, those whose recognition Pakistan continues to pursue through the borrowed authority of a language that remains, for the majority of its own citizens, a marker of exclusion rather than access.

Regional Vernaculars as "Heritage Anchors"

The third tier of Pakistan's linguistic diplomacy deploys regional vernaculars as "heritage anchors" that root the country's civilizational narrative deeper than the 1947 nation-state, operating at the delicate intersection of cultural heritage and geostrategic calculation. This tier is the most precarious within the tripartite framework precisely because it subverts the Urdu-centric national narrative projected through diaspora engagement. The promotion of Sindhi language and culture offers the most sophisticated example of ancient civilizational outreach. In December 2025, the ancient Sindhi folk instrument Bareendo, a clay wind instrument dating back to the Indus Valley Civilization, was officially inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List in need of urgent safeguarding (Radio Pakistan, 2025). Ambassador Mumtaz Zahra Baloch, Pakistan's Permanent Delegate to UNESCO, positioned the Bareendo as an emblem of the Indus Valley's cultural continuity and a living expression of Sindh's artistic and spiritual heritage, a framing that simultaneously claims Sindhi heritage as a national asset while tracing its lineage to a pre-Islamic, pre-Partition antiquity that precedes and exceeds the modern nation-state (Radio Pakistan, 2025). The comprehensive Four-Year Safeguarding Plan accompanying the inscription, establishing a community music school and integrating Bareendo heritage into education, demonstrates an institutional commitment to regional vernacular heritage that stands in marked contrast to the state's otherwise Urdu-centric cultural posture. This outreach serves a dual diplomatic function, attracting heritage tourists and international scholars through UNESCO prestige while anchoring Pakistan's identity in an antiquity too deep to be reduced to security-focused narratives of extremism.

The second sub-case involves the subtle projection of Punjabi and Pashto cultural forms toward soft-power engagement with India and Afghanistan, where linguistic commonality across borders becomes both an asset and a political liability. The Kartarpur Corridor, providing visa-free access for Sikh pilgrims to Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, constitutes a de facto exercise in Punjabi-language soft power operating beneath official state-to-state diplomacy. The continued political salience of this corridor was underscored in September 2025 when Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann demanded its reopening, recounting the strong emotive connect between the two Punjabs and noting that people in Indian Punjab have relatives in Pakistan Punjab (Mann, 2025). The devotion of Sikh pilgrims and the kinship networks linking the two Punjabs constitute a transnational Punjabi public sphere referencing Sufi and Sikh spiritual traditions that predate the Hindu-Muslim binary structuring Partition. The poetry of Bulleh Shah functions within this space as a vernacular diplomatic resource carrying none of the statist connotations of Urdu or English. Sarwat Ali (2025) observed that despite regional ties, Pakistan's cultural compass still points westward, capturing the structural neglect of this eastward-oriented vernacular diplomacy. The same dynamic operates along the western border, where Pashto cultural forms circulate across the Durand Line, creating a transnational sphere that complicates the state's security-driven posture toward Afghanistan. Fazal (2025) has noted how language policy shapes Pakistan's unity, and the careful calibration required reflects the tension between cultural commonality and the state's insistence on a singular national identity.

The geostrategic cultural overlap represented by these initiatives constitutes diplomacy the state cannot fully control because the languages in question are not exclusively contained within Pakistan's boundaries. The indigenous languages of Pakistan, as Lohar (2025) argues, have long awaited recognition and preservation at the national level despite their deep cultural, historical, and social significance. This marginalization stands in revealing contrast to their diplomatic deployment. The state draws upon Sindhi civilizational depth for UNESCO

recognition, Punjabi spiritual heritage for cross-border pilgrimage, and Pashto cultural affinities for regional connectivity, yet these same languages remain absent from mainstream education, national media, and formal state institutions (Lohar, 2025). The July 2025 high-level review meeting of the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture affirmed commitment to strengthening the Pakistan Academy of Letters and the National Language Promotion Department, yet the agenda focused overwhelmingly on Urdu and English translation projects, translating Iqbal's works into Bengali and presenting translations of foreign presidents' books as official gifts (Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, 2025). The absence of substantive regional language initiatives underscores the selective and instrumental nature of state engagement. As Lohar (2025) articulates, indigenous languages reflect an implicit hierarchy where linguistic value is measured by utility in power structures rather than cultural worth. Regional languages are mobilized when serving geostrategic connectivity or heritage tourism yet denied the institutional resources accorded to Urdu and English. The policy challenge is not the absence of regional vernaculars but their profoundly uneven and instrumentalized presence, deployed internationally while neglected domestically, and celebrated as civilizational assets while marginalized as languages of power.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Pakistan's cultural diplomacy operates through an unspoken yet structurally entrenched tripartite linguistic hierarchy, one that projects the nation's internal fractures onto the international stage with precision and consequence. Urdu functions as the emotional binder, marshalling the sophisticated literary traditions of the *mushaira* and the commemorative rituals surrounding poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Josh Malihabadi to construct a romanticized, unified idea of the homeland for diaspora consumption. This tier mobilizes nostalgia as a political resource, yet its effectiveness is generationally bounded, resonating with first-generation migrants while increasingly failing to engage younger diaspora members whose cultural fluencies are mediated through English and global youth culture. English operates as the pragmatic facade, the language through which Pakistan performs state legitimacy and investor-friendly modernity to the gatekeepers of the international order. The Karachi and Lahore Literary Festivals, the Board of Investment's digital portal, and the launch of AsiaOne News all constitute performances of respectability designed to distance Pakistan from Orientalist tropes and to signal procedural familiarity to Western audiences. The third tier, regional vernaculars, functions as heritage anchors, drawing upon the civilizational depth of Sindh antiquity, the spiritual commons of Punjabi Sufi poetry, and the cross-border cultural affinities of Pashto traditions to root Pakistan's identity in histories that both precede and exceed the 1947 nation-state. Yet this tier remains the most precarious and the least institutionally supported, mobilized instrumentally for UNESCO recognition or geostrategic connectivity while denied the resources and national prestige lavished upon Urdu and English. The core finding that emerges from this tripartite analysis is not merely that Pakistan's linguistic diplomacy is fragmented but that its fragmentation follows a predictable and ideologically freighted logic. The state draws upon regional languages when they serve the instrumental purposes of heritage tourism or cross-border soft power, yet the same languages remain marginalized within domestic institutions of education, media, and governance. English is projected outward as a certificate of competence while functioning internally as a marker of class privilege and elite gatekeeping. Urdu is celebrated as the language of national unity while its historical imposition continues to register as a wound in the political memory of Pakistan's non-Urdu-speaking ethnic communities. This selective and uneven investment in linguistic capital produces a fractured national image abroad, one that signals elite competence in

English, emotional authenticity in Urdu, and ancient rootedness in regional vernaculars, yet never achieves the narrative coherence that effective nation branding demands. The policy implication is not that Pakistan should abandon its multilingual diplomacy in favor of a singular linguistic brand, such a project would be both impossible and undesirable. Rather, the state must reckon honestly with the domestic linguistic hierarchies that its international projection reproduces. A coherent linguistic diplomacy would require aligning the institutional resources devoted to regional languages with the civilizational prestige those languages are asked to carry abroad, broadening diaspora engagement beyond the Urdu-speaking elite to reflect the actual linguistic composition of overseas Pakistani communities, and questioning whether performances of English-mediated respectability before Western audiences ultimately constrain the country's soft power imagination rather than expanding it. Until such reckoning occurs, Pakistan's languages of influence will continue to tell a story not of confident pluralism but of unresolved internal contest, a story in which the nation's rich linguistic diversity remains a liability to be managed rather than an asset to be strategically deployed.

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