



Language Shift and Maintenance of Chittagonian Language towards Standard Bengali Language

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate which form of Bengali, Chittagonian or Standard, is most commonly used by native Chittagong speakers in their everyday lives. In other words, it seeks to determine if there is a language shift and the maintenance of Chittagonian amid Standard Bengali's dominance. The native speakers of Chittagonian from 19 distinct locations in the Chittagong district participated in the study. The study's time frame was from May 2022 to August 2022, and 117 respondents were interviewed using a formulated questionnaire. Descriptive statistics is used for quantitative analysis. The study's findings demonstrate that language usage preferences vary depending on the context. According to the results, most respondents are comfortable using Chittagonian with family and in their neighborhoods. In contrast, Standard Bengali is widely used in education and public settings because it effectively conveys information. The study concluded that as most of Chittagong's local people continue to speak Chittagonian, it is not at imminent risk of being completely displaced. Although the Chittagonian language is shifting in education and public places, the transition is gradual, and the language is still safe. It indicates that Chittagonian is preserved by locals and will continue to be used for generations to come.

Keywords: Language Shift, Language Maintenance, Chittagonian language, Standard Bengali

1. Introduction

Chittagong District, known officially as Chattogram District, is a district in the southeastern region of Bangladesh and within the Chittagong Division. Chittagong is called the port city of Bangladesh. As the country's second-largest city, it is an important economic and cultural hub. According to the 2022 population census conducted by the [Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics \(2022\)](#), Chittagong District has a total population of 9,169,464, with 4,566,039 males and 4,597,076 females. Although Bangla is the official language of Bangladesh, the people of Chittagong speak a dialect called Chittagonian, a combination of Bengali and Assamese ([Mia et al., 2015](#)).

The Chittagonian language is of the Indo-European language family and derived from Old Indo-Aryan and, in the end, from Proto-Indo-European through an Eastern Middle Indo-Aryan ([McCrae et al., 2021](#)). [Chatterji \(1926\)](#) asserted that the Chittagonian language belongs to the South Eastern Vanga branch of Magadhi Prakrit. This language does not have any writing scripts, but the Arabic script was utilized for writing systems in the past. Currently, the Chittagonian language uses the Bengali script as its primary writing script.

The Chittagonian can be distinguishable from Standard Bengali and other Bengali dialects by its phonetic and morphological features. Therefore, a study ([Hoque, 2014](#)) concluded that Chittagonian is distinguishable from Bengali and can be considered an individual language. A diglossic situation arises in Chittagong District due to the Chittagonian language being mutually unintelligible with Bengali. Hence, some people prefer to communicate in Chittagonian, while others prefer Standard Bengali. It has been observed that the number of Chittagonian speakers is constantly decreasing owing to the inclination for Standard Bengali. This occurrence is described as Language Shift.



A language shift occurs when a person stops using their native tongue in favor of another. Many social factors can cause a community to shift from one language to another (Holmes, 2013). The people begin to use specific languages for specific domains to fulfill distinct communication needs and thus initiate a language shift. As a result of this language shift, so many languages or language varieties of the world are endangered.

In Chittagong, people use Standard Bengali or Chittagonian according to the situation. Chittagonian is experiencing a language shift due to the city's people's preference for Standard Bengali instead of the local tongue. The continuation of these tendencies presents a serious threat to the existence of the Chittagonian language. In addition to losing their language, the people will also lose their culture, literature, and identity. The only way the Chittagonian language will continue to exist is if its speakers continue to use and maintain it.

The study seeks to determine whether the Chittagonian language is undergoing a radical shift that will lead to extinction. This research also investigates the residents' concerns about maintaining the language. In order to attain this, Chittagonian language usage is explored from a range of viewpoints and situations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Chittagonian language

Alam (2011) stated that Chittagonian is the most distinct from Bangla in terms of pronunciation, sentence structure, and the order of parts of speech. So, he attempted to determine whether the dialect originated from an entirely different language or was a skewed form of Bangla. Even the majority of educated Chittagong residents cannot speak Bangla correctly or do so with a noticeable accent because the Chittagonian dialect shares no linguistic similarities with Bangla. He also mentioned that, Although Chittagonian experts such as Abdul Karim Sahitya Bisharad, Dr. Enamul Haq, and Abul Fazal once believed that Chittagonian was derived from ordinary Bangla, they were unable to explain its origins. Nevertheless, they argued that because Chittagong borders the Arakan kingdom of Burma, there was an interaction between the Arakanian language and the Bangla used in Chittagong, resulting in Chittagonian.

Ahmad (2013) claimed that similar to emerging Indian Aryan languages such as Oriya, Assamese, and Maithili, Chittagonian is not a Bangla dialect. Because according to his view, Chittagonian has a longer history than Bangla. He also asserts that whenever the intonation, word order, and syntax of Caryapada are investigated, it will be proven that Chittagonian existed before Bangla.

Moniruzzaman (2007), conversely, believes that, based on the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the Chittagong dialect, it is only one of the Bangla dialects.

The same is stated by Hoque (2016). He asserted that the languages of Bangladesh's various areas are distinct. These were predominantly found within sounds, morphemes, and phrases. In contrast, a comparative analysis reveals a great deal of variance in morphemes. Although the vowels and consonants of standard Bangla are shared in the sound systems of the dialects, there are distinctions in some instances. In the Chittagong dialect, this is highly prevalent. He reaffirmed that the dialects of Rangpur and Chittagong exhibit the largest variety among Bangladeshi dialects. There is a historical background for the fact. Prior to the arrival of the British, this region had established commercial and immigration connections with non-Bangla-speaking territories. Consequently, several foreign linguistic features and morphemes have entered into the language. This resulted in variances in the Rangpur dialects. The Chittagong dialect has been affected by Arakanese Mogh and Arab-Portuguese merchants due to the similar historical context.

Faquire (2010) argued that The Chittagonian language is extremely different from the standard language. Out of the 16 regional varieties, the Chittagonian variety is one of the most difficult to comprehend for speakers of other regional varieties. The Chittagong regions of Bangladesh exhibit a diglossic scenario for this Bangla dialect. Standard Bangla is used in formal situations, and the regional variety is used in everyday situations.

Hossain, Milon, Sabbir & Inan (2020) stated that Chittagonian is a widely spoken but regionally distinct dialect. As a result, it is extremely difficult for non-native speakers to interpret, which impedes communication. This could eventually result in the extinction of the dialect. A standard language facilitates governmental and economic procedures but can also have long-lasting consequences on the language varieties.



2.2 Language Shift and Maintenance

According to Potowski (2013), "Language shift" refers to the process by which one language is abandoned in favor of another as the medium of everyday social interaction. Language shift is caused by several factors with multiple consequences, making it difficult to categorize them. It is essential to investigate language shifts at individual and social levels. The linguistic shift begins with individual speakers' language habits. A language is maintained or lost in a family and society by individuals' speaking behavior.

Grenoble (2021) claimed that, in both monolingual and multilingual societies, language shift is becoming extremely prevalent. It is commonly associated with immigrant groups that adopt the dominant language of their new country and abandon their native language. Language shift is usually caused by colonization in minority-language speaker groups. When a language is endangered, it is usually due to some aspect of language shift.

As defined by Crystal (1987), language maintenance occurs when a language continues to exist despite the presence of other, more dominant languages in the area. Furthermore, he described language shift as when a language gives in to this influence and its speakers assimilate to the dominant language. Typically, these phenomena can be seen in either bilingual or multilingual communities.

Pauwels (2016) stated that, for a long time, the concept of 'language maintenance' has been used in cultures where bilingual and multilingual behaviors are limited to specific demographics (e.g., immigrants and indigenous minorities). She also described that Language shift refers to the change in ethnic language usage among people due to their exposure to the dominant language. At the same time, linguistic maintenance implies continuing to use one's native tongue while living in a society where it is not the dominant tongue.

Ostler (2011) stated that, to keep a language alive, its speakers must successfully transmit it to future generations. This transmission may fail if speakers do not use it adequately in the presence of the learners or, for some reason, if the learners choose not to use it. Therefore we must evaluate the factors, institutions, and circumstances that promote this effective transmission and carry out language maintenance. He also argued that the language is threatened if its transmission is hindered. However, other issues, such as population decline, can induce linguistic shifts. When this occurs, a different language is substituted for the lost one. Hence, if a language is in danger within a sustainable population, it must shift.

Holmes, Roberts, Verivaki, & Aipolo (1993) conducted a study on the language maintenance and shift of the three Speech Communities of New Zealand: Tongan, Greek, and Chinese. Of the three languages, they discovered that Chinese was the one experiencing the most radical shift, as more and more native Chinese speakers gave up using it in their everyday routines. The Greek and Tongan languages will also undergo a language shift, but they are secure for the time being. A positive attitude toward the language is required to preserve these languages. Otherwise, language will undergo a complete change. The speakers of the languages should utilize their native tongue in a much broader context, including at home, social settings, school, and church.

Dyers (2008) studied language shift and the maintenance of Afrikaans amidst the dominance of English. It was observed that English was the dominant language in South Africa, used in different aspects of life, including agriculture, education, and social events. The data showed that, despite the threat posed by the English, the inhabitants of South Africa appear to have kept speaking Afrikaans. Multiple factors have been identified as responsible for preserving this language. These include the predominance of Afrikaans in key fields and the individual and collective identity of the people that the Afrikaans language carries.

3. Materials and Methods

The study's primary objective is to investigate how and to what degree the Chittagonian language shifted and maintained by the people of Chittagong towards the Standard Bengali language. First, the area of the study was selected. Then, a questionnaire was developed to collect the data from the informants in the selected study area. Data were collected using different methods. Insights were found after thoroughly analyzing the data.



3.1 Study Area Selection

The study location of this research was selected according to the living area speakers' who speak the Chittagonian Language. People who speak Chittagonian are scattered around the Chittagong District, so the data were collected from different parts of the Chittagong. The Population samples were collected from the north, south and mid area of Chittagong, the urban and the rural. For the collection of the data, nineteen areas have been chosen. The data are gathered from- Agrabad, Chowmuhuni, Dewanhat, Tigerpass, Lalkhanbazar, Nasirabad, Bahaddarhat, Kazir Dewri, Jamal Khan, Anderkill, Chawkbazar, Oxygen, Fatehabad, Hathazari, Patiya, Chandanaish, Aburkhill, Pahartali (Raozan) and Rangunia.

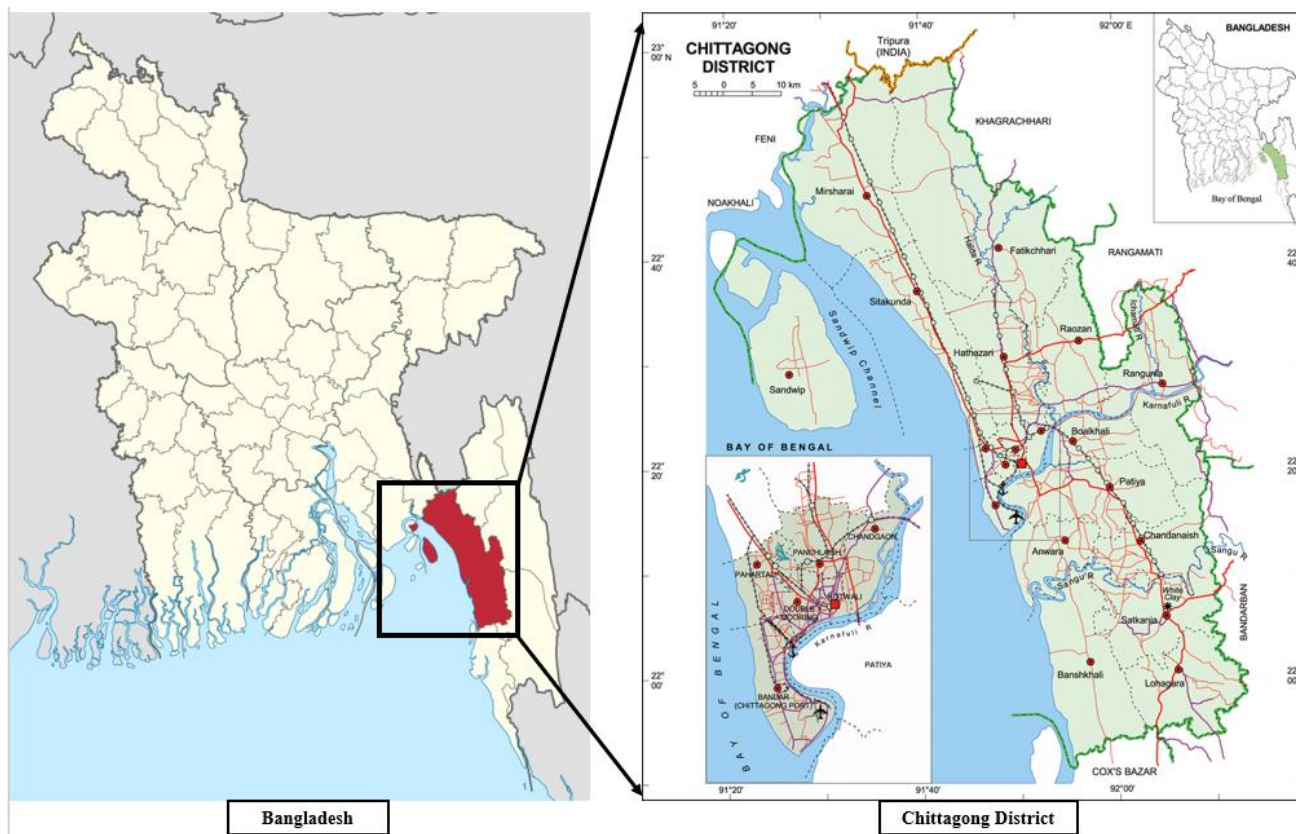


Figure 1. Location Map of the Study Area

3.2 Questionnaire Development

The survey questionnaire was developed to collect in-depth and detailed information from the respondents. The questionnaire was meant to obtain information regarding the language preferences and usage of the intended speakers. The questionnaire was designed according to Gal's (1979) research in Austria, Fasold's (1984) work with Tiwa Indian, and Gunarwan's (1994) study with Lampung. In addition, questionnaire questions were also influenced by the questionnaire form used in studies conducted by the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology. On the questionnaire, respondents were asked what language is preferred at home in regular conversation with members of the family or gatherings of different family events (with parents, grandparents, siblings, spouses, and housework assistant), with neighbours (with neighbours, relatives, guests), at school (with teachers, lecturers, students/friends), in the workplace, on the streets, in marketplaces, or public places. A total of 15 questions were developed to collect information from the respondents. The questionnaire was designed such that the first few questions were about the personal information of the interviewee. All the remaining questions were about the language preference and practices of the targeted speakers to get a more profound understanding of language shifting and maintenance.

3.3 Data Collection

The data were collected for 2.5 months, from May 2022 to August 2022. All the participants of the study were native residents of the Chittagong District. Primary data were collected via the survey interview. Most of them

were conducted face-to-face. However, there were some limitations in in-person interviews due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, a phone interview was conducted in some situations. They are notified before the phone call about the date and time of the interview. A Structured interview was designed, with the same predetermined question asked to all the participants in the same sequence. The interview is recorded on a smartphone so that it can be transcribed and evaluated at a later time. All the participants were briefed on the research, and their informed consent was taken before the interview began. Also, the recordings were made with the respondents' proper permission.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is essential to all research because it provides meaning for the obtained data. Recognition and analysis of these data provide insights into the data's pattern, revealing several study viewpoints. Research in this study relied primarily on quantitative techniques. Collected data were interpreted with the help of descriptive statistics. An interpretative and thematic analysis of the data was performed to elucidate different understandings of the study. As Farisiyah & Zamzani (2008) used in their research on the local language of Indonesia, this study was also analyzed according to a range of categorization areas: Language Shift, Language Maintenance, Chittagonian Language, and Standard Bengali Language. The data were studied from the perspective of four domains: family, neighborhood, educational, and public. These classification categories were also labeled using coding: CL (Chittagonian Language) and SB (Standard Bengali).

Microsoft Excel was used as the spreadsheet program to organize the participants' demographic details. As stated by Chowdhury (2019), it assisted me in determining if the participants' ages, genders, levels of education, and occupations aided or limited their function of maintaining their language. All the identifiable information in the data was obscured. Complete privacy of the participants' information is ensured by maintaining their anonymity.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The responses were gathered from the several areas of the Chittagong District stated above, whose native language is mainly Chittagonian. With the help of the structured questionnaire, a total of 117 respondents were interviewed. Table 1 presents a summary of the respondents' various demographic characteristics. About 70% of the sample's 117 respondents were men, and the remaining 30% were women. The age categories of the responders ranged widely as well, with about 31% in the 21-30 years age group. People above 50 years of age constituted about 26% of the respondents. The percentage of those aged 31–40 accounted for roughly 21%. The study's youngest participant was 18, while its oldest participant was 67.

Approximately 28% of the participants had done their Post-Graduate studies, whereas the 22% had finished their Higher Secondary education. In addition, over 21% of the respondents were illiterate, whereas 15% held a Bachelor's degree.

The occupation of the respondents was diverse, with 21% being university students - graduate and post-graduate. Additionally, 15% of the group consists of private-sector employees. Others work as teachers, civil servants, nurses, business people, farmers, and rickshaw pullers.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Gender	Male	82
	Female	35
Age (Year)	11-20	4
	21-30	36
	31-40	25
	41-50	22



	50<	30
Education	Illiterate	24
	Primary	7
	Secondary	9
	Higher Secondary	26
	Graduate	18
	Postgraduate	33
Occupation	Doctor	4
	Teacher	10
	Civil Servant	9
	Private-Sector	17
	School Student	4
	University Student	24
	Housewife	8
	Nurse	5
	Business People	6
	Rickshaw Puller	10
	Farmer	7
	Laborer	5
	Unemployed	8

Table 2. The percentage of language used by the respondents

Domain	Scale				
	Always CL	More Frequent CL	Equal CL and SB	More Frequent SB	Always SB
Family	43.59%	17.95%	6.84%	9.40%	22.22%
Neighborhood	33.33%	18.80%	11.11%	10.26%	26.50%
Educational	4.27%	7.69%	8.55%	27.35%	52.14%
Public	6.84%	9.40%	24.79%	26.50%	32.48%

A breakdown of the percentage of questionnaire responses illustrates in Table 2. The table displays the percentage of participants who always speak the CL on one side and the SB on the other. The respondents who speak SB and CL equally in various circumstances are shown in the center section of the table.



The study's findings will be presented and discussed in four domains: the family, the neighborhood, education, and the public sphere. What can be determined from the overall setting of the study is whether or not the SB is more dominant than the CL, causing language shifts.

4.2 Discussion

4.2.1 Family Domain

Each family member, immediate or extended, is considered a part of this domain. Experts believe the home is the primary setting for using a person's native or ethnic language. Clyne & Kipp (1999) stated that the home is the primary center for language maintenance. The only place where a language is sustained more than anywhere else is the family. Fishman (1991) asserts that passing one's native tongue on to one's descendants occurs naturally within the family domain. Given the importance of communication inside families, especially amongst parents, children, grandparents, and other family members, it is logical that local or native language is used extensively.

From the responses to the questionnaire, it was found that most respondents always use CL in family settings. They communicate with their family members more frequently through the CL. It was found that among all participants, 43.59% (51 respondents) speak CL in everyday communication with their family members. Additionally, the findings show that 17.95% or 21 respondents make the most frequent use of CL. All users, regardless of age or gender, feel socially at ease while interacting on CL. These figures indicate that CL is almost always employed during domestic communication among family members. One respondent said, "I told my children that they could learn and speak Standard Bengali in every other location, but home is the only place where they can learn the Chittagonian from childhood. Chittagonian language represents our identity and culture of the region. How can one go without learning the language?".

On the contrary, 22.22% (26 respondents) of the population uses SB to communicate with their immediate family members and relatives. It was seen from the response that they choose to communicate through SB rather than CL because they aim to enhance their social status. Even do not want their children to be taught the local language. "In today's society, speaking the local language is frowned upon because it hinders personal development. Almost anyone believes that the local dialect is inferior to Standard Bengali. Unfortunately, speaking Chittagonian has a negative effect on my children's self-esteem; hence I have no intention of teaching them the language.", another respondent said.

There has been some shift in the CL because some parents do not wish their children to learn the language. However, most people tend to retain their language in the family domain. As the local language is the marker of their identity, individuals tend to use it more regularly among their close ones. Thus, the rate of language shift within this domain is quite minimal. So, CL will continue to exist so long as families continue to use it as their preferred method of family communication.

4.2.2 Neighborhood Domain

It is common for people to communicate in a different language when interacting with their next-door neighbors or other members of their particular community. Thus, the neighborhood domain differs from the family domain because people tend to transition from their native to their standard language. People utilize more socially acceptable language while communicating with community members. Consequently, a diglossic scenario has been established where two same but mutually unintelligible languages, Chittagonian and Standard Bengali, coexist.

According to the data illustrated in Table 2, it is seen that CL is almost always spoken more frequently than SB by the respondents in the neighborhood domain. Although 26.50% of participants in a different social environment use SB, most people use CL when communicating in various social groups. It has been found that 33.33% of respondents use CL in their neighborhoods. It varies depending on the social class of the people that participated in the study. As Meyerhoff (2018) stated, the transition to the standard version of the language is being made because of the people's professions or their ascension to higher-level positions within the broader class. Based on the responses, it was determined that upper-class respondents use SB more frequently in neighborhood settings, whereas almost all working-class respondents use CL. It is because upper-class people strive to maintain high status



and want to climb the social ladder. On the other hand, participants who are part of the working-class do not put much effort into attempting to elevate their social position and are, therefore, more inclined to utilize CL in their neighborhood.

Geographic location also had a significant influence on language switching. The study indicated that participants from rural areas are more likely to use the CL in their neighborhoods. As for the participants from urban areas, they are more likely to switch their language from CL to SB more frequently. Because in urban areas, people from different regions move to find employment, and Standard Bengali is used to facilitate communication. Even though people use SB in various circumstances, it has been determined through study that CL is spoken more frequently in the neighborhood domain. Therefore, the shift in the Chittagonian language in this domain occurs more slowly.

4.2.3 Education Domain

The communication environment within and around a school or other educational institution is the focus area of the education domain. It includes communication situations found within the classroom and those outside the classroom. A communication event between a student and teacher is initiated when learning occurs in a classroom. Not only that, but when students interact with one another, they also participate in a communication event that takes place outside their usual learning environment. Students engage in conversations with their peers during playtime, lunch, and study discussion in class. Hence, responses to the questionnaire were collected from the students in two different contexts: first, within the classroom when conversing with teachers or lecturers, and second, outside the classroom with classmates.

The research revealed that 52.14% of people use SB in educational contexts, a higher proportion than any other domain. In addition, 27.35 percent of the respondents use SB in educational contexts more frequently, including conversations with their peers and teachers. The use of CL in this domain is as low as 4.27%. It is because all educational materials are written in Standard Bengali, and all teachers must adhere to the established language norms when instructing their students. Although, some school-going students in rural villages speak in CL with their classmates and friends outside the designated learning times to discuss and have casual conversations. It was also found in some university students speaking in CL with their closest classmates. However, that percentage is relatively small compared to SB's widespread use.

Based on the responses acquired, the vast majority of participants with a high education level tend to use more of the standard version of Bengali. Therefore, highly educated peoples have a greater propensity to reject the use of the local language. Although some respondents who live in rural areas use CL, the usage of SB is much more prevalent in this domain. As a result, the Language shift of CL is considerably more significant in the education domain, as students increasingly adopt the standard version of Bengali.

4.2.4 Public Domain

People interact with new people daily in different settings, including public transit, the workplace, seminars, and social functions. People's conversations that stretch beyond their immediate social circles (i.e., their families, friends, schools, and workplaces) emerge in the public domain. While interacting with people who are unfamiliar to them, people frequently shift the language they use.

The data reveals that 32.48% of the respondents (38 respondents) employ SB to initiate conversations with unknown people. It happens primarily within the Chittagong city area as people from other districts come here to seek employment. They come from a wide variety of different backgrounds, desires, and communicative objectives. Their local language is also different from the Chittagonian language. Since CL would be incomprehensible for them, SB is spoken to facilitate communication. The majority of people utilize SB in more general aspects of communication. As a consequence of this, it has also been seen that 26.50% of people use SB more frequently than CL in the public domain.



When people are in a comfortable setting, they are more likely to utilize CL. In contrast, when people are in unfamiliar situations, they prefer to switch the language to SB. It is therefore understood that, in a broader aspect, individuals tend to communicate in SB.

In addition, it is found that men are more likely to use CL than women. According to the responses provided by respondents, the survey reveals that females prefer to use SB more often than males. This result is the same as Meyerhoff's (2018) study, which stated that females focus more on their appearance. So, they tend to use more of the standard version of the language. Consequently, language shift is more frequently observed in females than in males.

According to a study by Letsholo (2009), the Bakalanga youth are inclined to give up their mother tongue, Ikalanga. They favor Setswana over Ikalanga as a means of communication. The Bakalanga people are experiencing a shift in their language due to this event. It was also observed in the younger generation of Chittagong. Younger individuals tend to transition from CL to the standard language because standard Bengali can help them advance in their careers and integrate with modern society. For this, they are gradually rejecting their local language and causing a language shift of the Chittagonian language. In contrast, the elder age group prefers to use the CL more often. They maintain their language as a way of expressing their Chittagonian identity.

5. Conclusion

This study's primary purpose is to determine how and to what degree the Chittagonian language is shifting and being maintained. This research explores the language preferences of respondents in different settings in their everyday lives. The study found that the respondents' language choice varies according to the different environments. Most respondents feel more comfortable using CL around their families and neighborhoods. On the other hand, in the educational and public domains, respondents have a higher tendency for SB. Therefore, the educational and public spheres, as opposed to the home and neighborhood spheres, are the major contexts in which the language shift is currently occurring.

Additionally, younger generations have a greater tendency to choose SB as their primary language. It can cause language shifts to occur much more swiftly than anticipated. However, in a diglossic community, one language is typically preferred over another, according to the situation. It does not necessarily indicate that the Chittagonian language will experience a complete shift. Furthermore, the older generation values their language and continues to use it since it represents their identity. Therefore, Chittagonian will be among the safe language because of the significant number of people who still speak it. Due to the relatively slow rate at which languages shift is occurring, Chittagonian poses no imminent threat. People find themselves in a familiar environment while engaging in conversation in Chittagonian. Despite the widespread use of Standard Bengali in several contexts, Chittagonian remains a prominent language. This study contains some limitations despite the insightful findings acquired. First, the study's small sample size may limit the findings' significance to a broader population. Moreover, participants may not precisely recall or report their behaviors and experiences, so relying solely on self-reported data raises the possibility of bias. These limitations suggest that one should take cautiousness when interpreting the results.

The study's limitations also suggest several possibilities for further research. Extending the sample size and using longitudinal designs would enable an investigation of changes over time and give a deeper understanding of the language shift and maintenance of the CL. Moreover, mixed methods approach, which combine quantitative and qualitative data to provide deeper insights, could be valuable for future research.

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Authors' Contributions

The author solely contributed to all aspects of this research project, including the conceptualization of the study, data collection and analysis, interpretation of the results, and writing and revising the manuscript.

Has this article been screened for Similarity?

Yes

Conflict of interest

The Authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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