



Heritage Voices: Languages

Urdu

ABOUT THE URDU LANGUAGE

Urdu is an Indo-Aryan language that serves as the primary, secondary, or tertiary language of communication for millions of individuals in Pakistan, India, and sizable migrant communities in the Persian Gulf, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Syntactically Urdu and Hindi are identical, with Urdu incorporating a heavier loan vocabulary from Persian, Arabic, and Turkic and retaining the original spelling of words and sounds from these languages. Speakers of both languages are able to communicate with each other at an informal level without much difficulty. In more formal situations and in higher registers, the two languages diverge significantly. Urdu is written in the Perso-Arabic script called Nasta'liq, which was modified and expanded to incorporate a distinctively South Asian phonology. While Urdu is one of the world's leading languages of Muslim erudition, some of its leading protagonists have been Hindu and Sikh authors taking full advantage of Urdu's rich expressive medium.

Urdu has developed a preeminent position in South Asia as a language of literary genius as well as a major medium of communication in the daily lives of people. It is an official language of Pakistan, where it is a link language and probably the most widely understood language across all regions, which also have their own languages (Pashto, Balochi, Sindhi, and Punjabi). It is also one of the national languages of India. Urdu is widely understood by Afghans in Pakistan and Afghanistan, who acquire the language through media, business, and family connections in Pakistan. Urdu serves as a lingua franca for many in South Asia, especially for Muslims.

Urdu began as a mixed language of the Mughal (Persian-speaking Turks) army camp, in the late 15th century called the Zabān-e-Ordu-e-Mu'alla, which drew heavily from the Khari boli spoken around Delhi. Urdu also has roots in the southern parts of the sub-continent, where Deccani Urdu developed a distinct dialect separate from the Northern Urdu of the Delhi-Agra-Lucknow region. Urdu's association with the army, and eventually with the royal courts and metropolises of South Asia, led to its use as a language of high culture (after Persian) for much of the 17th-19th centuries. It continued to dominate as a language of cultural prestige until the colonial era, when it was gradually supplanted by English in administrative and technical areas.

Urdu is used today in all forms of contemporary media: satellite TV channels, the Internet, traditional print media, film, and contemporary music. The increasing influence of English on Urdu is felt today increasingly with the use of digital communications such as SMS texts in Romanized Urdu and in formal education. Pakistani state schools provide Urdu-medium education, but most students are increasingly searching for English education. India also has Urdu-medium schools or the option of learning Urdu as a second language.

URDU STRUCTURE

The writing system of Urdu is based on the Arabic script and is written right to left. The Nasta'liq form of the Arabic script has several features that distinguish it from other Arabic script forms like Naskh. Letters in the Nasta'liq form are not only connected in a cursive fashion from right to left in the formation of words, they are also stacked on top of each other according to their position in the word. In many cases letters have three different forms, depending on whether they appear in the initial, medial, or final position in the word. These features of Nasta'liq create economy in the number of words and lines that can fit on one page.

Several features of Urdu are different from English. Urdu makes distinctions in vowel length, nasalization, retroflex consonants, and aspirated and non-aspirated consonants. Urdu sentence order is Subject-Object-Verb in contrast to English, which is Subject-Verb-Object. Urdu has post-positions instead of prepositions. Urdu also has gender, number, and case agreement. All nouns are either masculine or feminine, singular or plural, nominative, oblique, or vocative. There are no articles in Urdu, and syllable stress is not as pronounced as it is in English. Politeness or formality is very strict in Urdu and is embedded in the choice of pronoun used to address others: *tu*, *tum*, *aap*. Additionally, word agreement changes from singular to plural to mark respect.

ذ	ڈ	د	خ	ح	چ	ج	ث	ٹ	ت	پ	ب	ا		
ذال	ڈال	دال	خے	حے	چے	جیم	ثے	ٹے	تے	پے	بے	الف		
zāl	dāl	dāl	khe	he	che	jīm	se	te	te	pe	be	alif		
z	d	d	kh	h	c	j	s	t̪	t	p	b	-		
[z]	[d]	[d]	[ɣ]	[h]	[tʃ]	[dʒ]	[s]	[t]	[t]	[p]	[b]	[ɑ/ə]		
ذ	ڈ	د	خ	ح	چ	ج	ث	ٹ	ت	پ	ب	ا		
ذال	ڈال	دال	خے	حے	چے	جیم	ثے	ٹے	تے	پے	بے	الف		
zāl	dāl	dāl	khe	he	che	jīm	se	te	te	pe	be	alif		
z	d	d	kh	h	c	j	s	t̪	t	p	b	-		
[z]	[d]	[d]	[ɣ]	[h]	[tʃ]	[dʒ]	[s]	[t]	[t]	[p]	[b]	[ɑ/ə]		
ف	غ	ع	ظ	ط	ض	ص	ش	س	ث	ز	ر			
فے	غین	عین	ظاے	طاے	ضاد	صاد	شین	سین	ثے	زے	رے			
fe	ğain	ʿain	zoe	toe	zvād	svād	šīn	sīn	že	ze	re	re		
f	ğ	ʿ	z	t	z	s	š	s	ž	z	r	r		
[f]	[ɣ]	C_[ɑ]; [Ø/?/ə]	[z]	[t]	[z]	[s]	[ʃ]	[s]	[ʒ]	[z]	[r]	[r]		
ق	ک	گ	ل	م	ن	ں	و	ہ	ھ	ء	ی			
قاف	کاف	گاف	لام	میم	نون	نون غن	واڈ	عوٹی	دو چشمی	عمرہ	چھوٹی	یے		
qāf	kāf	gāf	lām	mīm	nūn	nūn-e ğunnah	vāḍ	choṭī he	lo chashmī he	hamzah	choṭī ye	yē		
					n	n	v	/_#	indicates	vowel	y			
					[n]	[n]	[v/u/o o/ow]	[h, Ø]	aspiration	separator	[j/i/e/ɛ]			
ے	بھ	پھ	تھ	جھ	چھ	دھ	ڈھ	رھ	ڑھ	کھ	گھ	لھ	مھ	نھ
بھ	پھ	تھ	جھ	چھ	دھ	ڈھ	رھ	ڑھ	کھ	گھ	لھ	مھ	نھ	بھ
bhe	phe	the	jhe	chhe	dhāi	dhāi	chhe	jhe	the	the	phe	bhe	bari ye	bhe
bh	ph	th	jh	chh	dh	dh	chh	ih	th	th	ph	bh		bh

Figure 1. Urdu writing system
Script Images from [Omniglot](http://Omniglot.com)

URDU AND HINDI

Urdu and Hindi are listed as two different languages in India's Constitution. Although both of them have common conversational vocabulary, identical function words, and the same grammar, they are treated as two different languages because of their distinct socio-religious identities. The two languages use different scripts, and they borrow their literary and formal vocabularies from different sources.

Hindi is written in Devanagari (same as Sanskrit) and goes from left to right. It tends to borrow its high (formal and literary) vocabulary mostly from Sanskrit. Urdu is written in Nastaliq (Perso-Arabic script) that goes from right to left and borrows its high vocabulary from Arabic and Persian. Even though the colloquial varieties of Hindi and Urdu, used in everyday conversations and in Hindi films, are similar, their formal and literary varieties are mutually incomprehensible because of different vocabularies and cultural references.

About the Author: Rubab Qureshi



Rubab Qureshi has taught Urdu at the University of Pennsylvania since 2002. She has also taught Urdu at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). She is working on developing National K-16 ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Urdu Standards and is the program director for the University of Pennsylvania's STARTALK Urdu Program for high school students in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She is involved in outreach efforts to create more programs and materials for heritage learners of Urdu.

As Rubab explains, "Urdu has always played an important part in my life. Some of my earliest memories are of my mother teaching me the English and Urdu alphabets side by side. It was the language of the home and my life as a Pakistani-American kid growing up in the United States. I was fortunate to be surrounded by many Urdu speakers in my childhood who were willing to ensure that this part of our heritage was maintained and passed down."



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