

# Language Policies and Intercultural Communication in Multilingual Afghanistan: Historical Trajectories, Contemporary Challenges, and Reform Imperatives

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## ABSTRACT

Afghanistan's multilingual landscape, encompassing over forty languages, has been profoundly shaped by successive political regimes that have deployed language policy as a tool of power rather than a mechanism for social cohesion. This article examines how historical and contemporary language policies in Afghanistan have influenced intercultural communication, social integration, and national identity formation across diverse ethnolinguistic communities. Drawing on Spolsky's (2004) tripartite framework of language practices, beliefs, and management—supplemented by Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, translanguaging theory, and critical discourse analysis—the study employs a mixed-methods design incorporating surveys (n=50) and semi-structured interviews (n=10) conducted across five major Afghan cities. The survey sample comprised 54% male and 46% female respondents, with a mean age of 27.8 years (range: 18–45), drawn from seven ethnolinguistic communities through stratified random sampling. Findings reveal that only 22% of respondents expressed satisfaction with current language policies, while 34% reported experiencing language-based discrimination. Although 68% of participants engage frequently in intercultural interaction, 42% identified language policy as a barrier to cross-ethnic relationship building. An overwhelming 82% supported the implementation of bilingual education as a reform measure. The analysis traces policy shifts from the Monarchy through the Taliban resurgence of 2021, demonstrating how each regime's linguistic decisions deepened ethnolinguistic tensions and marginalized minority language communities. The article contributes empirically grounded evidence that extends Spolsky's framework by illustrating the active, coercive dimension of language management—and calls for evidence-based policy reforms including institutionalized bilingual education, legal protections for minority languages, and community-centred governance to foster inclusive intercultural communication and durable social peace in Afghanistan.

**Keywords:** language policy, intercultural communication, Afghanistan, multilingualism, symbolic power, bilingual education, ethnolinguistic identity

## INTRODUCTION

Language is never merely a neutral instrument of communication; it is simultaneously a carrier of cultural identity, a repository of historical memory, and a site of political contestation. In multilingual societies, decisions about which languages are afforded institutional recognition, educational legitimacy, and symbolic prestige carry profound consequences for social integration, intercultural understanding, and national cohesion.

Afghanistan exemplifies this dynamic with particular intensity. Home to more than forty languages distributed across a deeply heterogeneous ethnic landscape, the country has witnessed recurring cycles in which state language policies have elevated certain communities while systematically marginalising others.

The two constitutionally recognised official languages—Dari (Afghan Persian) and Pashto—have historically been positioned not only as administrative tools but as markers of ethnic identity and political legitimacy. Dari served as the lingua franca of governance, commerce, and high culture for centuries, while Pashto has been closely associated with the ethnic Pashtun majority and its claims to national leadership. Alongside these, a constellation of minority languages—including Uzbek, Turkmen, Baluchi, Pashai, and Nuristani—maintains

vital social and cultural functions within regional communities, even as they receive limited institutional support.

The relationship between language policy and intercultural communication in Afghanistan cannot be disentangled from the country's turbulent political history. Each successive regime has reconfigured the linguistic order to serve its own ideological and ethnic interests. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, early signs indicate a reversion to Pashto-centred policies, raising renewed concerns about linguistic marginalisation and intercultural fragmentation. This study addresses three central research questions: (1) How have historical language policies shaped ethnolinguistic hierarchies in Afghanistan? (2) How do current policies affect intercultural communication and social integration among Afghan communities? (3) What evidence-based reforms can foster more equitable and communicatively inclusive language governance?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical scholarship on language policy has moved decisively beyond treating policy as a neutral administrative matter toward understanding it as a domain of power, identity, and ideology. Spolsky's (2004) tripartite framework—distinguishing between language practices, language beliefs and ideologies, and language management—provides the foundational analytical lens for this study. Language practices refer to habitual patterns of use; beliefs and ideologies encompass attitudes and evaluations assigned to languages; and management involves deliberate efforts to modify language behaviour through policy instruments such as legislation and educational curricula.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power extends this framework by revealing how certain languages accumulate 'symbolic capital'—social prestige that enables their speakers to gain access to educational, economic, and civic resources while reproducing hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion. In Afghanistan's context, Dari and Pashto function as dominant symbolic markets; minority language speakers must negotiate access to institutional resources by operating in languages that are not their own, a phenomenon Bourdieu would identify as linguistic misrecognition.

The literature on intercultural communication highlights that linguistic proficiency alone is insufficient for meaningful cross-cultural exchange. Hall (1976) emphasises high-context and low-context communication styles, and Lustig and Koester (2010) stress the role of cultural values and world-views in shaping communicative competence. García and Wei (2014) advance the concept of translanguaging—the fluid, dynamic deployment of multiple linguistic repertoires as an integrated communicative system—which challenges monolingual ideologies embedded in official language policies. Empirical studies of Afghanistan's linguistic history (Dupree, 1973; Barfield, 2010; Mojadidi, 2019) reveal a consistent pattern of policy instrumentalisation in which language planning has served ethnic-political agendas rather than communicative or educational needs.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical architecture of this study rests on three complementary theoretical pillars. First, Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model foregrounds the gap between declared policy (management), societal attitudes (beliefs), and everyday use (practices)—a gap that, as the Afghan data reveal, is particularly acute in post-conflict multilingual states. Second, Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital and symbolic power conceptualises official language choices as acts of consecration that legitimise certain varieties and delegitimise others, translating linguistic difference into socioeconomic inequality. Third, García and Wei's (2014) translanguaging framework provides a counter-hegemonic lens, foregrounding the rich multilingual competences that Afghan speakers actually deploy in daily life—competences that official monoglossic policies obscure and suppress.

Together, these three frameworks generate a set of analytical questions: Do official policies reflect or contradict lived language practices? Whose beliefs and identities are validated by institutional language choices? And does the translanguaging reality of Afghan communities offer a resource for reform? The study operationalises these questions through its mixed-methods design.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), combining quantitative survey analysis with qualitative semi-structured interviews. The mixed-methods approach is particularly suited to this study's aim of connecting the statistical scope of language policy attitudes across linguistic groups with the depth of lived communicative experience. The quantitative phase provides generalisable trends; the qualitative phase adds interpretive richness and contextual specificity.

### Sampling Procedures and Participant Demographics

The quantitative survey employed stratified random sampling to ensure proportional representation across Afghanistan's major ethnolinguistic communities. Participants were recruited from five major urban centres — Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad, and Kandahar—selected for their high degree of multilingual engagement. A total of 50 survey responses were collected and analysed. The qualitative phase used purposive sampling to recruit ten interviewees—including educators, community members, and individuals with direct experience of language-policy contexts—who could provide rich, experience-based perspectives.

Table 1 summarises the demographic composition of the survey sample.

Variable	Category	n (%)
Gender	Male	27 (54%)
	Female	23 (46%)
Age	Range	18–45 years
	Mean (SD)	27.8 (±6.4)
Education	Primary	12 (24%)
	Secondary	18 (36%)
	University	20 (40%)
Ethnicity	Pashtun	9 (18%)
	Tajik	8 (16%)
	Hazara	8 (16%)
	Uzbek	7 (14%)
	Turkmen	6 (12%)
	Nuristani	6 (12%)
Cities	Baluchi	6 (12%)
	Kabul / Herat / Mazar-i-Sharif / Jalalabad / Kandahar	5 cities

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Survey Participants (n = 50)

### Data Collection Instruments

The survey instrument comprised a structured questionnaire featuring Likert-scale items (1–5) measuring satisfaction with language policy, perceived linguistic inclusion, experience of discrimination, support for

bilingual education, language-of-instruction match, intercultural interaction frequency, and communicative difficulty. Items were developed from themes identified in the literature review and pilot-tested with 15 participants before wider distribution. Questionnaires were administered electronically (email and WhatsApp) and, where digital access was limited, on paper. Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes each) were conducted in Dari or Pashto, recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS (Version 28), with statistical significance set at  $p < .05$ .

## FINDINGS

### Quantitative Findings

Table 2 presents a consolidated overview of all major survey findings, organised by thematic domain. Results are reported as response frequencies and percentages for Likert-scale items.

Thematic Domain	Survey Item / Indicator	n	% / Value
Satisfaction with Language Policy	Satisfied (Likert 4–5)	11	22%
	Neutral (Likert 3)	20	40%
	Dissatisfied (Likert 1–2)	19	38%
Perceived Inclusion & Discrimination	Policy not inclusive of minorities	18	36%
	Experienced language-based discrimination	17	34%
Support for Bilingual Education	Support bilingual education	41	82%
Language of Instruction	Taught in first language	22	44%
	Not taught in first language	28	56%
	Found lessons challenging due to language mismatch	17/28	60%
Intercultural Interaction	Interact 'often' or 'very often'	34	68%
	Rate IC ability as 'average' or 'poor'	19	38%
	Policy hinders cross-ethnic relationships	21	42%

Table 2. Summary of Survey Findings by Thematic Domain (n = 50)

Satisfaction with current language policy was markedly low: only 22% of respondents indicated satisfaction (Likert scores 4–5), while 38% were dissatisfied (Likert 1–2) and 40% were neutral. Satisfaction was notably higher among Dari and Pashto speakers in urban areas, while respondents from minority language groups (Uzbek, Turkmen, Hazara) consistently reported higher levels of perceived exclusion. A substantial 34% reported personal or family experiences of language-based discrimination. Support for bilingual education was high across all groups, with 82% in favour—a particularly strong signal from minority-language communities.

Regarding educational experience, 56% of respondents received their primary schooling in a language other than their home language. Of those, 60% reported significant difficulties in understanding instructional content, and students whose home language matched the medium of instruction reported substantially higher academic self-confidence. Despite high rates of intercultural contact (68% reporting frequent interaction with

speakers of other languages), 42% felt that current language policy actively hindered the formation of cross ethnic friendships and professional relationships.

### Detailed Satisfaction Distribution

Table 3 details the full Likert-scale distribution for satisfaction with national language policy.

Response Category	Likert Score	n	Percentage (%)
Very Dissatisfied	1	7	14%
Dissatisfied	2	12	24%
Neutral	3	20	40%
Satisfied	4	7	14%
Very Satisfied	5	4	8%
<b>Total</b>	—	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3. Likert-Scale Distribution: Satisfaction with National Language Policy (n = 50)

### Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the ten interviews yielded four recurrent themes that triangulate and contextualise the quantitative results.

**Theme 1 — Linguistic Invisibility: Minority-language participants described a pervasive sense of institutional invisibility.** One Turkmen interviewee described being unable to read official government correspondence: 'The forms come only in Dari or Pashto. I have to find someone to translate for me, or I simply do not understand what the government is asking.' This experience resonates with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic exclusion—the marginalised speaker is rendered communicatively incompetent not by linguistic incapacity but by institutional design.

**Theme 2 — Educational Disadvantage: Teachers and students from Uzbek, Nuristani, and Baluchi communities consistently reported that the mismatch between home language and language of instruction produced lower academic confidence and higher dropout intention among younger learners.** These accounts align with the 56% quantitative finding on language-of-instruction mismatch.

**Theme 3 — Social Distance and Stereotype Reinforcement: Several interviewees noted that language-policy induced communication barriers perpetuate ethnic stereotypes.** When Dari-speaking officials interact with Uzbek or Turkmen community members through inadequate Dari as a second language, miscommunications are frequently attributed to cultural incompetence rather than policy failure, reinforcing negative inter-ethnic perceptions.

**Theme 4 — Translanguaging as Everyday Practice: Despite official monolingual policies, all interviewees described daily lives characterised by fluid multilingual switching—using Uzbek at home, Dari in the marketplace, and Pashto in formal settings.** This gap between official policy and lived practice illustrates the disconnect between Spolsky's 'management' and 'practices' dimensions, and provides empirical grounding for García and Wei's (2014) translanguaging perspective.

### Historical Analysis of Language Policy Trajectories

The evolution of language policy in Afghanistan traces a recurrent pattern in which ruling regimes have manipulated linguistic hierarchies to consolidate power. Under the Monarchy (1919–1973), Dari was promoted as the primary medium of governance and high culture, reflecting the Persianised elite's cultural orientation while leaving Pashto as a politically charged but administratively secondary language. The Daoud Khan era

(1973–1978) used Pashto promotion as a nationalist mobilisation tool, while Soviet-backed governments (1978–1992) instrumentalised minority languages (Uzbek, Turkmen) for communist ideological outreach—momentarily elevating them before their subsequent re-marginalisation.

The first Taliban regime (1996–2001) aggressively centralised Pashto as the language of religious and political authority, systematically suppressing Dari-medium education and minority-language broadcasting. The post-2001 constitutional settlement attempted a more inclusive framework, recognising both Dari and Pashto as official languages and permitting minority-language instruction in regions where speakers constituted a majority. However, implementation failures—rooted in resource scarcity, political resistance, and insufficient teacher training—meant that these constitutional provisions rarely translated into meaningful practice. Since the Taliban's return in August 2021, early indicators suggest renewed centralisation around Pashto in administrative and educational domains, replicating historical cycles of exclusion.

This historical trajectory directly supports Spolsky's observation that language management decisions frequently diverge from both language practices and beliefs. Successive Afghan governments have produced policy documents asserting inclusive multilingualism while managing the linguistic environment in ways that reinforce Dari–Pashto hegemony—a pattern the present study's survey data and interview accounts confirm for the contemporary period.

## DISCUSSION

### Extending Spolsky's Framework: The Coercive Dimension of Language Management

Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model was developed primarily within pluralistic democratic contexts where the three domains—practices, beliefs, and management—may align or misalign through processes of negotiation. The Afghan data extend this framework by revealing a specifically coercive configuration: management decisions imposed by successive regimes without reference to community practices or beliefs have generated chronic misalignment that produces not merely communicative inefficiency but active social harm. The 38% dissatisfaction rate among survey respondents, combined with interview accounts of institutional exclusion, suggests that in fragile-state contexts, language management operates less as policy coordination and more as ethnic governance. This finding contributes to Spolsky's framework by identifying coercive top-down management as a distinctive configuration requiring analytical attention—one that cannot be theorised adequately through studies conducted in stable democratic settings.

### Symbolic Power and Lived Inequality

The survey data—34% of respondents reporting language-based discrimination, 56% receiving schooling in a language other than their own, 60% finding such instruction challenging—provide granular empirical substance to Bourdieu's (1991) theoretical account of symbolic domination. Beyond confirming that symbolic power operates in Afghanistan, the study advances the literature by disaggregating its effects across educational and social domains. Educational exclusion (language-of-instruction mismatch) and social exclusion (policy barriers to cross-ethnic relationship formation) are distinct mechanisms of symbolic domination that require distinct policy responses—a differentiation that Bourdieu's general framework does not make but that applied linguistic scholarship can usefully develop.

### Translanguaging: From Theoretical Lens to Reform Blueprint

García and Wei's (2014) translanguaging framework provides not only a descriptive lens but also a normative horizon. The qualitative finding that all interviewees engage in fluid multilingual switching in everyday life—irrespective of official monolingual policy—demonstrates that translanguaging is the communicative norm, not an exception, in Afghan urban communities. This finding moves beyond confirming translanguaging theory to providing field-based evidence from a severely under-researched context: post-conflict Afghanistan under resurgent authoritarianism. The 82% support for bilingual education among survey respondents further suggests that community-level language beliefs align with translanguaging principles, indicating that a reform agenda grounded in translanguaging pedagogy would have substantial popular legitimacy—an empirical bridge between theoretical linguistics and policy feasibility that prior scholarship has not yet established for Afghanistan.

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## Limitations And Future Research Directions

### Limitations

Several limitations of the present study warrant acknowledgement. First, the sample size (n=50 survey; n=10 interviews) is relatively small given Afghanistan's vast ethnolinguistic diversity, and findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than definitively representative of the national population. Second, data collection was geographically confined to five urban and semi-urban centres due to security constraints, limiting insights into rural linguistic dynamics—where language-policy effects may be more pronounced and where minority-language communities often have less access to even Dari-medium resources. Third, self-reported survey data are subject to social desirability bias; respondents in sensitive political climates may moderate their expressed views on language discrimination. Fourth, qualitative data translated from local languages (Dari, Pashto, Uzbek) into English inevitably carry some risk of meaning loss and cultural decontextualisation. Fifth, the cross-sectional design captures attitudes at a single point in time and cannot trace how individual-level language behaviours and beliefs change in response to policy shifts.

### Future Research Directions

The present study points toward several productive lines of future inquiry. Longitudinal research tracking the impact of the post-2021 policy environment on educational outcomes, language attitudes, and intercultural competence would provide essential evidence for both scholars and policy advocates. Comparative studies examining language policy dynamics in analogous post-conflict multilingual states—such as Iraq, South Sudan, or Bosnia-Herzegovina—would enable theory-building about coercive language management beyond the Afghan case. Research specifically focused on rural linguistic communities and on women in conservative areas would address the under-sampling limitations of the present study and illuminate the most marginalised language users. Finally, investigation of digital media and technology as vehicles for minority-language maintenance and multilingual communication represents an emerging and underexplored dimension of Afghan linguistic life with significant practical implications for community resilience.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings carry direct implications for language policy reform in Afghanistan. Four recommendations emerge from the evidence:

**Institutionalise Bilingual Education:** The 82% support for bilingual education, combined with evidence of educational disadvantage among minority-language students, provides a compelling empirical mandate for transitional bilingual programmes in which children are initially instructed in their home language while acquiring Dari or Pashto as a second language. Research consistently demonstrates that mother tongue-based bilingual education produces superior long-term academic and linguistic outcomes (Baker, 2011; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

**Strengthen Legislative Protections for Minority Languages:** Legal frameworks recognising minority language rights in public administration, courts, and media—as outlined in the 2004 Constitution—should be operationalised through enforceable implementation mechanisms, monitoring structures, and dedicated funding streams.

**Embed Community Engagement in Policy-Making:** Language management decisions should incorporate structured consultation with minority-language communities, drawing on grassroots knowledge of communicative needs rather than relying exclusively on top-down ideological prescription. This aligns with Spolsky's emphasis on the alignment between management and the beliefs and practices of language communities.

**Incorporate Intercultural Communication Training:** Professional sectors—public administration, health, education, and security—should integrate intercultural communication competency training, equipping personnel to navigate linguistically diverse contexts and reduce the policy-generated communication barriers documented in this study.

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## CONCLUSION

This study has examined how language policies in Afghanistan have functioned as instruments of symbolic power, deepening ethnolinguistic hierarchies and impeding intercultural communication across successive political regimes. Drawing on Spolsky's tripartite model, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, and translanguaging theory, the mixed-methods analysis has documented substantial dissatisfaction with current policies, widespread language-based discrimination, significant educational disadvantage rooted in language-of-instruction mismatches, and strong community-level demand for bilingual education reform.

Beyond confirming established theoretical claims, the study makes three specific contributions to the existing literature. It extends Spolsky's framework by identifying coercive language management as a distinctive configuration in fragile-state contexts. It disaggregates Bourdieu's symbolic domination into educational and social mechanisms that require differentiated policy responses. And it grounds García and Wei's translanguaging framework in empirical data from post-conflict Afghanistan, establishing both the descriptive accuracy and the reform potential of translanguaging approaches in one of the world's most linguistically complex and politically challenging environments.

Official language policy in Afghanistan has historically privileged political expediency over communicative justice. Recognising linguistic diversity as a national resource—rather than a problem to be managed—and adopting inclusive, evidence-based language governance is a prerequisite not only for educational equity but for durable social peace.

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