



From Kabul to Quetta: Plan Your Journey to Pashto Fluency

by Michelle Baumgartner

West of the Indus River in Pakistan and south of the river Amu Darya in Afghanistan, the ancestral homeland of the Pashtun people awaits you.

The ancient [origins of the Pashtuns are unclear](#), but their cultural identity is strong. Pashtuns [live by the Pashtunwali](#), a rigorous and ancient code of honor that is [over a millennium old](#), far predating the formation of the modern states of Pakistan and Afghanistan where most Pashtuns live.

With roughly sixty tribes and over 400 sub-clans, the Pashtuns have a rich and diverse culture that is best expressed through their own language: Pashto.

About the Pashto Language

Pashto is an Indo-Iranian language. It's closely related to Farsi, Kurdish, and Balochi, among other languages.

Pashto is native to both Pakistan and Afghanistan. There are smaller groups of Pashto speakers in Tajikistan, as well as Iran.

You might hear the Pashto language referred to as Pukhto, Pakhto, Pashtu, and Pushto. In Persian literature, it's sometimes called "Afghani."

The Pashto language is divided into three standards, or dialect groups.

The language's "soft" dialects, which retain the age-old /zh/ and /sh/ sounds, are known collectively as Southern Pashto—and spoken by about six million people in Afghanistan.

Conversely, the Northern dialects are sometimes called either Paxto or Pakhto. These dialects are sometimes called the "hard" dialects, since they use the /gh/ and /kh/ sounds in place of the older /zh/ and /sh/ sounds. Northern Pashto counts about 9.6 million speakers in Pakistan.

Northern and Southern Pashto are the two primary standards. There's also a set of Central Pashto dialects, Bannuchi, Waziri, and Dzadrani, which are spoken along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Some sources put the total number of native Pashto speakers in modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan as high 18.5 million.

The Pashtun diaspora has brought between 40 to 60 million Pashto speakers to the shores of many countries all over the world — such as India, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, Iran, Germany, Japan, Australia, and Russia.

Pashto in Afghanistan

The disparity between the number of Pashtuns in Afghanistan and the attitudes toward their language is a delicate subject.

Pashto is a regional language in Afghanistan, and one of the country's two official languages. The country's other official language is Dari (Eastern Persian) — which [many of its speakers still prefer to call Farsi, or Fārsī-ye Darī](#). Afghan Pashto, which shares some vocabulary with Persian, is a literary language with a rich written tradition of poetry.

Varying numbers of Pashto speakers in Afghanistan are reported. Some sources say the number is as low as 18% of the population; others claim that it's as high as 48%. (It's unclear whether these numbers represent just native speakers, or some speakers who use Pashto as an auxiliary language.)

Ethnic Pashtuns make up the single largest Afghan ethnic group, accounting for about 42% of the Afghan population. Traditionally, they have also [held much of the country's political power](#).

Despite all of this, Fārsī-ye Darī holds linguistic sway in Afghanistan. About 80% of the country's communications, from print and electronic media to official government directives and records, are in Fārsī-ye Darī. It's largely the language of government and of higher education.

Indeed, many Pashtuns are bilingual in Fārsī-ye Darī, which also serves as a common language between several of the country's ethnic groups. The Pashto language is less likely than Fārsī-ye Darī to be spoken as an auxiliary language by those outside of the Pashtun ethnic group.

Pashto in Pakistan

Pashto is not an official language in Pakistan.

Roughly 15-20% of the Pakistani population speaks Pashto as their native tongue. Like Punjabi, Balochi, and Sindhi, Pashto is recognized by the Pakistani government as a **regional** language.

Most of Pakistan's Pashto speakers live in the northern part of Balochistan province and in the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which sits above Balochistan on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. (A particularly famous Pashtun and Pashto speaker, Nobel prize winner [ملاله یوسفزی \(Malala Yousafzai\)](#), is a native of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's scenic Swat Valley.)



Daraal Lake in Swat Valley, Pakistan

(Tariq siddiq kohistani, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

The language is also spoken in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, among other Pakistani cities and towns.

Pashto is the second most-spoken language in the country, with about half as many speakers as the [majority language, Punjabi](#).

However, Urdu and English are the two official languages of Pakistan. Pakistani Pashto [borrows some words from Urdu](#).

Pashto in Pakistan tends to be more of a spoken language, rather than a literary one. Because it is [not given state support](#) to promote its use, many speakers do not learn to read and write it in school.

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