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# Language and its Politics in Indian Trans-Himalaya: Beyond Bhoti Versus Ladakhi

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**Abstract**

*Language politics in Ladakh involves the twin issues of recognition and preservation. Contestation on nomenclature is concerned with the recognition and the debate on writing system is about preservation. There are two broad views regarding both, one adopts a conservative approach and another liberal. This paper is an attempt to delve into the complexity of the language issue in Ladakh with primary focus on Bhoti versus Ladakhi contestation. The study adopts a qualitative method relying on secondary data based on survey of literature as well as primary data based on government documents and personal interviews with language experts in Ladakh. The study suggests that Bhoti as a classical language with rich literature, geographical expansion and mother language of many Himalayan languages can be considered high standard language appropriate for official recognition in the eighth schedule of the constitution of India. Whereas, Ladakhi being a variant of Bhoti can be provided scope for deviation from classical Bhoti in writing and accord official recognition at the state level. Language education shall move from familiar to unfamiliar by introducing textbooks in local Ladakhi language at primary level and in Bhoti at higher level. While religious and literary texts can be in classical Bhoti, popular literatures like magazines, newspapers etc. can be considered more appropriate in Ladakhi*.

**Key Words**: Language Politics, Ladakhi, Bhoti, Purgi, Balti

## 1. Introduction

Emergence of regional or social varieties and dialects from a mother language is significant in the history of a language. There are instances where certain variety of a language becomes high variety used by the community for religious and literary purposes, whereas, a regional colloquial variety become low variety used by the community as lingua franca. The Bhoti versus Ladakhi is a similar case in point, where, the former has become high variety and the latter a low variety. Since Ladakhi is one of the Himalayan languages belonging to Tibeto-Burman language family, it has retained classical Tibetan elements,

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however there are elements which are specific to it. People who understand Ladakhi well generally finds it difficult to read and understand written classical Tibetan. It is because, in spoken Ladakhi language, people use many indigenous as well as loan words.

The standard classical Tibetan language and script was developed by the Tibetan scholar, Thonmi Sambhota, in the 7th century. The religious texts used by Tibetans as well as Buddhists of Indian Himalayas are typical examples of written standard classical Tibetan language. Whereas, Ladakhi is a colloquial language used in All India Radio Leh, *Ladakhi Sheraza*[1] and as a lingua franca across Ladakh. Although it is written in the same Tibetan script, there are scope for deviations in the words and grammar from standard classical Tibetan. Meanwhile, Bhoti is an umbrella term developed in 1970s to bring all Himalayan languages, which belongs to Tibeto-Burman language family, under a common nomenclature and project it for constitutional recognition under 8th schedule of the constitution of India. Although, the rationale is to base 'Bhoti' on the script and the grammar of standard classical Tibetan language but consensus is yet to achieve on its standardisation and nomenclature.

It would not be wrong to assume that Bhoti will be closer to classical Tibetan language but Ladakhi on the other hand would be slightly different and localised. It is due to these deviations, particularly in grammar, that there were cases of resistance to written Ladakhi colloquial language by the proponents of Bhoti in Ladakh. Therefore, there has been and still is a debate on writing system between the proponents of Bhoti and Ladakhi. The baseline of Bhoti versus Ladakhi contestation is the debate on maintaining standard and scope for deviation in writings. In this context, it can be argued that given the reality of the language fluidity there must be scope for deviation and modifications in the colloquial language (known as "*Phal-skat*" in Ladakhi) but at the same time standard is also necessary to be maintained in the classical language (Known as "*Chos-skat*" in Ladakhi) to ensure the preservation of the authenticity of the mother language.

Language is also an important basis of social identity and culture. A community acquire and preserve its identity through language and as a cultural marker of group identity language acquires more significance than religion (Warikoo, 1996). Therefore, language assertion and the case for its official recognition become a complex and a contested issue. The case of language issue in Ladakh shows how communities tend to politicise and communalise language in the process of seeking official recognition to it. The movement for the inclusion of Bhoti language in the eighth schedule of the constitution of India and the recent declaration of official languages of the Union Territory (UT) of

Ladakh are main issues around which the language debate in the region revolves.

## 2. Methodology

The study relies on qualitative method using both primary and secondary data. While the study uses government documents, study report, organisational publications and personal interviews for primary data, its secondary data is based on books, research articles, periodicals and newspaper articles. The case study report of Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) as well as the pamphlet published by Himalayan Buddhist Cultural Association (HBCA) are significant sources of primary data for understanding the case of the movement for constitutional recognition of Bhoti language. Personal interviews were conducted with range of language experts to have better understanding of Bhoti versus Ladakhi debate in particular and the dynamics of policy issue, identity contestation and language politics of Ladakh in general.

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to collect data by employing semi- structured interviews. Since the language contestation and politics in Ladakh mainly revolves around Bhoti versus Ladakhi debate, attempt has been made to explore and analyse perspectives of both the proponents of Bhoti and Ladakhi. Therefore, language experts were chosen to ensure proportionate representation of both the groups. Whereas, experts of other languages were also interviewed to know perspectives on language issue in Ladakh beyond Bhoti versus Ladakhi. In doing so, attempt has been made to create a corpus construction of discourses on the issues of pressing language issues in Ladakh regarding the preservation, promotion, recognition and identity.

### 2.1 Language Diversity of Ladakh

Languages spoken in Union Territory of Ladakh can be classified into two major groups belonging to Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan family respectively. Ladakhi, Balti and Purgi belongs to the first group and Shina and Brokskat belongs to the second group. While Ladakhi speakers predominate Leh district and Zanskar tehsil in Kargil district, Balti speakers are confined to Turtuk tehsil in Leh district and Hardas as well as Lato village in Kargil district. Whereas, Purgi speakers predominate Kargil district excluding Zanskar and Drass. Meanwhile, Shina (Dardic) speakers are predominant in Drass belt[2] and Brokskat (Dardic) speakers are confined to Dah-Hanu belt[3]. The UNESCO placed languages spoken in the Union Territory of Ladakh under the category of endangered languages with Ladakhi, Balti and Purgi as vulnerable and Dardi-Arya[4] language as definitely endangered (Tashi, 2023). However, these languages except Purgi were recognised regional languages in the sixth schedule of the constitution of erstwhile state Jammu and Kashmir. The section 146 of the constitution also envisaged the establishment of an Academy of Art, Culture and Languages for the development of official languages as well as recognised regional languages of the sixth schedule (Noorani, 2014).

Ladakhi spoken in and around Leh and Purgi spoken in and around Kargil has gained dominant position in Leh and Kargil districts respectively (Tashi et al., 2024). Although Ladakhi, Balti and Purgi belong to the same Tibeto-Burman family, there are slight variations among them but mutually intelligible. Meanwhile, Shina and Brokskat though belong to the same Indo-Aryan language family are largely unintelligible to the speakers of each other. However, the differences among them are further being complicated by census classifications, official language policies and demand for recognition.

The union government of India recently declared English, Hindi, Urdu, Bhoti and Purgi as official languages of UT Ladakh. The president of India promulgated 'The Ladakh Official Languages Regulation 2025' on 2 June 2025. The clause 4 (1) of the regulation also envisage establishment of an Academy of Art, Culture and Languages and strengthening of institutional mechanism for the "promotion and development" of other languages in UT Ladakh (MLJ, 2025). Further, the regulation emphasises on "promotion and development" of native languages which include Ladakhi, Balti, Shina (Dardic) and Brokskat (Dardic). However, public debate before and after the official language declaration signifies an ongoing debate within language assertion in Ladakh and the dominant one has been the contestation between Bhoti versus Ladakhi.

### 2.2 Language Assertions of Ladakh and Bhoti Movement.

Though Bhoti versus Ladakhi contestation is not very old, the trajectory of language assertion and official policies adopted from time to time are pertinent to discuss for better understanding of the contestation. Earliest assertion of a language was made by Kashmir Raj Bodhi Mahasabha[5] in its memorandum submitted to the Glancy Commission, a commission of enquiry appointed by British, in early 1930s. The memorandum contained, among others, the demand for "a change in the medium of instruction from Urdu to Tibetan (Ladakhi/Bhoti)[6]" (Bertelsen, 1996). Having Urdu as compulsory subject in schools instead of Ladakhi was perceived by Buddhists of Ladakh as state imposition of a language that was alien for them. Therefore, the demands that people of Ladakh placed before the state government in 1950s also included making Bodhi[7] the medium of instruction in schools and demanded for the preparation of Bodhi text books for all the classes (Kaul, 2004). Subsequently, the term 'Bodhi' became official name of the academic subject in JKBOSE[8], although 'Ladakhi' was already a recognised regional language under the sixth schedule of the state constitution. This early language assertions made by Buddhists of Ladakh and acquiring the name "Bodhi", a misnomer, have led to the politicisation of language in the region.

Although, Balti, Ladakhi and Shina were recognised as regional languages in the state constitution, none of them became compulsory subject in the government schools in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. In 1969 during their first mass agitation against alleged government negligence and discrimination, Buddhists of Leh demanded recognition

of 'Bodhi' and making it compulsory up to high school level (Kaul, 2004). The agitation compelled the state government to declare that Bodhi will be taught in schools up to high school level. The government also decided to create 32 posts of Bodhi teachers for schools in Leh and Kargil (Shakspo, 2024). However, Muslims of Kargil refused to accept Bodhi teachers and demanded for Arabic teachers instead. According to Gulzar Hussian Kingi[9], Muslims of Kargil demanded Arabic teachers when Buddhist demand for Bhoti teachers was considered by then state government in 1960s (personal communication, April 30, 2025). While, Buddhists of Ladakh criticised the state government of neglecting Bodhi and consistently resisted perceived deliberate imposition of Urdu on them, Muslims of the region did not resist it probably due to their affinity with Urdu. Issa Sabri[10] also observes that since Muslims had to learn Persian and Arabic for the religious purpose, it was easier for them to learn Urdu when introduced in the state during the Dogra rule (personal communication, June 11, 2025). All these factors led to the emergence of a perception of 'Bodhi' as Buddhist language and Urdu as Muslim language in the region.

Buddhists of Ladakh started making language assertion way back in 1950s and 60s in the name of Tibetan or Bodhi but Muslims of the region seldom associated themselves with it. While, Buddhists owned Tibetan script and preferred their language to be written in it and taught in schools probably because all Tibetan Buddhist religious scriptures are written in it. Meanwhile, Muslims of the region often tend to dissociated themselves from Tibetan script because it has no connection with their religious scriptures. Issa Sabri's observation also resonates the same. He opined that with the increasing influence of Islam, the learning of Arabic and Persian scripts became more necessary than Tibetan script for the Muslims of the region (personal communication, June 11, 2025). So, the Muslims in Ladakh preferred learning Arabic and Persian over Tibetan script. Although Purgi and Balti belong to Tibetan-Burman language family and come closer to Tibetan classical language, their literatures are mostly in Perso-Arabic script. Therefore, the popularly used script among Muslims of Ladakh for generations is Perso-Arabic and in the course of time Tibetan script became alien for them. However, the efforts are being made by Balti scholars of Baltistan and Purgi scholars of Kargil of late to revive Tibetan script among the Muslim communities. It reflects growing realisation among the Muslims of Kargil that Tibetan script (Locally called 'Yige') is the actual script with which their language, Purgi and Balti, can be written comprehensively.

According to the CIIL report of a study on Bhoti language which was carried out in 2008, the movement was more then 35 years old. Hence, it can be assumed that the movement for the inclusion of Bhoti language in the eighth schedule of Indian Constitution was started in 1970s. However, the movement got the momentum and has become a popular demand in early 1980s. It was on 10$^{th}$ December 1980, then member of Parliament from Ladakh has raised the issue in the

parliament for the first time (Lok Sabha, 1980). Over the course of time, Members of Parliament from Himalayan regions have submitted number of memorandums to the government and raised matters and questions in the parliament, regarding the inclusion of Bhoti in the eighth schedule of the constitution of India. Then, the movement got intensified with the appointment of Lama Chosphel Zotpa[11] as vice-chairman of National Commission for Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes in 2002. In 2008 the commission approached CIIL to conduct a study "to ascertain the fitness of Bhoti language for inclusion in the eighth schedule of the constitution of India" (CIIL, n.d.). Accordingly, CIIL carried an extensive study in 2008 and recommended the inclusion of Bhoti language in the eighth schedule of the constitution.

In 2011, Tarun Vijay, Member of Rajya Sabha from Uttarakhand, introduced a private member bill for the inclusion of Bhoti in the eighth schedule of the constitution (Rajya Sabha. VII, 2011). However, the bill was lapsed and could not get passed. Subsequently, MP Ladakh, moved another private member bill in the parliament on 1st April, 2022 proposing necessary constitutional amendment in the eighth schedule to include Bhoti language in it (Lok Sabha. 31, 2022). Considering the symbolic significance the day of introducing the bill in the parliament, the Executive Council of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council[12] (LAHDC), Leh declared 1st April to be celebrated as "Bhoti Day" (News UT Ladakh, 2022). Henceforth, Bhoti day is celebrated every year by the Department of Education, Ladakh Academy of Art, Culture and Languages and the administration of union territory of Ladakh.

Ladakh has been the epicentre of the movement for the inclusion of Bhoti in the eighth schedule of the constitution. Although, other regions of Himalaya resonated the movement in different forms and asserted their collective concerns at various platforms. Yet, Ladakh has maintained the momentum through the support of various socio-religious organisations particularly Buddhist and sustained the movement to date. The main organization which spearheads the movement is HBCA, a Ladakh based organisation. It claims that there are more than 1.6 million Bhoti speakers throughout Himalayan region (HBCA, n.d.). Various Buddhist organizations across Himalayan states have conceived a collective identity and succeeded in mobilising political supports from chief ministers of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh as well as Members of Parliament from these states (CIIL, n.d.). Beside HBCA, socio-religious organization like Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) has also been advocating the inclusion of Bhoti in the eighth schedule of the constitution. HBCA and LBA have been conducting multiple seminars and peaceful demonstrations in support of the movement. Apart from this, the movement also got support from across religious organisations in Ladakh such as Anjuman-e-Imamia, Anjuman Moin-Ul-Islam and Christian Association (Angmo, 2014). Likewise, LAHDC, Leh has also passed resolutions seeking inclusion of Bhoti language in the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution in 2011 and

2022 (Indus Dispatch, 2022; Reach Ladakh Bulletin, 2022). Therefore, political and social organisations in Leh district have been pressing the government for the declaration of Bhoti as scheduled language.

The government also acknowledged that Bhoti is among 35 non-scheduled languages and demands for their inclusion in the eighth schedule is pending with the government (MHA, 2004). Mentioning the absence of any fixed criteria for the inclusion of languages in the eighth schedule, government stated that the inclusion of more languages in the Eighth Schedule can only be considered after criteria being set and approved (Lok Sabha, 2014). The government constituted committees in 1996 and 2003 to set fix criteria for the same but could not materialised (MHA, 2016). However, the Ministry of Home Affairs in a press release mentioned:

The Government is conscious of the sentiments and requirements for inclusion of other languages in the Eighth Schedule, and will examine the requests keeping in mind the sentiments, and other considerations such as evolution of dialects into language, widespread use of a language etc. (MHA, 2016)

Therefore, at present it seems that the inclusion of languages in eighth schedule is dependent on the political will and the significance of a demand. However, questions, call attention motions and private member bills in the parliament regarding the inclusion of Bhoti language in the eighth schedule, brought by members from Ladakh as well as other concerned states, yielded no result.

**3. Bhoti versus Ladakhi Debate**

The emergence of the nomenclature 'Bhoti' and subsequent demand for its recognition can be traced back to 1970s. In 1970s the Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies, Sarnath, held a conference with the idea of seeking recognition for Tibetan language in India under the nomenclature of 'Bhot Basha' to integrate it into the larger family of Indian languages (Shakspo, 2024). The purpose of using the nomenclature 'Bhot Bhasha' was to establish the linkage between Tibetan language and Indian culture. Because, Tibetan script is believed to have developed in 7$^{th}$ century by Thonmi Sambhota[13] deriving from Indian Bhrami script (Tashi, 2023). Subsequently, Himalayan Buddhist Cultural Association (HBCA), an NGO, started the movement for the inclusion of Bhoti language in the eighth schedule of the constitution of India in 1970s-80s. The idea of using the term 'Bhoti' seems to have conceived from the 'Bhot Bhasha' term used in the mentioned conference. The term 'Bhoti' is claimed to have broader and inclusive meaning that can be applied to the language and culture of entire Himalayan region in India. Therefore, 'Bhoti' became an umbrella term which seeks to integrate all the languages of Himalayan region from Arunachal Pradesh to Ladakh, belonging to Tibetan-Burman language family, and demand for its recognition under eighth schedule of the constitution of India. The movement received extensive support from the majority of the scholars and monks in Ladakh who are well versed

in classical Tibetan language. However, there is another group of intellectuals in Ladakh, some of them are also well versed in classical Tibetan language, who opposes 'Bhoti' as nomenclature and resisted the inclusion of Ladakhi under the umbrella of Bhoti. Furthermore, this group of intellectuals proposed to maintain Ladakhi as the nomenclature. As a result, two schools of thought have emerged and formed perennial discourses on the debate of Bhoti versus Ladakhi language issue in Ladakh. One is represented by the proponents of Bhoti and another is represented by the proponents of Ladakhi.

After analysing the interviews of language experts, it can be said that the scholarly debate on Bhoti versus Ladakhi revolves around two major issues; the nomenclature and the writing system. On the nomenclature, the general argument of those who are in favour of 'Bhoti' is that the term is more inclusive than the term 'Ladakhi'. Whereas, those who are not in favour of 'Bhoti' argues that the language spoken in Ladakh should rather be called 'Ladakhi'. They also claim that 'Bhoti' term does not enjoy consensus and it also tends to create communal divide in Ladakh. The more serious debate on Bhoti versus Ladakhi is regarding the writing system. The proponents of Bhoti prefer their language to be written in standard classical Tibetan script and strictly according to Tibetan grammar developed by Thonmi Sambhota. Whereas, the proponents of Ladakhi prefer their language to be written in Tibetan script but in colloquial form with slight modifications in classical Tibetan grammar wherever necessary. Therefore, regarding the writing system the approach adopted by the former group is largely conservative, whereas, the approach adopted by the latter group is liberal. Konchok Tashi categorises the prevalent perspectives on language issue in Ladakh into three categories (Tashi, 2023). He observes that there are three group of scholars with starkly diverse views. The first category of intellectuals is the advocator of preservation, development and promotion of 'Ladakhi' and promotes writing colloquial Ladakhi in Tibetan script. The second category of intellectuals are the proponent of 'Bhoti' and they oppose using colloquial Ladakhi in books and other forms of writings. The third category object 'Bhoti' nomenclature but prefer using classical Tibetan in literatures.

One of the arguments in favour of 'Bhoti' nomenclature is based on its historical significance. Urgain Dadul[14], argues that the term 'Bhoti' was derived from the term 'Bhot', which was historically used by Indian scholars to refer to Tibet and in fact 'Greater Tibet' including Baltistan and Ladakh (personal communication, May 20, 2025). The position that the Tibet was historically referred to as 'Bhot' by Indians is also corroborated by the claim that 'Sambhot' was the name acquired by Thonmi Sambhota in India. While, Thupstan Norboo[15] observes that 'Bhoti' term was adopted after prolong deliberations among scholars from different parts of Himalayan region with consensus (Personal communication, May 21, 2025). His observation implies that the term being adopted after prolong scholarly discussion is not justified to be questioned and debated. Another argument is in the line of expanding

the geographical reach of the language. Konchok Thupstan[16] argues that the term 'Bhoti' is more inclusive whereas 'Ladakhi' will limit the expansion of the language and confine it to Ladakh region only (personal communication, June 3, 2025). The underlying concern of all these arguments is the support base and the population of the speaker of the language that is deemed necessary to strengthen the case of its inclusion in the eighth schedule of the constitution of India.

The torch bearer of Bhoti movement seems to have adopted a balance strategy of establishing the Indian root of the Tibetan language, to which all the Himalayan languages trace their origin, and maintaining its Indian identity at the same time. The Centre Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Government of India, conducted a case study on Bhoti language in the first decade of 21st century. In the report, it observed:

> The choice of the term Bhoti over Tibetan is a conscious part of the strategy of the leaders of the movement belonging to diverse tribes to affirm their status as a part and parcel of the Indian Identity. They would not want their indigenous speech communities to be confused with their better-known Tibetan refugee cousins, but remind instead how Bhoti has drawn the script and cultural content from the fertile and liberal soil of India with its great intellectual tradition. (CIIL, n.d.)

Moreover, HBCA in its pamphlet entitled as "Memorandum: Importance of Bhoti Language & Recognition of Bhoti Language in The Eight Schedule in Context to Recognise" argued:

> Many studies proved that the primary form of this language was dialectics of people of entire Himalayan region of India. Therefore, Bhoti is the mother tongue of Himalayan people as well as source of Indian culture. (HBCA, n.d.)

Therefore, 'Bhoti' term though consciously coined by some Tibetologist (Sherab, 2023) seeks to develop a larger linguistic identity of Himalayan belt so as to strengthen the case for constitutional recognition of a language.

On the contrary, the arguments against 'Bhoti' nomenclature are founded mainly on identity, consensus and communal division. Scholars who favour the term 'Ladakhi' argue that there is lack of consensus on the term 'Bhoti' at larger Himalayan region level as well as among communities within Ladakh. They also argue that their language should reflect Ladakhi identity. Therefore, they find more logic in calling their language 'Ladakhi' than 'Bhoti'. Khenpo Konchok Sherab[17], writes "the name 'Ladakhi' provides self-identification and a sense of proprietorship over the language that we speak in Ladakh". Further, he argues:

> Bhoti might provide an overarching framework to bring together the Indian Himalayan regions. However, if Ladakhi is recognised under 'Bhoti' it will lead to several challenges.

> Since 'Bhoti' refers to the cultural, religious and literary language of Classical Tibetan, most Ladakhis hesitate to use it to refer to their language. Furthermore, Ladakh's Muslim community would have reservations about the language if it is called 'Bhoti' as it seems associated with Buddhism (Sherab, 2023).

His argument suggests that 'Ladakhi' is more preferable nomenclature than 'Bhoti' because the term 'Bhoti' indicates linkage of the language with culture and religion of Tibetan Buddhism but 'Ladakhi' term confers an indigenous language identity. Bakula Randol Nima Rinpoche[18], also says that 'Bhoti' term being viewed as something related to Buddhist religion would not get support from Muslims of Kargil district and will lead to divide people on communal ground. He thinks that the nomenclature 'Ladakhi' is more likely to get consensus of the people of all the communities in Ladakh and unite them on the language front (personal communication, June 10, 2025). Similarly, Purgi scholars of Kargil argue that technically and historically 'Bhoti' cannot be the name of their language and they perceive it as religion specific in nature. Dissociating from Bhoti movement for inclusion in eighth schedule, Nasir Khafi[19] says that the Bhoti movement is not an assertion of Kargili Muslims, rather it is Leh centric. He thinks that Kargil Muslims would rather agree on 'Ladakhi' than 'Bhoti' as nomenclature (personal communication, April 28, 2025). Whereas, Konchok Phanday[20], argues that 'Bhoti' cannot be called inclusive because it is resisted not only by Purgi and Balti speakers of Ladakh but also by communities like Bhutia and Monpa of Himalayan region (personal communication, May 18, 2025). His argument seems valid given the fact that Lepcha, Bhutia and Limbu are separately demanding for inclusion in the eighth schedule. Moreover, people in Ladakh are also divided on the issue of their language be named as Bhoti. Therefore, the analysis of anti-Bhoti perspectives suggest that the 'Bhoti' term not only lacks consensus but it also tends to foster a communal perception particularly among the Muslims of Ladakh.

As far as the writing system is concerned, proponents of Bhoti argue that writing in colloquial form without following the standard classical Tibetan grammar developed by Thonmi Sambhota will lead to distortion of the language. Their position on writing system contends that it will be a disservice to the language if it is not written according to the classical Tibetan grammar and deviates from its standard. Because they believe that it will change the language beyond recognition in the long run. Konchok Thupstan says that the writing should be according to a standard grammar and he claims that it is lacking in the books written in colloquial Ladakhi language (personal communication, June 3, 2025). Similarly, Thupstan Norboo, observe that if a standard grammar is not followed Bhoti/Ladakhi language will lose its structure and become baseless which he thinks is a more serious issue than nomenclature. Further, he argues that the writing in colloquial language will also encounter with problem of regional dialectical variation (personal communication, May 21, 2025). Their

statements imply that the colloquial Ladakhi language has no grammar. Whereas, according to Urgain Dadul, writing in colloquial language will limit the literary works to Ladakh region only because it would not be understandable to people outside Ladakh who also associate themselves with Bhoti language (personal communication, May 20, 2025). This view seems to assume that written Bhoti would be understandable throughout Himalayan region. Therefore, intellectuals who are in favour of Bhoti leaves no scope for modification in or deviations from the classical Tibetan grammar and they believe that the colloquial language has no grammar.

On the contrary, proponents of Ladakhi group argue that there are considerable differences between classical Tibetan language and Ladakhi colloquial language in both spoken and written forms. Therefore, writing colloquial Ladakhi strictly according to classical Tibetan grammar without even a slight modification is not possible. They believe that popular literature barring the religious ones should be written in colloquial language to make it easier for the public to understand. Therefore, they prefer writing in colloquial language with slight modifications in the Tibetan classical grammar to serve the purpose. Konchok Phanday remarks:

> Human Language cannot exist without grammar, whether it is written in the shape of book or not, therefore to say that the Ladakhi language has no grammar in not true. Language written with grammar that doesn't match the grammar of speech may be misunderstood by the readers, whereas any language which matches the written grammar to the spoken language will be clearly understood. (Phanday, 2017)

Similarly, Sonam Wangchuk[21], observes that there is no language without a grammar and if two persons can communicate with each other without any confusion then there is a grammar (personal communication, June 9, 2025). His argument also implies that Ladakhi colloquial language has a grammar and can be written like any other language. Whereas, Bakula Rangdol Nima Rinpoche, who has written *A Ladakhi Grammar* in colloquial language, says that a writing meant for common masses in Ladakh should be written in colloquial language. However, he agrees that writing in classical Tibetan language following the Tibetan classical grammar rules would also be appropriate if it is meant for those who understands it (personal communication, June 10, 2025). Sonam Wangchuk also observes that there should not be any restriction either on writing in classical Tibetan or colloquial language and both should rather be encouraged (personal communication, June 9, 2025). Therefore, Konchok Phanday has written his book *Comment on Thon-mi's Grammar and Clarification of Language* in classical Tibetan language and *New Dawning Knowledge for Ladakhi Youngsters* in colloquial language. The former book has a section entitled "Clarification of the Language" in English, in which he suggests that literacy in Bodyik (Tibetan script) should be promoted through newspapers, magazines and school text books for 1st and 2nd

class in Ladakhi language (Phanday, 2017). The underlying assumption behind the arguments put forth by proponents of Ladakhi is that a language should not be rigid and there should be a scope deviation and modification if required to match the written form of the language with the spoken one. The proponents of 'Ladakhi' also believe that the elementary text books in colloquial language will eventually help student learn classical Tibetan in higher classes.

There are contesting scholarly perspectives on the issue of promotion and preservation of language and culture as well. The 'Bhoti' proponents hold that the inclusion of it in the 8th schedule would be eventually necessary for the promotion and preservation of Bhoti language and culture. Lama Chosphel Zotpa, chairman HBCA, in an interview argued that the recognition of Bhoti as scheduled language in the constitution is necessary for governmental aid and facilities for its promotion, generating interest among learners and creation of jobs (DD Kashir, 2020). Similarly, Urgain Dadul maintains that since Bhoti has already made a place in the government recognised non-scheduled languages pending inclusion in the eighth schedule, there should not be any issue on nomenclature. He argued that the inclusion of Bhoti in the eighth schedule would encourage learners and enhance the use of the language (personal communication, May 20, 2025). A major concern of Bhoti proponents was the declining interest and use of language among public. This is because the widespread use of language is considered necessary, though not a prescribed criterion for a language to be included in the eighth schedule. The projection of Bhoti as a language spread over entire Himalayan region from Arunachal Pradesh to Ladakh is also done considering the population factor. However, Ladakhi proponents argue that 'Bhoti' being a constructed nomenclature of a language lacks consensus and consequently it has not received constitutional recognition. Konchok Phanday argued that 'Bhoti' literally means Tibetan and the latter being already a recognised language in China[22] may not be considered by the government of India to include in the eighth schedule, moreover, ethnic groups in Sikkim and Balti and Purgi groups in Kargil do not agree with it (Gulistan News Ladakh Official, 2022). Whereas, Nawang Tsering Shakspo[23] in an interview to Reach Ladakh observed that though the demand for Bhoti inclusion in the eighth schedule has been raising since early 1970s, there is confusion and misunderstanding regarding the term Bhoti. He rejects the existence of a language called "Bhoti" and instead suggests "Bodhyik" as nomenclature (Padma, 2024). Therefore, the unresolved language issue in Ladakh is evolving into a more complicated debate among intellectuals.

### 4. Policy Lacuna and Politicisation of Language

The branch offices of Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages were established in Leh and Kargil in 1969 and 1989 respectively. The academy has been publishing annual books and journals in Ladakhi language since 1976 and 1979 respectively (Shakspo, 2024). According to Balti writer Mohammad Sadiq Hardassi,

*Nati Adaab*, a journal in Balti language, was published by the academy from 1980s to 2010 (personal communication, June 12, 2025). While *Ladakhi Sharaza*, *Shesrig Melong* and other publications by the academy are written in Tibetan script, *Nati Adaab* was written in Perso-Arabic script[24]. While Bodhi/Bhoti is taught in government schools since 1970s and JKBOSE approved text books are available up to 10th class, Balti and Shina were started teaching in government schools only from 2016 onwards. According to Mohammad Sadiq Hardassi, Balti was taught in government schools up to 5th class with JKBOSE approved text books written in Perso-Arabic script since 2016 (personal communication, June 12, 2025). Whereas, according Mohammad Shafi Sagar[25], Shina was taught in the schools up to 7th class but discontinued after Ladakh becoming UT said (personal communication, June 10 2025). Meanwhile, Centre Institute of Indian Language and National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) published primers for Balti, Ladakhi and Shina. The Ladakhi and Shina primers were published in July 2024 and Balti primer was published in May 2025. Ladakhi primer is written in Tibetan script and Balti as well as Shina primers are written in Perso-Arabic script. All these not only created complications in the language issue in Ladakh but also fostered perceptual differences between Buddhists and Muslims of the region regarding script (*Yige*) and its usages.

The ambiguous and confusing classification of mother tongues of Ladakh in linguistic census reports seems to have further contributed in the complicated language issue of Ladakh. The Linguistic Survey of India (LSI) report 1961 mentions about Balti, Budhi [sic], Ladakhi, Zanskari and Sham [sic] as mother tongues classified under Bhotia group of Tibeto-Himalayan branch of Tibeto-Burman language family and Shina and Brokpa [sic] classified under Dard group of Indo-European language family (Mitra, 1961).While, LSI 2001 report mentions about Balti, Ladakhi, Zanskari and Shina in the list of mother tongues wherein Zanskari is listed as a mother tongue under Bhotia group (ORGI, 2001). The LSI 2001 (Paper 1 2007) has listed Balti, Ladakhi and Shina as languages and Zanskari as a mother tongue under Bhotia language (ORGI, 2007). Whereas, CIIL also observe:

> In the first instance, the complexity stems from the fact that in the census reports of 2001 [or even of earlier decades] tabled by the Home Ministry, the name Bhoti is neither included in the list of 100 non-scheduled languages, nor as one of the Mother tongues listed under them [as census would reason, it is obviously only because less than 10,000 people must have returned it and not out of any bias] (CIIL, n.d.)

Further, LSI 2011 (Paper 1 2018) mentions about Balti, Ladakhi and Shina as languages and Zanskari got no mention (ORGI, 2018). However, Purgi and Bhoti did not figure in all the census reports, while, Brokpa and Zanskari figured in 1961 but missing in 2001 and 2011 census. Therefore, the projection of Bhoti and it missing in census reports have further made the language issue intricated.

The use of different nomenclatures for the same language has also contributed in complication and politicisation the language issue. The use of multiple terms like Bhoti, Bodyik, Bodhi and Choskat to denote written Ladakhi language were ambiguous and have created confusion (Tashi et al., 2024). Muslims of Ladakh perceive these terms as affiliated to Buddhist religion and they tend to distance themselves from associating with any of them. Though Balti and Purgi scholars agree that their mother language is classical Tibetan and the Tibetan script they called "Yige" will be the best to write their language, they explicitly dissociate themselves from the projection of a common 'Bhoti' nomenclature. The general perception among Kargil scholars and leaders is that the 'Bhoti' term is nothing but a changed version of the term 'Bodhi'. Issa Sabri, claims that Bodhi was made the name of the subject on the suggestion of Leh scholars without consulting Purgi and Balti scholars. Further he argued that the Bodhi text books of JKBOSE generally lacked lessons on Balti and Purgi culture and history of Kargil leading them to further alienate from Bodhi (personal communication, April 28, 2025). Similarly, Nasir Khafi argues that since Kargil scholars were never consulted on the adoption of the term 'Bhoti' they not only felt alienated but also perceived it as an attempt to get religious consensus among Buddhists in the garb of language (personal communication, April 28, 2025). The arguments put forth by Balti and Purgi scholars of Kargil also reveals the prevalent communal perception towards Bhoti among Kargil Muslims. Buddhist scholars of Leh also thinks that the general reason behind Kargil's dissociation from Bhoti was religion. Moreover, the apathetic policy adopted by the state government towards regional languages with overarching emphasis on Urdu and the introduction of Arabic alongside Bodhi in government schools further led to polarisation of Ladakhi identities along communal lines (Warikoo, 1996). Then, emphasising Buddhist religious texts as important Bhoti literatures and Bhoti as Himalayan Buddhist language also seems to have encouraged communal perception on the language particularly among Muslims of Ladakh.

It is pertinent to note that Buddhist scholars generally tend to mention important religious scriptures like '*Kagyur*' '*Stangyur*' as important literatures while arguing for inclusion of Bhoti in the eighth schedule. Similarly, CIIL report also observed that just as Sanskrit being sacred language for Hindus, Bhoti is regarded as language of Himalayan Buddhists (CIIL, n.d.). These can also be said to have provided reasons for reinforcement of the perception that associates Bhoti with Buddhism which in turn led to the division of Ladakhi society by its language. John Bray observed:

> All indigenous inhabitants of the region speak a variety of Ladakhi yet, at least as far as the written version is concerned, it is even more true of them than of the British and Americans (in Winston Churchill's well-known phrase) that they are "divided by a common language". In this case the sources of division are explicitly religious. (Bray, 2007)

His observation is pointing to the paradox of the society of Ladakh having a common language but being divided due to the communalisation of that language.

The religious influences or communalisation have made the language matter a sensitive issue. As a result, there were instances of strong resistance to deviation from classical Tibetan grammar in the writing system. For instance, an experiment carried out in 1950s by Eliyah Tsetan Phuntsog, a Christian convert, with modified spelling system in Bhoti/Ladakhi to make it more appropriate to write in colloquial Ladakhi received severe criticism from local Buddhists as "form of linguistic religious subversion" (Bray, 2007). Similarly, a local bilingual magazine *Ladags Melong* published from 1993-2006 was also criticised for writing in colloquial language and had to stop publishing. The magazine was popular because of written colloquial Ladakhi language it used. However, it was accused of diluting the purity of classical Tibetan language, which according to critics may subsequently lead to deadening of Buddhist religious scriptures and teachings if translated into colloquial Ladakhi language (Chosjor, 2019). These resistances show how religious concerns caused the language to become sensitive. Therefore, when language, script and religion are perceived as combined, the confusion prevails and language become a religious sentiment. Consequently, scholars in Ladakh tends to consider Tibetan script as inseparable from its usage for religious scriptures (Tashi, 2023). Such view also seems to have stemmed from deifying a script as sacred and unalterable.

**5. Language and Identity**

The contestation on language in Ladakh also implies an undercurrent identity issue. The language debate reflects tensions between Ladakhi local identity and its "wider cultural inheritance" (Bray, 2007). While the consideration of cultural inheritance takes preeminent position in the pro-Bhoti perspective, meanwhile, the concern for local identity outstands the former in the pro-Ladakhi perspective. The Bhoti nomenclature is an attempt to construct a larger identity of a language and associated culture. In its pamphlet, HBCA claim that Bhoti is the language and culture of people living in the Himalayan region from Arunachal Pradesh to Ladakh including Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Spiti, Kinnuar, Uttar Kashi etc (HBCA, n.d.). Whereas, proponents of Ladakhi argue that although the root of language and culture of Ladakh lies in Tibet, the language spoken by the people of the region is different from Tibetan and therefore have its own identity. Konchok Phanday opines that Ladakhi language is the identity of the people of Ladakh and it needs to be preserved and promoted (personal communication, May 18, 2025). He prefers the name Ladakhi over Bhoti between these two different identities. Similarly, Khenpo Konchok Sherab observed that the name 'Ladakhi' would provide the people of Ladakh with "self-identification and a sense of proprietorship" over their language (Sherab, 2023). However, Elijah Gergen view Bhoti versus Ladakhi debate a two-prong approach of

preserving classical Tibetan as well as Ladakhi and he thinks it is not bad an approach (personal communication, May 19, 2025). Therefore, the local and wider identity tension is implicit in the contestation over the nomenclature of the language. However, both the perspectives acknowledge that Ladakh owes a great deal of its language and culture to Tibet but at the same time the former has its own distinction.

### 6. Declaration of Official Languages

After the fierce debate on *Ladags Melong* that took place in early 21st century leading to the cessation of its publications, another public debate on language erupted in Ladakh after it became a Union Territory (UT) in 2019. The declaration of official language of Ladakh was the underlying matter of public discussion aftermath the formation of UT. The debate on language got heightened when Nawang Tsering Shakspo filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the high court of Jammu Kashmir and Ladakh challenging the term Bhoti being used to refer to "the linguistic and cultural heritage of Himalayan region" (Khajuria, 2024). It led to condemnation by Ladakh Buddhist Association, Ladakh Gonpa Association and Ladakh Cultural Forum as misleading and against the public demand for Bhoti inclusion in eighth schedule of the constitution (Reach Ladakh, 2024). Subsequently, number of conferences and meetings were held by Ladakh Academy of Art, Culture and Languages and the Hill Councils of both the district to deliberate on the languages to be put forth for recognition as official languages of UT Ladakh. Wherein, according to Thupstan Norboo, larger consensus was reached in the conferences on Bhoti to be recognised as one of the official languages (personal communication, May 21, 2025). However, according to Nasir Khafi, scholars of Kargil did not agree with Bhoti but they rather proposed Ladakhi as nomenclature on which they agreed to support (personal communication, April 28, 2025). However, according to Mukhtar Ahmad, Shina writer, scholars and experts were divided on Bhoti and Purgi in the conferences. Therefore, it seems that there was no consensus on Ladakhi and scholars of Leh and Kargil proposed Bhoti and Purgi respectively to be considered for the declaration as official languages. Subsequently, the official languages regulation 2025 declared Bhoti and Purgi among other three as official languages of UT Ladakh. Wherein Shina, Brokskat, Balti and Ladakhi are mentioned as other native languages and the promotion and development of them through proper institutional mechanism like Academy of Art, Culture and Languages is also being envisaged.

### 7. Conclusion

The language contestation in Ladakh particularly Bhoti versus Ladakhi represents a classic case of conflict between high variety (locally known as *Chos-skat*) and low variety (locally known as *Phal-skat*) language. The case of 'Bhoti' and 'Ladakhi' can be said to be in diglossia[26] situation where the former is standardised and the latter is yet to be standardised. Since the movement for constitutional recognition of 'Bhoti' envisages the language to be standardised

according to the classical Tibetan language used in Buddhist religious texts, 'Bhoti' can be considered as high variety language. Whereas, 'Ladakhi' being a colloquial language used as lingua franca across Ladakh and as medium of communication in All India Radio Leh and popular literatures can be considered as low variety language. While 'Bhoti' is learned through formal education in schools and monasteries, 'Ladakhi' is learned through informal education in families. Therefore, Bhoti and Ladakhi embody an inter-dependent yet complicated positionality.

By analysing the issue at length, it can be posited that the rigid stance taken by both the proponents of Bhoti and Ladakhi has obfuscated the 'Bhoti' versus 'Ladakhi' issue. Therefore, the stances taken by both the groups needs to be slackened because it does not help in strengthening any of the cause. The Bhoti proponents should allow and encourage popular publications like newspapers and magazines be written in the colloquial language because that would help in the promotion and popularisation of both Ladakhi and Bhoti. Moreover, the readership of Ladakhi is far more than that of Bhoti. Whereas, the proponents of Ladakhi should also support the movement for constitutional recognition of Bhoti language as it would ultimately help in preserving the mother language of the land.

The Bhoti versus Ladakhi contestation needs to be dealt with careful consideration of both the arguments adopting moderate approaches without being influenced by mere sentiment. Bhoti is the mother of many languages spread over the entire Himalayan region, and has been projected as a Himalayan language with a strong demand for its inclusion in the eighth schedule of the constitution for last more than five decades. In the past, CIIL in its report submitted in 2008 strongly put a case in favour of inclusion of Bhoti in the mentioned schedule in its recommendation. Bhoti also claims to have majority support in the Himalayan region barring some ethnic groups. However, the debate on writing system and standardisation of Himalayan languages to be included in the larger nomenclature of Bhoti would probably persist even after the inclusion of Bhoti in the eighth schedule. Therefore, dealing with the issue with outmost prudence will be necessary for the preservation and promotion of Himalayan languages. Meanwhile, the objection to Bhoti cannot be overlooked and needs to be addressed prudently by giving due consideration to the arguments of the proponents of Ladakhi. Moreover, the apprehension among Ladakhi proponents that inclusion of Bhoti in the eighth schedule would lead to demotion of Ladakhi, also needs to be removed by ensuring equal promotion of colloquial Ladakhi language.

Since there is no denial of Tibetan script and grammar being the mother language from which Ladakhi, Bhoti, Balti, Purgi etc languages have emerged, slight modification if required may be allowed to make the popular literatures more public oriented. Since there is only a slight difference in the grammar of written classical Tibetan and written Ladakhi, the fear of severing common people from classical Tibetan

language due to use of colloquial language, otherwise claimed by some Ladakhi Buddhist scholars, should not arise. Proponents of Ladakhi argue that promotion of learning and writing colloquial Ladakhi language would not harm Bhoti, rather it will help one to start from mother tongue and progress to learn classical Tibetan language more effectively in higher classes. Similarly, proponents of Bhoti also argue that learning and writing of Bhoti would in a way promote Ladakhi colloquial language as well as classical Tibetan language. In such situations, there should not be any problem on either side to promote learning and writing classical as well as colloquial languages in Ladakh because both are mutually complimentary for the promotion of each other. While, religious and literary texts may be written in classical Tibetan with standard grammar of higher level, the popular literatures may also be allowed to be written in colloquial language with necessary deviation from standard classical Tibetan grammar. Such distinction between popular and literary literature and creation of space for the promotion of both would help Bhoti and Ladakhi coexist and flourish.

The issue of recognition and preservation has been the underlying concerns of language contestation in Ladakh. While the contestation on nomenclature is concerned with the recognition and the debate on writing system is about preservation. There are two schools of thought, one adopts a conservative approach and another a liberal approach. We suggest that Bhoti as a classical language with rich literature, geographical expansion and mother language of many Himalayan languages can be considered high variety language appropriate for official recognition in the eighth schedule of the constitution of India at national level. Whereas, Ladakhi being a variant of Bhoti can be provided scope for deviation from classical Bhoti in writings and given deserving official recognition at the state level. One of the common concerns of both the schools of thought is the declining interest on their language among the people of Ladakh. Therefore, a collaborative effort from both the groups, to find ways to generate interest on the language among the masses and promote language education in Ladakh, should be encouraged. The language education shall move from familiar to unfamiliar by introducing textbooks in colloquial Ladakhi language at primary level and in Bhoti at higher level. While religious and literary texts can be rendered in classical Bhoti, popular literatures like magazines, newspapers etc. can also be considered appropriate to be written in Ladakhi colloquial language. The contestation between Bhoti and Ladakhi in other sense is also about 'maintaining standard' versus 'matching mother tongue' in writings. We maintain that given the fluid nature of language, the scope for deviation and modifications in the colloquial Ladakhi language is required. But at the same time, maintaining the standard of the mother language is also necessary to keep the authenticity of the language intact. Therefore, a balanced approach of preserving the standard of classical language, and the preservation and promotion of Ladakhi colloquial language is recommended.

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[1] Ladakhi Sheraza is a periodical and Shesrig Melong is an annual publication, both published by the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages (now known as Ladakh Academy of Art, Culture and Languages).

[2] It consists of Tehsil Dras and some villages of Kargil tehsil namely, Chhanigon, Badgam, Karkechu and Karsar.

[3] It consists of villages like Darchik, Garkon and Biama villages of Kargil district and Dah and Hanu villages of Leh district.

[4] Languages belonging to Dardi-Arya family are classified as Shina (Dardic) and Brokskat (Dardic) by The Ladakh Official Languages Regulation 2025.

[5] An organization formed by some Kashmiri pandit neo-Buddhists to represent Buddhists of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir to the Glancy Commission.

[6] Because, during the Dogra rule Urdu became the official language of the state and it was compulsory in schools. Thereafter, Urdu remained an official language of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and was a compulsory subject in Jammu and Kashmir State Borad of School Education (JKBOSE) up to 10th class.

[7] Bodhi, though a misnomer, was nomenclature used for Ladakhi mother-tongue by the Jammu and Kashmir State Board of School Education. According to Tashi et al. (2024), 'Bodhi' term was coined by Pandit teachers then posted in Ladakh mistakenly as a romanticisation of 'Bodyik' (meaning Tibetan script)

[8] Which subsequently got changed into Bhoti.

[9] He is a Purgi language expert and director of Munshi Habibullah School Kargil.

[10] He is a Purgi language expert and a writer, who has initiated teaching 'Yige' (Tibetan alphabets) in Kargil.

[11] Venerable Lama Chosphel Zotpa is from Zanskar Ladakh. He is the head of the Himalayan Buddhist Cultural Association and vice president of Indian Himalayan Council of Nalanda Buddhist Tradition.

[12] One of the regional autonomous political institutions in Ladakh, other being LAHDC Kargil.

[13] It is said that Tibetan king Srongtsan Gampo sent his minister Thonmi Sambhota to India for the purpose of learning scripts of Indian languages in which teachings of the Buddha was available. He is believed to have learned Indian languages and developed Tibetan script to translate Buddha's teachings in to Tibetan language.

[14] Venerable Dr. Urgain Dadul is a retired Associate Professor of Bhoti and the current Chairman of Language and Cultural Committee, Ladakh Buddhist Association.

[15] Dr. Thupstan Norboo is the Editor Ladakh Academy of Art, Culture and Languages.

[16] Venerable Konchok Thusptan is an associate professor of Bhoti at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Ladakh.

[17] Venerable Khenpo Konchok Sherab is a research officer at Srongtsen Library, Centre for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, Dehradun, India.

[18] Bakula Rangdol Nima Rinpoche is a scholar and he has also written many books in colloquial Ladakhi language including "Ladakhi Grammer".

[19] He is a Purgi writer and an assistant professor of English.

[20] Khenpo Konchok Phanday is well versed in classical Tibetan grammar and has written many books in colloquial Ladakhi language. He was the editor of the section of *Ladags Melong* which contained writeups in colloquial language.

[21] He is an Educator and the founder of 'Ladags Melong' a local bilingual magazine published from 1993 to 2005.

[22] According to Wikipedia, Tibetan language is a recognised official language in the Tibet region under China.

[23] He is a historian, a cultural activist and former head of Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art Culture and Languages office Leh.

[24] Ladakhi Sheraza is a periodical and Shesrig Melong is an annual publication published by the Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages (Now Ladakh Academy of Art, Culture and Languages)

[25] He is Shina writer from Drass and written books on Shina culture and poetry.

[26] It is a concept propounded by American Linguist, Charle A. Fergusson, that refer to a linguistic situation in which a highly standardised language (not used by the community for ordinary conversation) and one and more less standardised language (popularly used by the community for ordinary conversation) coexist.