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Attitudes of Afghan Americans towards Their Heritage Language



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ABSTRACT

Language attitude is the feeling of a group of linguistic group toward their language. Language attitude studies look at how speakers of particular languages or varieties of languages think of and believe about their language. The purpose of this article was to study the attitudes of Afghan Americans toward their heritage languages (i.e., Dari, Pashto and Uzbek). It also compared the language attitude of young and old generations of Afghan Americans toward their heritage language. The data came from 15 Afghan Americans who filled out questionnaires with questions seeking information about Afghan Americans' language attitude. The findings of the study showed that most of the participants had positive attitudes toward their heritage language. It also revealed that the older generation of Afghan Americans had stronger attitude than the younger generation of Afghan Americans toward their heritage language.

INTRODUCTION

The study of language attitudes is very important for sociolinguistics since it is an effective way to determine linguistic behavior of a given community (Solis, 2002), and it influences language planning & language policy; how governments look at languages. Scholars have looked into language attitudes from different perspective such as politics, sociolinguistics, social psychology, and anthropology. People with different linguistic backgrounds have different thoughts and feelings about their heritage language particularly when they are a small minority in a country. Some groups may feel proud of their heritage language and do their best to maintain their language. On the other hand, there might be some groups who may not be proud of their heritage language and culture. Therefore, they attempt to dive into the mainstream and forget their heritage language. There are different Afghans with different linguistic backgrounds who have been living in the USA for years. The purpose of this study is to explore the attitudes of Afghan Americans toward their heritage language (Dari, Pashto, and Uzbek). It also aimed to compare the language attitudes between the older and younger generations of Afghan Americans.

Brief History of Afghans in the United States

Afghans began migrating to the United States for education and profession in the mid 20th century. The influxes of Afghans were taken in as refugees by the USA in the 1980s as a result of Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan, and in the late 1990s as a result of persecution of ethnic minorities and their opponents by Taliban Regime. It is estimated that more than 300,000 Afghans live in the USA. The largest communities of Afghans are in California, New York and Virginia, and there are smaller communities of Afghans in other states. Afghan American population is very diverse. They have different linguistic, ethnic and religious backgrounds with their own unique cultural elements. The Pashtuns and Tajiks constitute the majority of population of Afghan Americans, and there are small communities of Uzbeks, Hazaras, Afghan Jews and Afghan Hindus as well. The major heritage languages spoken by Afghan Americans are Dari, Pashto and Uzbek.

Brief introduction of Afghan Americans' heritage languages

There are more than 35 languages in Afghanistan. Dari, Pashto and Uzbek are the languages with large number of speakers. Dari and Pashto are the official languages of the country. A few languages including Uzbek are considered the third official languages alongside Dari and

Pashto in the areas where the majority of people speak them. (Afghanistan Constitution, 2004; Article 16).

Dari

Dari, also known as Afghan Persian in the western literature, is a variety of Persian spoken in Afghanistan. It is a member of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family. Dari plays a vital role in the Afghan society. It is used in all the domains of the Afghan society from politics to education to business. It is one of the two official languages, and it is the most spoken language in Afghanistan. Moreover, it serves as the lingua franca of the country, meaning that it is the primary means of communication for speakers of other languages in Afghanistan. Dari is also spoken in some parts of Iran and Pakistan. Dari is written in a modified Arabic alphabet called Perso-Arabic. The syntax and morphology of Afghan Persian and Iranian Persian are identical. However, there are some phonological differences between the two (Glassman, 1971, World Factbook, 2016 & Ethnologue Language of the World, 2015).

Pashto

Pashto also pronounced, as [pæxtu] is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan. It is a member of the East Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. It became the official language in Afghanistan by a royal decree in 1936. Although Pashto has enjoyed the support of government since the majority of kings and presidents of Afghanistan have been from Pashtun ethnic group, it is little propagated among speakers of other languages particularly Dari speakers. It has two major dialects namely southern and northern dialects. It is the second largest regional language in Pakistan. It is also spoken in some parts of Iran and Tajikistan. It is written in a modified version of Arabic alphabet. It plays an important role in the Afghan society. It is the second most prestigious language in Afghanistan. It is the language of politics, business, and it is the medium of instruction at schools and colleges where majority of students are native speakers of Pashto. (Coyle, 2014, David 2014, World Factbook, 2016 & Ethnologue Language of the World, 2015).

Uzbek

Uzbek is a member of the Turkic branch of Altaic language family. It is the official language of Uzbekistan and a national language of Afghanistan. It is also spoken in some parts of

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The Uzbek language spoken in Afghanistan is known as Southern Uzbek, and the Uzbek language spoken in Uzbekistan is known as Northern Uzbek. The Southern Uzbek is written in modified Arabic alphabet while it is written in Latin and Cyrillic scripts in Uzbekistan, with different functions in different domains. More than 25 million people speak Uzbek around the world. The Southern Uzbek is the medium of instruction in primary schools in Afghanistan where the majority of students are native speakers of Uzbek (Ismatualla, 1992, World Factbook, 2016, Ethnologue language of the world, 2015).

Research Questions

In general, this paper investigated the attitudes of Afghan Americans toward their heritage language and it also aimed to explore the differences in attitudes and approaches toward heritage language between Afghan American younger generation, and older generation. To achieve these ends, I asked the following questions.

1. Do Afghan Americans believe that their heritage language is part of their identity and culture?
2. Which language will they choose if they have a choice between the mainstream language (English) and their heritage language?
3. Is the younger generation of Afghan Americans willing to teach their heritage language to their children?

Language Attitudes

Language attitude is a very hot topic in social psychology and sociolinguistics. Before diving into what language attitude is, the meaning of attitude in sociolinguistics literature is discussed. There is not a consensus on the definition of the word attitude in social psychology and sociolinguistics literature (Ryan and Giles, 1982, and Ajzen, 1988). Baker (1992) discusses the original meaning of attitude. He believed that the original meaning of attitude was different from its current meaning. It originally meant a posture in a picture or drama. The word attitude is derived from the Latin word 'aptitude' and Italian word 'atto' which meant aptitude for something, i.e., to have an inclination to certain things. According to Eiser (1986), "to say that we have a certain attitude towards something or someone is a shorthand

way of saying that we have feelings or thoughts of like or dislike, approval or disapproval, attraction or repulsion, trust or distrust and so on.” Ajzen (1988) defines attitude as “a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event.” That is, an attitude to something or someone involves internal feelings. According to Zhang (2008), language attitudes are people’s feelings about their native language and other languages. Ryan et al. (1982) defines language attitudes as “any affective, cognitive or behavioral index of evaluative reactions toward different language varieties or speakers.” Almost all the definitions made by language attitude experts have one thing in common; psychological feeling is involved.

Language attitudes are different from other types of attitudes since they are only about language. Some studies of language attitude are confined with attitudes toward language itself. In such type of studies, the thought of subjects are inquired about a language or a variety of language. The subjects are asked about the richness, poorness, beauty, ugliness, sweetness, and harshness of a language or a variety of a language. However, most often language attitude is broadly defined not only to include attitudes toward language but also to include attitudes toward speakers of a specific language or variety. Some researchers define it even very broadly to include attitude toward language maintenance and language planning (Fasol, 1984, and Baker 1992).

There are two main approaches that researchers take into consideration when doing research on language attitudes: mentalist approach, and behaviorist approach. The mentalist approach is concerned with the inner state of readiness, and it can be inferred by behaviors or reports of attitudes. The behaviorist approach refers to response to social situations for a particular language (Fasol, 1984). There are two methods to determine attitudes about language, direct method and indirect method. In direct method, subjects are asked to respond to a questionnaire or interview questions. The questionnaire or interview questions usually seek the subjects’ views and opinions about a language or a variety of a language. On the other hand, in indirect method, language attitudes of a group of people toward a particular language or one of its varieties are investigated without the subject’s awareness (Fasol, 1984).

There are very few articles that studied language attitudes of Afghan Americans toward their heritage language in the USA, and a few related articles are discussed.

Hansia (2014) investigated the attitudes of first and second generation of Afghan and Iranian Americans toward the two varieties of Farsi: Persian and Dari spoken in Iran and Afghanistan, respectively. She used a modified version of Lambert *et al.*'s 1960 matched guise design, which aimed at collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. She collected quantitative data from an online survey, and qualitative data from optional responses to survey questions. There were 47 adult participants in the study. They were fluent both in English and in one of the dialects of Farsi: Dari or Persian. She concluded that Dari speakers in the USA did not consider Dari as a prestigious dialect. The study also revealed that the first and second generation of Afghan and Iranian Americans considered the Persian variety more prestigious than Dari.

Al-Sahafi (2015) studied language attitudes of Arab immigrant fathers and practices toward their children's heritage language maintenance in New Zealand. His instruments of data collection consisted of a questionnaire and semi-structured interview. He used the semi-structured interviews to understand the approach and feeling of the participants toward their heritage language maintenance. He collected data from 10 Arab immigrant fathers whose children were 14 and under 14 at the time of the study. They were first generation New Zealanders who were between 36 and 57 years old. The average length of their residency in New Zealand was 9 years. Their proficiency in English was different. Although the subjects of the study came from different Arab countries, the findings of the study showed that they had very similar positive attitudes toward their heritage language and its maintenance. They believed that their heritage language was a major part of their identity and culture, and they rejected the idea that their children's learning English would lead to the loss of their heritage language.

Another research by Sisamouth and Lah (2015) explored the attitudes of Thai undergraduates toward Thai, Patani Malay and English, and their reasons behind their attitudes. They collected data from 30 undergraduates on Prince of Songkla University Pattani Campus, Thailand. They were sophomores. They acquired Patani Malay since their birth. They started to acquire Thai at the age of five and English at the age of six. They used semi-structured questionnaire to interview the subjects. They used a qualitative approach to analyze their data. The findings of the study revealed that the subjects had a positive attitude toward all three languages: English, Thai, and Pattani Malay.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Collection of Data

In this section, I discuss the procedure of collection of data of the present study. More specifically, I describe questionnaire, participants of the study and procedure of collection of data in details.

Questionnaire

There are a number of methods of collecting data to measure language attitudes of a particular group of linguistic group. There are a number of techniques such as the matched guise technique, interviews, questionnaires and observation to collect data for language attitude studies (Agheyisi and fishman, 147-50, 1970). According to Fasol (1984), questionnaires can have two types of questions. Closed questions which have a particular set of responses, and they include yes-no answers, multiple choice, and ranking in which the respondents do not have freedom. The other type is open-ended questions in which the subjects have enough freedom. In this study, I used questionnaire with closed questions to collect data.

The questionnaire consisted of the description of the study and purpose of the study. First, I briefly described the study and the purpose of the study. I made the participants aware that participation in the study was voluntary and they had the freedom to avoid answering any question they did not want to answer. The first group of questions sought demographic information about the subjects such as age, gender, linguistic background, length of residency in the USA, and level of education. They are the major variables investigated in language attitude studies (Baker 1992). Another group of questions consisted of 10 questions that sought information about general attitudes and feelings of the subjects toward their heritage language.

Participants

The subjects of this study were Afghan Americans who have been living in the USA. There was no restriction on the selection of the subjects based on their length of residency in the USA and level of education. However, there was a restriction on the selection of the participants based on age. That is, the subject had to be at least 18 years of age or older to

participate in this study. There were originally 30 participants in the study. I distributed 30 questionnaires to 30 subjects, but unfortunately, 15 of them declined to fill out the questionnaires. I visited another Afghan community “Mohammadia Islamic Community-Afghans” in Paterson and I explained my research and its purpose to one of the community’s leader. I asked him if they could allow me in one of their gatherings to ask Afghans to fill out the questionnaires. I shared with him a copy of the questionnaire and he talked to the Board of the community. The Board disagreed to allow me to ask their community members to fill out the questionnaire in one of their gatherings.

Therefore, I analyzed the data derived from 15 participants including three females. 60% (n=9) of the participants were native speakers of Pashto, and 40% (n=6) were the native speakers of Dari.

Procedure

I met with the managers of two Afghan restaurants and an Afghan store and talked to them about my research. They agreed to allow me ask their Afghan customers to fill out the questionnaires. I met with the participants in Afghan restaurants and an Afghan store. I explained the research and its purpose to each participant individually since I met each of them in person at different times. After the explanation, I asked them if they were willing to participate in the study. Then, I explained the consent form to the participants and made them sure of the confidentiality of their answers. When they agreed to fill out the questionnaire, I asked them to first read the consent form and sign it, and then fill out the questionnaire. Some of the participants declined to fill out the questionnaire when they found out that they had to sign the consent form. I was present to explain and clarify any areas that were vague or ambiguous to the participants.

Data Analysis

I derived qualitative data from 15 participants. The data was collected through survey questionnaire consisted of two categories of questions, and each category was aimed to seek particular information. I studied two variables with respect to attitudes of Afghan Americans toward their heritage language, age and linguistic & cultural backgrounds.

I used Likert scales to measure the closed questions in the questionnaire seeking information about the subjects’ attitudes toward their native language. The typical Likert scale is a 5- or

7-point ordinal scale used by researchers to ask the participants to indicate the extent they agree or disagree with a number of statements and propositions about “beliefs, evaluations, and actions held by individuals” (Bradburn et al, 2004; Sullivan & Artino, 2013). I used the following likert scales to measure the extent to which the subjects agreed or disagreed with the statements about their language attitudes.

1 – strongly disagree 2 – disagree 3 – neuter 4 – agree 5 – strongly agree

I also used multiple-choice questions to measure the proficiency of the participants and the frequency they used their mother tongue. I input the raw data into an excel sheet and then I encoded the data. I also translated the data into charts and tables.

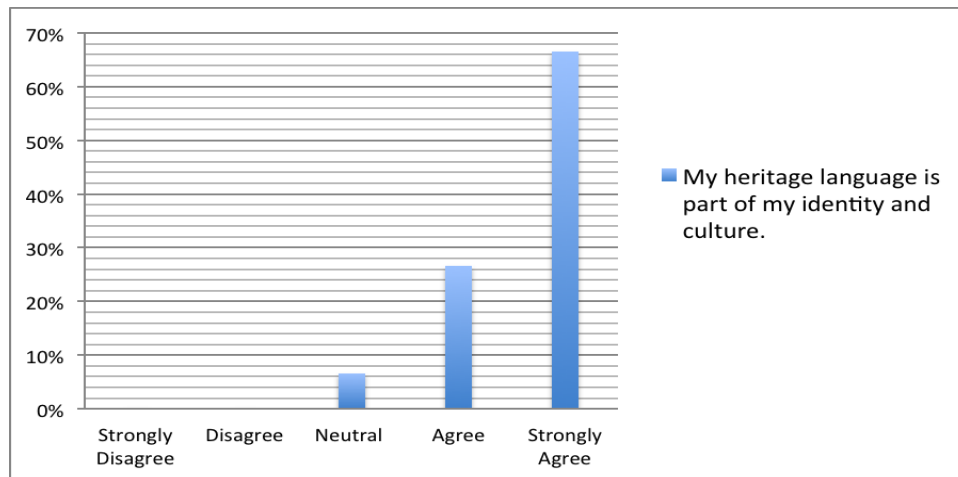
RESULTS

The main purpose of the paper was to investigate the attitudes of Afghan Americans towards their heritage language and to make a comparison between the attitudes of the older and the younger generations of Afghan Americans. The results of the study showed that Afghan Americans generally had a positive attitude toward their heritage language including the young generation of Afghan Americans. Each research question is discussed in details.

Research question 1: Do Afghan Americans believe that their heritage language is part of their identity and culture?

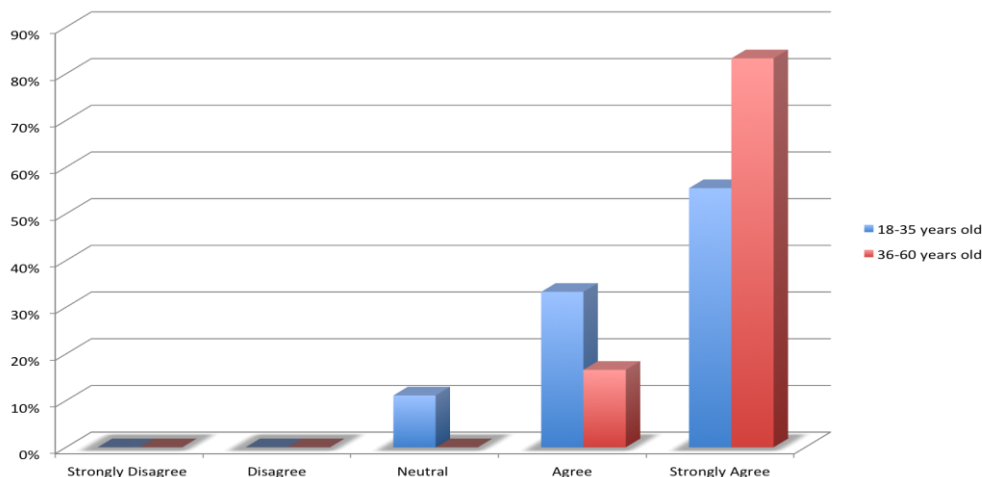
To answer this question, participants were asked to indicate if their native language was vital to their identity and culture (Q.4, section 2). 67.7 % (n=10) strongly agreed that their heritage language was part of their identity and culture. 26.66 % (n=4) of the subjects agreed that their heritage language was part of their identity and culture while 6.6% (n=1) of the participants neither agreed nor disagreed that their heritage language was part of their identity ad culture.

Chart 1. Participants' views about heritage language being part of their identity and culture



The young and older adults were different in their views on their heritage language as part of their identity and culture. As chart 2 shows, the older adult participants had a stronger belief than young adult participants about their heritage language being a vital part of their identity and culture, i.e. more than 80% (n=5) of the older adults strongly agreed that their heritage language was part of their identity and culture, and 16.66% (n=1) agreed that their heritage language was part of their identity and culture. On the other hand, more than 50% (n=5) of the young adult participants strongly agreed that their heritage language was part of their identity and culture, and more than 30% (n=3) agreed that their heritage language was part of their identity and culture.

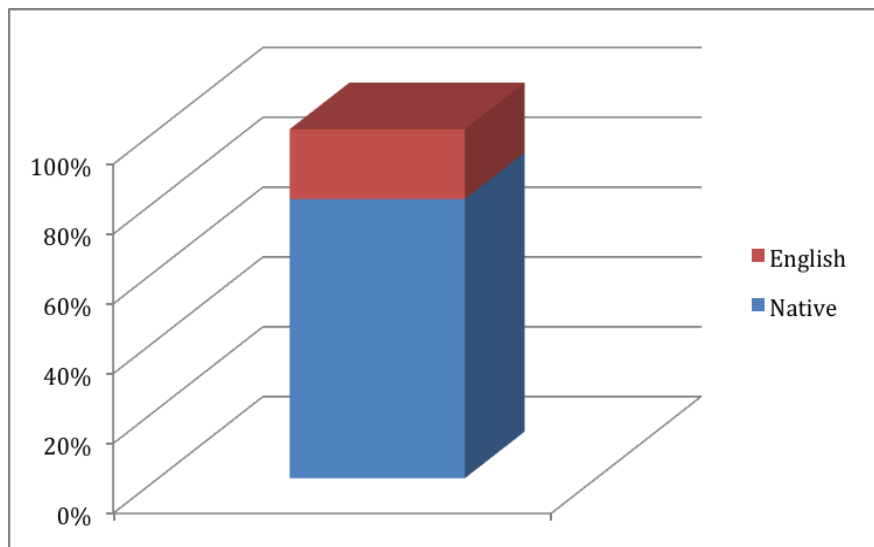
Chart 2. The young and old adults' difference of views on language as part of identity and culture



Research Question 2: Which language will they choose if they have a choice between mainstream language (English) and their heritage language?

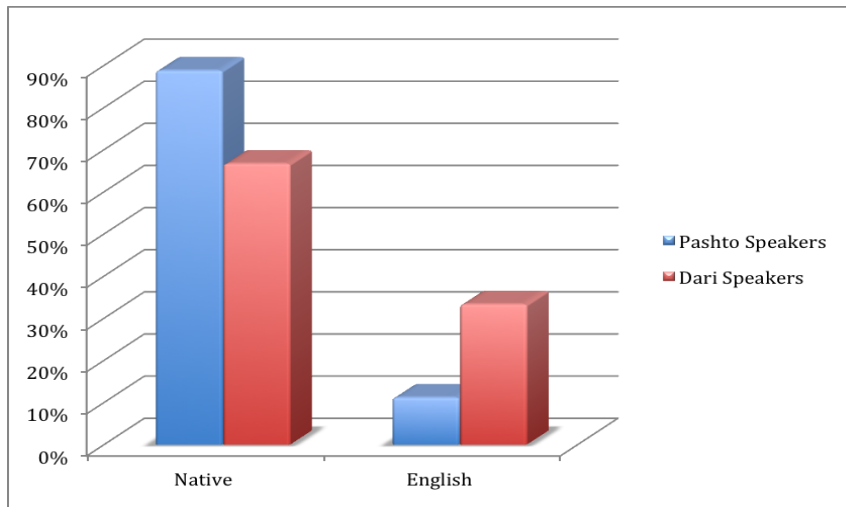
The participants were asked a particular question about which language they would choose if they had a choice between English and their heritage language (Q.9, section 2). As chart 3 demonstrates, 80% (n=12) would choose their heritage language if they had a choice between English and their heritage language. However, 20% (n=3) would choose English.

Chart 3. Participants' language choice



Dari and Pashto speakers were different in their views on their language choice. As you can see in chart 4, more than 80% (n=8) of Pashto speakers would choose their heritage language if they had a choice between English and their heritage language while more than 60% (n=4) of Dari speakers would choose their heritage language if they had a choice between mainstream and their heritage language. Less than 20% (n=1) of Pashto speakers would choose English if they had a choice between English and Pashto while more than 30% (n=2) of Dari speakers would choose English if they had a choice between Dari and English.

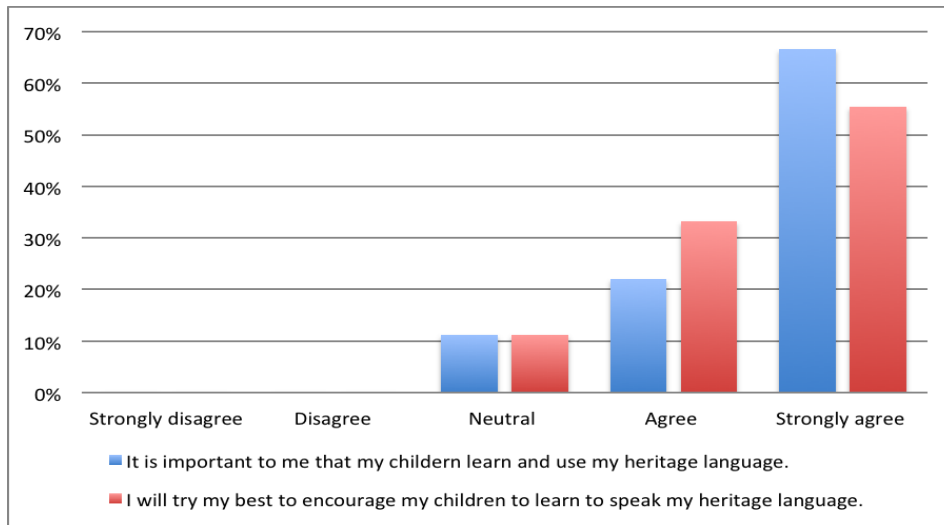
Chart 4. Different views of two linguistic groups on their language choice



Research Question 3: Is the younger generation of Afghan Americans willing to teach their heritage language to their children?

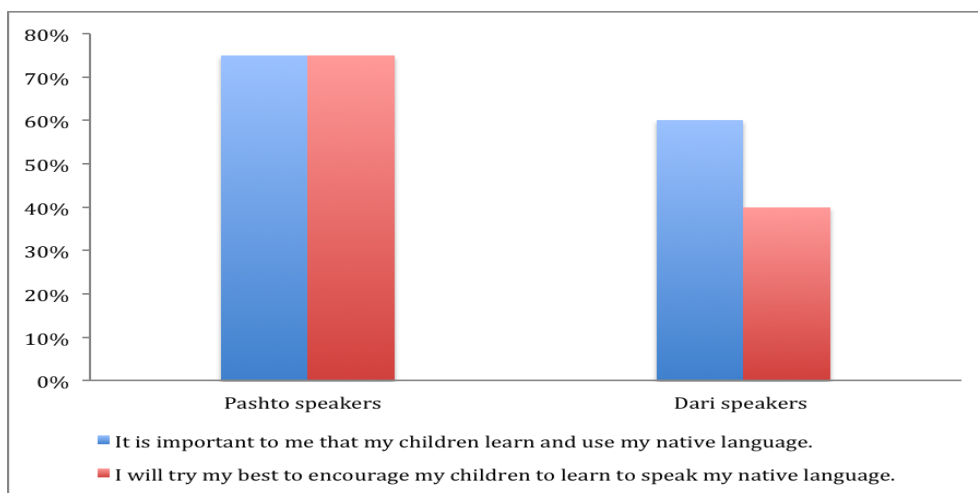
To answer this question, participants were asked two questions about their willingness to pass on their language to their children (Q.6 & Q.7 section 2). As the chart 5 shows, more than 60% (n=6) of the young adult participants strongly agreed that it was important to them that their children learn and use their heritage language, and more than 50% (n=5) of the young adult participants strongly agreed that they would try their best to encourage their children to learn to speak their native language. More than 20% (n=2) of the young adults agreed that it was important for them that their children learn and use their native language, and more than 30% (n=3) agreed that they would try their best to encourage their children to learn to speak their native language. However, only 11.11% (n=1) of the young adult participants neither agreed nor disagreed that it was important to them that their children learn and use their heritage language, and would do their best to encourage their children to learn to speak their heritage language.

Chart 5. Young participants’ willingness to pass on their language to their children



There was a big difference between young adult Dari and Pashto speakers in terms of their inclination to pass down their heritage language to their children. As chart 6 demonstrates, more than 70% (n=3) of the young adult Pashto speakers strongly agreed that it was important for them that their children learn and use their native language and they would do their best to encourage their children to learn to speak their native language. However, 60% (n=3) of the young adult Dari speakers strongly agreed that it was important for them that their children learn and use their heritage language while 40% (n=2) of them strongly agreed that they would do their best to encourage their children to learn to speak their heritage language.

Chart 6. Young adult Pashto and Dari speakers’ willingness to pass on their language to their children



CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the attitudes of Afghan Americans toward their heritage language, and compare the attitudes of young and old Afghan adults. Most of the participants in the study generally held positive attitudes toward their heritage language (Dari and Pashto). 93% of the participants including young adults believed that their heritage language was part of their identity and culture. This finding is consistent with other language attitude studies done before (e.g., Park & Sarkar, 2007; Martin, 2009; Nguyen, Shin, & Krashen, 2001).

The results of the study also revealed that older adults had a stronger attitude than younger adults, and their tendency to teach their heritage language to their children was considerably higher than that of young adults. The study also revealed that a particular linguistic group was more attached and had more connection to their heritage language than the other linguistic group. In other words, Pashto speakers had a stronger attitude toward their heritage language than Dari speakers.

Limitations and Future Studies

It is very hard to make generalizations based on this small sample. The scope of this research article was small and the data was collected from a small sample of 15 Afghan Americans who were all living in New Jersey. The results of this study might not be applicable to other Afghan Americans in other cities of the United States. The study also excluded teenagers. Future studies need to be done, and the data should be collected from a large number of Afghan Americans from different cities in the United States. Future studies must include children participants. It should include equal number of male and female participants. They should focus on a number of variables such as gender, level of education, length of stay in the United States. Besides survey questionnaire, participants should be interviewed to really understand their feelings and attachment toward their heritage language.

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Appendixes

Appendix one: Article 16 of the Afghan Constitution

Article Sixteen

From amongst Pashto, Dari, Uzbeki, Turkmani, Baluchi, Pachaie, Nuristani, Pamiri and other current languages in the country, Pashto and Dari shall be the official languages of the state. In areas where the majority of the people speak in any one of Uzbeki, Turkmani, Pachaie, Nuristani, Baluchi or Pamiri languages, any of the aforementioned language, in addition to Pashto and Dari, shall be the third official language, the usage of which shall be regulated by law. The state shall design and apply effective programs to foster and develop all languages of Afghanistan. Usage of all current languages in the country shall be free in press publications and mass media. Academic and national administrative terminology and usage in the country shall be preserved.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Section 1: Demographic data

Please tick the most appropriate response.

1. What is your gender?

Male Female



2. What is your age range?

18-25 26-35 36-45 46-60 older

3. What is your education level?

completed some high school High school graduate community associate degree

Bachelor's degree Master's degree Doctorate degree

4. What is your mother tongue?

Pashto Dari Uzbek other _____

5. How long have you been living in the USA?

Less than 5 years Less than 10 years Less than 20 years Longer than 20 years

Section 2: Language Attitudes

Please indicate the extent you agree or disagree with the following statements by ticking your response using this scale.

1 – strongly disagree 2 – disagree 3 – neuter 4 – agree 5 – strongly agree

1. I like my native language and I am proud of it.

1 2 3 4 5

2. It is important to me that I know and use my native language.

1 2 3 4 5

3. It is important to communicate in my native language at home.

1 2 3 4 5

4. My language is vital to my identity and culture.

1 2 3 4 5

5. Keeping my language strong is important to me.

1 2 3 4 5

6. It is important to me that my children learn and use my native language.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I will try my best to encourage my children to learn to speak my native language.

1 2 3 4 5

8. My ability to speak my native language is a matter of pride.

1 2 3 4 5

9. It is important for members of Afghan American community to know their language.

- 1 2 3 4 5

10. Afghan American community should work hard to teach their native language(s) to their children.

- 1 2 3 4 5

Section 3: Language Proficiency and Use

Please choose the most appropriate response.

1. Can you read and write in your mother tongue?

- very well well not well a little

2. Can you speak and understand your mother tongue?

- very well well not well a little

3. What language(s) do you mostly speak at home?

- English my native language

4. What language(s) do you speak with your Afghan friends?

- English my native language

5. Which language are you most comfortable at home?

- English my native language

6. How often do you read and write in your native language?

- very often often sometimes never

7. How often do you use your native language?

- very often often sometimes never

8. Whom do you speak your mother tongue?

- home with Afghan friends when talking to my extended family in
Afghanistan in Afghan restaurants

9. Which language do you prefer to speak when you have a choice?

- English my mother tongue

