What makes the Sindhi language special and why you should care
- A linguist's view

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Preview
I. A brief history of Sindhi
II. Sindhi scripts
III. Highlights of Sindhi grammar
IV. Cultural expression through Sindhi language
V. Language preservation
VI. Resources for learning Sindhi
I: A brief history of Sindhi

A brief history of Sindhi over two millenia

- Sindhi belongs to the **Indo-Aryan** language family, along with other modern Indian languages of the north.
  - *e.g.*, Hindi, Gujurati, Kashmiri,…

- The earliest written reference to Sindhi dates to the 2nd century A.D./C.E.

- Sindhi derives from an ancient Prakrit in use during the early Vedic period, possibly before the emergence of Sanskrit as a standardized language.
Was Sindhi the language of Mohen-jo-daro?

• A nice idea, but lacks supporting evidence.

• The Mohen-jo-daro script is not yet deciphered, and not much is known about the language of the inhabitants.

• Scholars continue to debate whether the Harappan civilization of Mohen-jo-daro was Dravidian or Indo-Aryan in origin. Linguistic evidence is scant.

Is Sindhi related to Persian or Arabic?

• The short answer: Yes (but distantly) and No

• Persian is related to Sindhi, as both belong to the Indo-European language family.

• Arabic is a Semitic language, not related to Indo-European.

• Apparent similarities with Persian and Arabic are due largely to borrowings from those languages into Sindhi, and are reinforced by the use of a common script (Arabic).
Is Sindhi the purest of the Indo-Aryan languages?

• Linguists would reject this notion—there is no language spoken by humans which resists change. Not today, not ever.

• Sindhi is described as retaining more of the features of ancient Prakrit than other modern Indic languages.

• The conservatism of Sindh could be attributed to the geographic isolation of the Sindhi-speaking region. Similarly for Kashmiri, Sindhi’s closest cousin in the Indo-Aryan family.

II. Sindhi scripts
Sindhi scripts: take back the write!

• There were four scripts in use at the time of the British occupation of Sindh:
  
  Devanagari  Gurumukhi  
  Hatwanki  Perso-Arabic  

• The modified Perso-Arabic script, adopted by British in 1853, is the standard in Sindh.

• The modified Devanagari script is used today in some Sindhi communities in India.

Which is easier to learn?

• Neither is very difficult, compared to Chinese… and lots of people learn to read and write in Chinese!

• The modified Devanagari script is easy to learn for people who already read Hindi.

• The Perso-Arabic script is more complex in that it has different shapes for the letters in initial, medial, and final position of the word.
  – Somewhat like cursive writing with the Roman alphabet…
Anyone who is literate in English can become literate in Sindhi.

But it takes practice, like everything else!

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The little secret of Romanization for Sindhi

- Sindhi can be written with the Roman alphabet we use for English, and it’s easy to learn for someone literate in English.
  
  “maan sindhii likhaan thii”

- Convenient for computer communication.

- Can be used to facilitate language learning at an elementary level.

- Won’t supplant Perso-Arabic, which is still needed to access the literature and print media.
III. Highlights of Sindhi Grammar

Notes from a linguist’s journal
Or ---
“How I spent my sabbatical and summer vacation”

The exotic sounds of Sindhi

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May 2003
Jennifer Cole
### Sindhi consonants not in English

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### Implosive Consonants

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## Retroflex Consonants

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## Lots of Nasal Consonants

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</table>
Word Order: Putting the cart before the horse

• English word order:
  Subject -- Verb – Object
  *Gul speaks Sindhi.*

• Sindhi word order:
  Subject – Object – Verb
  *Gulu Sindhii ggalhaayo-thaa*
  
In Sindhi the Object comes before the Verb.

Postpositions come later

• In English, the preposition precedes the noun it modifies:
  *Leela went inside the house*

• Sindhi uses postpositions, which follow the noun:
  *Leela ghar men vaii*
Transforming English to Sindhi

• Subject stays put

Anil  put  the cart  before  the horse

Transforming English to Sindhi

• Verb goes to end:

Anil  put  the cart  before  the horse

Anil  put
Transforming English to Sindhi

- Object goes before the verb

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anil</th>
<th>put</th>
<th>the cart</th>
<th>before</th>
<th>the horse</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anil</td>
<td>cart</td>
<td>put</td>
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Transforming English to Sindhi

- Postposition follows the noun it modifies, all preceding the object

<table>
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<td>horse</td>
<td>before</td>
<td>cart</td>
<td>put</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aniila</td>
<td>ghoRe</td>
<td>aggyaan</td>
<td>gaaddo</td>
<td>vidho</td>
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</table>
Word Order is Free

• Although Subject-Object-Verb is the neutral word order, these parts of the sentence can be freely rearranged:

  cʰokria kuto: ḏiṭʰo: SOV
  cʰokria ḏiṭʰo: kuto: SVO
  kuto: cʰokria ḏiṭʰo: OSV
  ḏiṭʰo: cʰokria kuto: VSO
  kuto: ḏiṭʰo: cʰokria OVS
  ḏiṭʰo: kuto: cʰokria VOS

‘The girl saw the dog.’

Pronouns:
Now you see them, now you don’t

• In Sindhi, Subject pronouns are often omitted:
  (huua) hale-thii.
  ‘(She) leaves.’

• Object pronouns can also be omitted:
  huna ḥuu paaRhyo
    --- --- paaRhia:i:n

  ‘(He/She) (it) read.’
Pronouns:
Now you see them, now you don’t

• In Sindhi, Subject pronouns are often omitted:
  
  *(huua)* *hale-thii.*
  
  “*(She)* leaves.”

• Object pronouns can also be omitted:
  
  huna  huu  *paarRhyo*
  
  ---   ---   *paarRhia:i:n*

  “*(He/She)* (it) read.”

Do you notice the difference in the verb endings?

Getting tense: Sindhi verbs

• There are many ways to conjugate a verb in Sindhi, depending on
  – It’s use as a verb, adjective or adverb;
  – The tense, aspect, mood;
  – The number and gender of the noun it agrees with.

• Ignoring number/gender, there are 23 distinct verb forms for each verb.
  – *Verb*
  – *Verb + Auxiliary*
### Verbs as adjectives and adverbs

<table>
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<th>Meaning</th>
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<tr>
<td>halanu</td>
<td>'to go'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halaiŋo</td>
<td>'about to taken'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halando</td>
<td>'going'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halyalu, halyo</td>
<td>'went'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halande</td>
<td>'(as he was) going'</td>
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<tr>
<td>hali:, hali: kare:</td>
<td>'(as he) went'</td>
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### Finite Verbs (many of them)

<table>
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<td>hale: tʰo:</td>
<td>'he goes'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hale: ha:</td>
<td>'had he gone'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halando:</td>
<td>'he will go'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halando: ahe:</td>
<td>'he goes'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halando: huyo:</td>
<td>'he used to go'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halando: hundo:</td>
<td>'he is probably going'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halando: huje:</td>
<td>'(perhaps) he goes'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hali: rahyo: ahe:</td>
<td>'he is going'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hali: rahyo: huyo:</td>
<td>'he was going'</td>
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</table>
Agree to disagree with verbs

• In many languages, including English, the verb agrees with the subject.

• In Sindhi, the verb agrees with the subject most of the time, but in some sentences the verb agrees with the object.
  – Past tense of transitive verbs:
    
cʰokría  kuto:  dɪtʰo:
    Girl-fem  dog-masc.  saw-masc.
  ‘The girl saw the dog.’

IV. Cultural expression through Sindhi language
• The Sindhi perspective can often be gleaned through the language constructions that are used.

• Translating the mindset is often harder than translating the actual words and phrases. (True for any language)

• Following are a few personal observations.

Don’t confront

• Sindhis often prefer indirect expressions to communicate advice or an injunction to action.

• Sindhii sikhije

   Lit: Sindhi should be learned.
   “You should learn Sindhi.” (wistful?)
   Close to but not quite the same as the American English generic: “One should learn Sindhi.”
Don’t disappoint

• “Can you do this?”
  – *haa, thii tho saghe*
    Lit: yes, it's possible
    “It may not be possible.”
    [colloquial American English: “Don’t count on it.”]

• “Will you come tomorrow?”
  – *jithe daaNo paaNii huundo...*
    Lit: where grain and water will be
    “If fate ordains…”
    A polite way to say “not sure, maybe not”

Assume the worst

• *chaai kaana aahe.*
  *(Said with question intonation)*
  Lit: There is not any tea?
  “Is there any tea?”
V. Language preservation

Will Sindhi survive into the next century?

• Estimated 40 million Sindhi speakers in Pakistan (1991 census- cancelled before completion)

• Estimated 1.2 million Sindhi speakers in India (1971 census; including Kachchi would bring total to 1.7 million).

• Even inflating figures for population growth, Sindhi is a “small” language. But is it threatened? Is it actually endangered?
Some background facts

- There are an estimated 6,000 (+/- 1K) languages spoken in the world today.
- Distribution
  - Europe 4%
  - Americas 15%
  - Africa 31%
  - **Asia 50%** (Papua New Guinea & Pacific Islands + Indonesia: 25% !)

A few languages dominate the world scene

- 10 major languages, each spoken by over 109 million people, are the mother tongues of almost half (49%) of the world's population.
- 4% of languages spoken today are spoken by 96% of the world’s population.
- Top 8: Mandarin, Spanish, English, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese.
How fast can a language become endangered?

Some factors determining rate of decline:
• Use of the language in the home.
• Number of speakers in lower age groups.
• Pattern of language loss as speakers leave home environment.
• Pattern of language use by women of childbearing age.

Linguists’ best estimate

• **50%** of today’s languages are moribund, are not being transmitted to children.
• These languages are expected to be lost in the next 100 years.
  – 3,000 languages lost in 1,200 months
  – Approx. 1 language lost every 2 weeks.
The fewer the better?

• Maybe a reduction in numbers of languages will ease communication, help to build nations and global solidarity.

• If everyone had equal access to the language of power, would that level the playing field in the development of societies?

Or…Strength in numbers?

• But… arguably, the success of humanity is due to the ability to develop cultures suited for survival in a variety of environments.

• These cultures have everywhere been transmitted by languages, in oral traditions and in written literatures.

• Each language constitutes a model of the universe, a way of understanding the world.
Four reasons why small languages should be preserved

1. Language expresses identity

   - When a language is lost, so also is the unique identity of the community.

   “Every language is a temple in which the soul of those who speak is enshrined.”

   --- Oliver Wendall Holmes
2. “Languages are the archives of history.”
   --- Ralph Waldo Emerson

   – Language links us to our parents, our grandparents, and to their ancestors.

3. Knowledge is preserved through language.

4. Multilingualism is enriching!
   – It’s the norm in most of the world outside of North America.

VI. Resources for Learning

Sindhi
Learning Sindhi

• Print resources:
  – K. Lekhwani (1987) An Intensive Course in Sindhi. Published by the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore (India)

• Computer resources:
  – Let’s Learn Sindhi (2002). Published by Sindhi Sangat and the Indian Institute of Sindhology (India). Available on CD.
  – Let’s Talk Sindhi
To appear…

- **Sindhi Online**, a self-directed online course in Sindhi I’m developing at the University of Illinois.
  
  – Based on the summer Intensive Sindhi course taught at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2000.
  
  – Geared towards an English-speaking adult learner.