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SARAIKI AND THE LANGUAGE–DIALECT DEBATE: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF MALDONADO GARCÍA'S EIGHT CRITERIA IN THE CONTEXT OF LINGUICISM AND LANGUAGE POLICY

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Abstract

María Isabel Maldonado García's (2016) article "Soraiki: Language or Dialect?" employs an eight-criteria framework to conclude that Saraiki is a dialect of Punjabi. This review critically examines that framework through the integrated lens of language policy, linguicism, and teacher agency. Drawing on Skutnabb-Kangas's (1988) foundational concept of linguicism, Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model of language policy, and recent empirical evidence from Southern Punjab, the review demonstrates that Maldonado García's criteria—prestige, medium of instruction, media presence, literary tradition—are not neutral linguistic indicators but outcomes of systemic institutional discrimination. The review argues that her classification of Saraiki as a "dialect" exemplifies what Mirza and Zaman (2025) term criteria-based linguicism: establishing seemingly neutral conditions for marginalized languages that cannot be fulfilled without the very institutional support the framework denies them. The review concludes by proposing a policy roadmap for establishing Saraiki as a recognized language, grounded in constitutional provisions and recent policy developments in Pakistan.

Keywords: Saraiki, linguicism, language policy, dialect classification, language rights, Southern Punjab

1. Introduction

The classification of Saraiki as either a language or a dialect has long been contested in South Asian linguistics. María Isabel Maldonado García (2016), Professor and In-Charge of the Institute of Languages and Linguistics at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan, addresses this question through a systematic eight-criteria framework. She concludes that Saraiki is a dialect of Punjabi, noting that it "does not comply with the great majority of the criteria needed in order to be classified as a language" (Maldonado García, 2016, p. 7).

For scholars working on language policy and linguicism in Southern Punjab's primary education, this article presents both a significant reference point and a contested text. Its seemingly rigorous methodology masks a fundamental theoretical flaw: the criteria used to determine language status are themselves products of the power structures that have marginalized Saraiki. This review critically examines Maldonado García's framework through the integrated lens of language policy, linguicism, and teacher agency, drawing on recent empirical evidence from Southern Punjab to demonstrate how her classification operationalizes systemic discrimination rather than measuring intrinsic linguistic properties.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Language Policy

Language policy, as theorized by Spolsky (2004), comprises three dynamically interrelated components: language practices (what people actually do with language), language beliefs/ideologies (the values and attitudes attached to languages), and language management (explicit efforts by authority figures to modify practices or beliefs). Spolsky emphasizes that the "real" language policy of a community is often found not in explicit policy documents but in actual language practices and beliefs, noting that there is frequently "disparity between the pesent language situation in practice and the idealised language situation in policy" (as cited in Mirza et al., 2024). Language policy is not limited to official

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declarations but incorporates a variety of mechanisms that serve to ensure that language policies are implemented (Shohamy, 2006, as cited in Mirza et al., 2024).

This tripartite model is particularly relevant for understanding the Saraiki situation because it reveals that policy operates not only through formal documents but also through the taken-for-granted beliefs and everyday practices of educational actors. The absence of Saraiki from official curriculum documents is only one dimension of its marginalization; equally significant are the beliefs that position Urdu and English as the natural languages of education, and the classroom practices that exclude Saraiki from instructional use.

2.2 Linguicism

The term "linguicism" was coined in the 1980s by Finnish linguist and educator Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, who defined it as "ideologies and structures that are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups, which are defined on the basis of language" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988, as cited in Mirza et al., 2024). Skutnabb-Kangas further clarified that linguicism "is a reflection of an ideology, associated with racismo" (as cited in Mirza et al., 2024). Linguicism can be covert and overt, the former exemplified by the non-use of particular languages as languages of instruction, the latter by the prohibition of certain languages (Mirza et al., 2024).

Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) warns that "it is not a question of information but one of power structure," and that linguists who fail to ask the right questions may "be supporting linguicism and racismo" (as cited in Mirza et al., 2024). This warning is directly relevant to Maldonado García's analysis: by classifying Saraiki as a dialect through criteria that measure institutional recognition rather than linguistic capacity, her framework inadvertently legitimizes the very hierarchy that produces Saraiki's marginalization.

2.3 Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs)

Language rights (LRs) are all those rights that are connected to languages and their speakers or signers (Hafeez & Mirza, 2026). Linguistic human rights (LHRs) are only those language rights that are so fundamental that every individual has them because that individual is a human being, so inalienable that no state is allowed to violate them, and which are necessary for individuals and groups to live a dignified life (Hafeez & Mirza, 2026). These are sociological rather than legal definitions.

The LHR framework provides a normative basis for challenging Maldonado García's classification. If Saraiki speakers have a fundamental right to education in their mother tongue, a right recognized in international human rights instruments, then the absence of Saraiki from primary education is not a neutral linguistic fact but a violation of linguistic human rights. Maldonado García's criteria, which treat this absence as evidence for Saraiki's status as a dialect, effectively legitimize this violation.

2.4 Teacher Agency

The ecological model of teacher agency developed by Priestley et al. (2015) represents a significant departure from individualistic conceptions. Drawing on Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) chordal triad, they argue that agency is not a capacity individuals possess but a phenomenon achieved through the interplay of iterational (past-oriented), projective (future-oriented), and practical-evaluative (present-oriented) dimensions, within specific cultural, structural, and material conditions. The same teacher may exercise high agency in one context and low in another, not because her personal characteristics have changed but because the ecology has.

This ecological understanding of agency is essential for analyzing language policy implementation. Teachers in Southern Punjab exercise agency through translanguaging practices by using Saraiki for explanation and classroom management while maintaining public compliance with official Urdu-only policies, but this agency is constrained, covert, and

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unsustainable. The meso-level conditions of assessment regimes, supervisory practices, and professional development opportunities shape whether teachers feel authorized to draw on students' full linguistic repertoires.

2.5 The Integrated [3x3x3] Tri-Level, Tri-Prong Framework

The preceding sections have introduced the three theoretical pillars—language policy, linguicism, and teacher agency—and the three policy dimensions—beliefs, practices, and management. These do not operate in isolation but intersect across three institutional levels: macro (state and policy), meso (institutional and administrative), and micro (classroom and individual). Mirza and Zaman (2025) have synthesized these axes into an integrated framework that allows systematic analysis of language policy implementation. Figure 1 presents this framework visually.

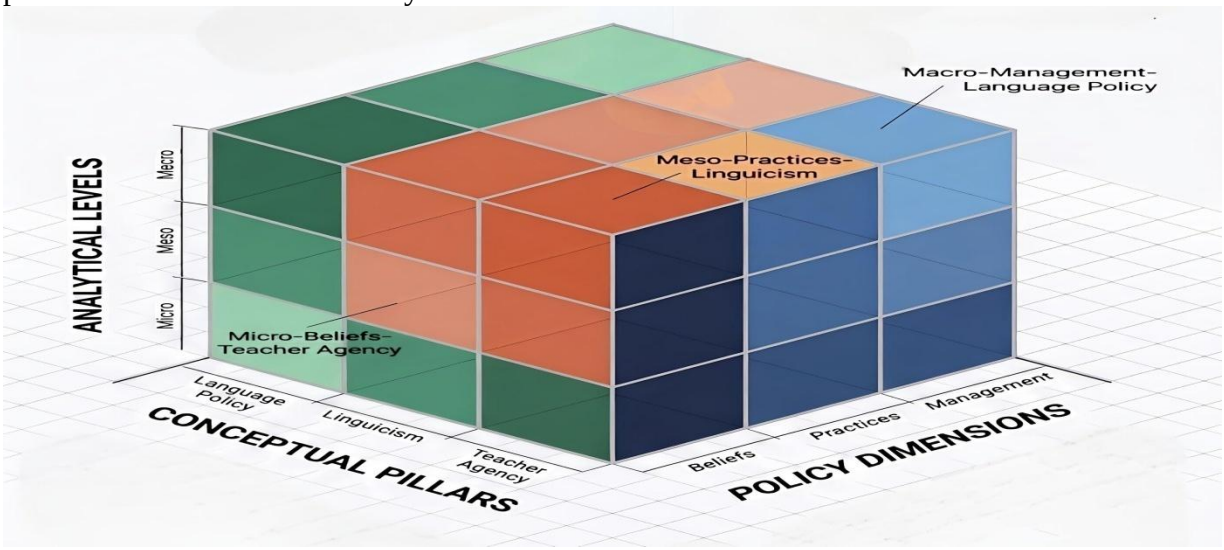


Figure 1

The Integrated Tri-Level, Tri-Prong Framework (Language Policy Implementation Cube)

Note. Adapted from Mirza and Zaman (2025).

The cube illustrates the intersection of three analytical levels (macro, meso, micro), three conceptual pillars (language policy, linguicism, teacher agency), and three policy dimensions (beliefs, practices, management), generating a 3×3×3 analytical matrix of 27 cells. As illustrated in Figure 1, the intersection of the three axes generates a 3×3×3 analytical space of twenty-seven cells. Each cell represents a unique intersection of level, dimension, and pillar. This allows for configurational analysis: rather than asking what single variable explains policy outcomes, researchers can ask what configurations of conditions across levels, dimensions, and pillars characterize different systems. A linguicism-reproducing configuration shows consistent alignment: beliefs, practices, and management at all three levels pull toward linguistic hierarchy. A linguicism-contested configuration shows systematic misalignment, contradictions between levels, tensions between dimensions.A linguicism-interrupting configuration shows alignment toward equity (Mirza & Zaman, 2025).

3. Overview of Maldonado García's Article

3.1 The Article's Argument

Maldonado García (2016) presents a criteria-based analysis of whether Saraiki is a language or a dialect. Her eight criteria for language identification are:

(1) High degree of leveling,
(2) Elevated differentiation degree,
(3) Thriving over others of the same origin,
(4) High level of prestige,

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(5) Written manifestations and grammar,
(6) Medium of instruction,
(7) Language of the media, and
(8) Vast literary tradition.

Based on her analysis, she concludes that Saraiki "only fully complies with the first criteria, high level of leveling" (p. 7), and therefore "it is clear that Saraiki is definitely not a linguistic system that can fit into the parameters which characterize a language" (p. 10).

3.2 The Article's Contributions

The article makes several contributions to the study of Saraiki:

1. Empirical Documentation: It provides systematic documentation of Saraiki's institutional marginalization, including the absence of official status, limited educational use, and constrained media presence.

2. Quantitative Data: It offers specific data on speaker numbers and lexical similarity indexes that are useful for understanding Saraiki's position within the Indo-Aryan language family.

3. Methodological Clarity: The explicit eight-criteria framework provides a transparent analytical structure that can be evaluated and critiqued.

4. Engagement with Sources: The article engages with major linguistic databases (Ethnologue, Glottolog) and historical scholarship, providing a useful overview of the classification debate.

3.3 The Article's Limitations

Despite these contributions, the article's analytical framework is fundamentally flawed. The eight criteria are derived from the author's own previous work (Maldonado, 2015), not from a widely accepted sociolinguistic framework. More critically, the criteria operationalize the very conditions that linguicism produces: lack of prestige, absence from education, limited media presence as neutral indicators of linguistic deficiency. This circular reasoning is the central weakness of the article.

4. Critical Analysis of the Eight Criteria

4.1 The Eight Criteria and Their Critical Evaluation

The following table presents Maldonado García's (2015, 2016) eight criteria for language identification alongside critical evaluations informed by empirical evidence from Southern Punjab and the Policy-Linguicism-Agency framework.

Table 1: Critical Evaluation of Maldonado García's Eight Criteria for Language Identification

Criterion	Maldonado's Assessment	Policy Dimension (Official Floor)	Linguicism Dimension (Ideological Gravity)	Agency Dimension (Mediating Practice)	Critical Reassessment

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1. High Degree of Leveling	□ Yes (20+ million speakers)	Language policy at the macro level recognizes Saraiki's numerical strength but does not allocate institutional resources for its development	Structural Linguicism: The large speaker base is rendered invisible through non-recognition in curriculum and official domains	Community agency is constrained by the absence of institutional support, limiting the language's functional domains	The criterion measures quantitative spread without attending to qualitative domain coverage. Saraiki remains "present in everyday life but largely absent from institutional recognition" (Yasir, 2022).
2. High Degree of Differentiation	□ No (70-85% lexical similarity with Punjabi)	Language management establishes Punjabi as the standard, positioning Saraiki as a sub-variant	Dialectization: The "dialect" label functions as a political mechanism for absorbing linguistic differences into an assumed standard	Teachers lack agency to assert Saraiki's distinct status due to institutional framing	Lexical similarity is a crude metric that ignores sociolinguistic realities. Saraiki possesses "its own phonological system, grammatical structure, and literary tradition" (Yasir, 2022).
3. Thriving Over Others	□ No (Urdu, Punjabi, and Sindhi have thrived)	Policy prioritizes Urdu and English through curriculum, assessment, and resource allocation	Coercive Linguicism: State authority compels functional usage of dominant languages while suppressing others	Teachers exercise covert agency through translanguaging but remain constrained by assessment regimes	The criterion confuses effect with cause. Urdu and English thrive due to institutional support, not inherent linguistic merit.

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4. High Level of Prestige	□ No (Not official, national, or regional language)	Language beliefs position English as the language of development and Urdu as the language of national unity	Ideological Linguicism: Linking Urdu to national identity makes discrimination appear naturally patriotic	Communities internalize stigma, leading to language shift away from Saraiki	Prestige is conferred through institutional recognition, not discovered in linguistic structures. This criterion establishes a catch-22: languages without prestige cannot be languages, but they lack prestige because they are not recognized as languages (Hafeez & Mirza, 2026).
5. Written Manifestations and Grammar	□ Limited (Grammar and dictionary exist)	Language management does not allocate resources for Saraiki publishing, textbooks, or standardized orthography	Erasure Linguicism: Excluding Saraiki from official domains creates the perception that it "does not even exist"	Authors and educators lack institutional platforms to develop and disseminate written materials	Written manifestation reflects institutional investment, not linguistic capacity. "The lack of standardized orthography, limited digital content, and minimal representation in national curricula further weaken Saraiki's institutional viability" (Yasir, 2022).

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6. Medium of Instruction	□ No (Not used in schools)	Policy mandates English and Urdu as media of instruction, excluding regional languages	Academic Linguicism: Limiting Saraiki's status to a subject of study while excluding it as a medium-of-instruction	Teachers lack the training, resources, and institutional authorization to teach in Saraiki This criterion evaluates institutional decisions that are products of linguicism.	Denying mother tongue-based education constitutes "a form of cultural destruction" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, as cited in Mirza et al., 2024).
7. Language of the Media	□ Limited (Some radio/TV programs)	Media regulation and advertising economics privilege Urdu and English content	Neoliberal Linguicism: Language is treated as a market commodity, with Saraiki lacking economic value	Media producers lack incentives to create Saraiki content due to perceived low market demand	Media representation is determined by policy decisions, advertising revenue, and institutional priorities—all shaped by linguicism.

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8. Vast Literary Tradition	□ No (Very limited literary tradition)	Literary canon formation excludes Saraiki from educational curricula and national literary discourse	Institutionalized Linguicism: The culmination of multiple forms of linguicism creates a perpetual, stable, and taken-for-granted hierarchy	Writers and cultural producers lack institutional recognition, limiting the visibility of Saraiki literary traditions	The assessment of "vast literary tradition" is culturally biased. The criterion assumes a Western, canon-based model that devalues oral traditions, folk literature, and performance-based cultural production, constituting symbolic violence (Hafeez & Mirza, 2026).

4.2 The Twelve Forms of Linguicism: An Analytical Framework

Mirza (2025) has developed a comprehensive taxonomy of linguicism, directly conceived from Skutnabb-Kangas's (1988) foundational conception, which maps Pakistan's language policies from 1947 to 2021 as manifestations of twelve distinct forms of linguicism. This framework provides a powerful analytical tool for critiquing Maldonado García's classification of Saraiki as a dialect.

Table 2: An Analytical Framework for Mapping the Leading Forms of Linguicism within the Education Policies of Pakistan (From 1947 to 2021)

Major Orientation (As conceived from Spolsky's (2004)Three-pronged Policy Model)	Leading Type or Form of Linguicism	Simple Definitions
The Ideology-based Orientation (It relates to the beliefs about language value)	Explicit Linguicism	It openly states that one language is superior to others.
	Ideological Linguicism	It is the linking of a language to a specific religion or to a distinct national identity in order to make discrimination appear naturally patriotic.

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	Neoliberal Linguicism	It relates to treating a language as a market commodity or product carrier of an economic gain and a form of an individual investment.
The Management-based Orientation (It relates to the management of the formal policies, rules, and regulations)	Structural Linguicism	This specifies the creating of such policies and rules which systematically and structurally cause disadvantage to the users of a specific language.
	Coercive Linguicism	This relates with the use of state authority that compels the functional usage of a dominant language while suppressing the others.
	Temporal Linguicism	The use of the future promises of language reforms or to cause indefinite delays and long timeframes for the promised reforms. It is also about the postponement of the linguistic rights/language human rights (LHRs) for the marginalized.
	Constitutional Linguicism	The process of embedding the language hierarchies directly and overtly in the constitution or the foundational legal documents of the state.
	Criteria-based Linguicism	The establishing of the seemingly-neutral and apparently fair conditions for the marginalized languages which cannot be fulfilled in actual.
	Institutionalized Linguicism	It is the culmination of the multiple forms of linguicism to exist as a perpetual, stable and taken-for-granted hierarchy which keeps on (re)produced through the routine practices.

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	Erasure Linguicism	It is about the excluding of a language/dialect from the official domains, from the curriculum, and from the recognition. It gives an overall perception as though it (language/dialect) does not even exist.
The Practice-based Orientation (It is about the actual language use and on-the-ground material realities)	Academic Linguicism	This relates with the process of limiting the status of a language to a subject of study and excluding it as a medium-of-instruction (MOI).
	Economic Linguicism	This relates with reserving a dominant language/dialect for the high-status employment and for technical fields exclusive to the speakers of the dominant languages/dialects.
	Implementation Linguicism	This type promises future safeguard and support for the marginalized language(s)/dialect(s) in the policy framework while failing to provide sufficient or any resources.

Note. This framework synthesizes and extends Skutnabb-Kangas's (1988) concept of linguicism and is adapted from the theoretical typology developed in Mirza (2025). The three orientations correspond to Spolsky's (2004) tripartite model of language policy (ideology, management, and practices).

4.3 Mapping Maldonado García's Criteria onto the Linguicism Taxonomy

Maldonado García's (2016) criteria for determining that Saraiki is a dialect can be systematically mapped onto the twelve forms of linguicism identified by Mirza (2025), revealing the extent to which her "scientific" framework operationalizes discriminatory mechanisms.

Ideology-Based Orientation:

1. Explicit Linguicism: Maldonado García's framing implies that Urdu and English are inherently superior for formal purposes, while Saraiki is deficient. Her criteria measure this deficiency without questioning its origins.

2. Ideological Linguicism: The author's framing of Saraiki as a "dialect" of Punjabi links it to a Punjabi identity, making the discrimination appear natural rather than politically constructed. This mirrors the historical process by which Saraiki (which, before 1961, was officially categorised as Punjabi) is now being claimed as a separate language.

3. Neoliberal Linguicism: The criteria implicitly value languages based on their economic utility. English and Urdu are positioned as "languages of development," while Saraiki is framed as irrelevant to economic advancement (Hafeez & Mirza, 2026).

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Management-Based Orientation:

4. Structural Linguicism: Maldonado García's criteria—prestige, medium of instruction, media presence—are the outcomes of policies that "systematically and structurally cause disadvantage" to Saraiki speakers. The classification of Saraiki as a dialect justifies this structural disadvantage.

5. Coercive Linguicism: The author's framework implicitly supports state authority that compels functional usage of dominant languages while suppressing others. Her criteria measure compliance with this coercion rather than questioning it.

6. Temporal Linguicism: Maldonado García's conclusion that Saraiki is "not yet" a language echoes temporal linguicism—deferring recognition while the language continues to be marginalized.

7. Constitutional Linguicism: While Maldonado García does not directly embed hierarchies, her framework supports the constitutional language hierarchy that privileges Urdu and English while rendering regional languages invisible.

8. Criteria-based Linguicism: The eight-criteria framework itself exemplifies criteria-based linguicism: "the establishing of the seemingly-neutral and apparently fair conditions for the marginalized languages which cannot be fulfilled in actual" (Mirza, 2025). Saraiki cannot meet the criteria because meeting them requires the very institutional support that the framework denies.

9. Institutionalized Linguicism: Maldonado García's framework contributes to "the culmination of the multiple forms of linguicism to exist as a perpetual, stable and taken-for-granted hierarchy which keeps on (re)produced through the routine practices" (Mirza, 2025). By classifying Saraiki as a dialect through seemingly neutral criteria, she legitimizes the existing hierarchy.

10. Erasure Linguicism: The classification of Saraiki as a dialect contributes to "the excluding of a language/dialect from the official domains, from the curriculum, and from the recognition. It gives an overall perception as though it (language/dialect) does not even exist" (Mirza, 2025). Maldonado García's article reinforces this erasure.

Practice-Based Orientation:

11. Academic Linguicism: Maldonado García's framework limits Saraiki's status to "a subject of study" rather than recognizing it as a legitimate medium-of-instruction. This is the essence of academic linguicism.

12. Economic Linguicism: The author's criteria implicitly reserve high-status employment for speakers of dominant languages, reinforcing the economic marginalization of Saraiki speakers.

13. Implementation Linguicism: While Maldonado García acknowledges Saraiki's existence, her classification provides "future safeguard and support" in theory while failing to recognize the resources needed for its institutionalization.

5. Implications for Language Policy and Linguicism in Southern Punjab

5.1 The Linguistic Reality

Maldonado García's (2016) article contributes valuable documentation of Saraiki's institutional marginalization. However, recent research provides more contemporary and specific evidence from the region. Yasir (2022) confirms that Saraiki is "the fourth largest language in terms of the number of speakers" in Pakistan, being "the first language of 10.53% of the whole populace." The study highlights that "casual attitude of the Saraiki community, their sense of shame attached to their linguistic identity and most importantly, their economic deprivation and the shrinking domains of Saraiki language in the daily life of the community are the most significant factors which are playing pivotal role in the phenomenon of this language shift" (Yasir, 2022).

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5.2 Linguicism in Operation

Maldonado García's (2016) article inadvertently provides a case study in linguicism—the systematic marginalization of a language and its speakers (Mirza et al., 2024). Research documents that "the lack of power sharing language regime and linguistic injustice become hurdles to socio-linguistic justice" (Mirza et al., 2024). The marginalization manifests through exclusionary institutional practices, including assessment regimes that evaluate students exclusively in languages they have not mastered (Mirza et al., 2024).

Mirza et al. (2024) documented that teachers face challenges including "poor English foundations, crowded and diverse classrooms, insufficient teacher training, and lack of parental involvement which hamper the way of proper policy implementation and cause probable acts of linguicism." Applying Mirza's (2025) taxonomy, the educational exclusion of Saraiki in southern Punjab represents a confluence of multiple forms:

- **Structural Linguicism:** Education policies systematically disadvantage Saraiki-speaking students
- **Academic Linguicism:** Saraiki is limited to a subject of study rather than a medium of instruction
- **Erasure Linguicism:** Saraiki is excluded from curriculum, assessment, and official recognition
- **Implementation Linguicism:** Policy promises of regional language support remain unimplemented

5.3 The Political Dimension

Maldonado García (2016) treats the Siraiki Movement's political claims as separate from linguistic analysis. However, the movement's trajectory reveals a clear "language-land spillover" pattern (Irfan, 2025). Recent research confirms that "the Saraiki movement in the Punjab region of Pakistan embodies a vibrant and intricate interaction of ethnicity, identity, and politics, advocating for the establishment of a new province called Saraikistan" (Irfan, 2025). The movement "confronts the supremacy of Punjabi-speaking elites and aims to establish a domain where the unique identity of the Saraiki populace can flourish" (Irfan, 2025).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

Maldonado García's (2016) article provides a rigorous, criteria-based analysis that concludes Saraiki is a dialect. For a language policy scholar, the article's value lies not in its conclusion but in its documentation of the conditions that linguicism produces (Mirza et al., 2024). However, the empirical evidence from Southern Punjab directly challenges the author's framework by demonstrating that the criteria she uses to classify Saraiki as a "dialect"—lack of prestige, absence from education, limited media presence—are not natural properties but systematic outcomes of linguicism (Mirza et al., 2024).

Weinreich's aphorism that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy" (Weinreich, 1945, as cited in Hafeez & Mirza, 2026) captures the fundamental truth that Maldonado García's (2016) framework obscures: linguistic classification is not a neutral scientific exercise but a political process shaped by power relations and institutional recognition (Hafeez & Mirza, 2026).

The application of Mirza's (2025) twelve-form taxonomy of linguicism reveals that Maldonado García's (2016) eight-criteria framework is not a neutral analytical tool but an operationalization of multiple forms of linguicism. The criteria—prestige, medium of instruction, media presence, literary tradition—evaluate the outcomes of institutional discrimination and then use those outcomes as evidence for linguistic insufficiency. This is criteria-based linguicism in operation: "the establishing of the seemingly-neutral and

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apparently fair conditions for the marginalized languages which cannot be fulfilled in actual" (Mirza, 2025).

6.2 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

1. Legislative Advocacy for Legal Recognition

Research confirms that "under the 1973 Constitution, provinces were empowered to promote their own languages and cultures, and the 18th Amendment of April 2010 further strengthened these rights" (Irfan, 2025). These constitutional provisions should be cited in advocacy efforts.

2. Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education

Yasir (2022) documents that the purpose of the study was to find out "an archetype or actual situation of language shift in Pakistan: A case study of Saraiki language in D.G. Khan District." The study's findings on the role of "economic deprivation and the shrinking domains of Saraiki language" provide empirical grounding for advocacy efforts.

3. Educational Policy Reform Advocacy

Mirza et al. (2024) recommend "proper restructuring in the existing (macro-micro) level language in education policy to accommodate more of teachers' agency for having plurilingualism/multilingualism in classrooms." The study emphasizes the need for "continuous specialized training and modern resources for the teachers."

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