DOI: 10.71317/jgst.2.11.2026.1123
Journal of Global Social Transformation
Journal homepage: https://rjsaonline.org/index.php/JGST

Lost in Language: Linguistic Inequality and Service-User Voice in Social Work

Muhammad Zeeshan[1], Liaqat Ali[2]
[1] B.S. English Language and Literature Scholar, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: mohammadzeshan210@gmail.com
[2] B.S. English Scholar, Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering & Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan, Pakistan.
Email: la725533@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Submission:
October 24, 2026
Revised:
November 04, 2026
Accepted:
November 18, 2026
Available Online:
November 25, 2026

Keywords:
language discordance, linguistic inequality, service-user voice, linguistic capital, street-level bureaucracy, participatory parity, Pakistan

Corresponding author:
Muhammad Zeeshan
Email:
mohammadzeshan210@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Social work is a profession that is done through conversation. Assessments, care plans and decisions about protection are developed with reference to the views of Service-Users and the interpretations of the professionals involved. The detail of the circumstances that brought the Service-User to the service, what they want and their objections to what is proposed drop out when the two sides do not have enough common language. In the article, the question is: what is lost in language, and who becomes less influential? It is a qualitative secondary study: an integrative critical literature review with structured searching and thematic synthesis of research, theory and public documents, focusing on publications from 2020 to 2026. The analysis draws on the work of Bourdieu, who speaks of linguistic capital and symbolic power; Fraser, who speaks of the principle of participatory parity; and Lipsky's theory of street-level discretion. Five themes are elaborated. The institution's working language is considered to be an unwritten condition of service. Discordance restricts the range of what a Service-User can say and alters the way in which a Service-User's words are evaluated. With an interpreter, one can gain access to the conversation, but the professional retains control of the agenda and the record. The choice of communication repairs is made through frontline discretion. Much of this loss can be turned around by multilingual practitioners and language-aware institutions. The review suggests that being informed and being heard are two different matters, and that linguistic inequality is generated by the normal functioning of institutions. The evidence from Pakistan comes mostly from the health care and education sectors, and so far there is no direct research on the use of language in social work in Pakistan. Implications for practice, social work education and institutional language policy follow at the end of the article.

Introduction

It is a fair characterization to call the social worker a language worker, as Hall and Valdiviezo (2020) do. A social worker rarely sees what happened to the individual that brought him or her to an agency. What is passed to the file is an account. The Service-User contributes a narrative, the professional asks questions about it, and it is summarized, categorized and thus becomes the basis for decisions on eligibility, risk or support. All of these steps occur in language, and at each one the decision on what counts is made by the person who writes the record.

The article is based on a simple observation. If there is insufficient common language between a social worker and a Service-User, the Service-User may find it difficult to explain their situation, state what they would like or need, challenge how the professional understands events or resist a plan. Their voice is easily lost in language. Buzungu and Rugkåsa (2023) call such meetings "language

discordant" and conceptualize discordance as something of a gradient. During some meetings, the people involved do not speak the same language at all. In other cases, only one of the parties is fluent in the common language. The second type easily goes unnoticed, as someone who can hold their own in a second-language conversation may not be able to describe a debt, a family issue or a legal issue in that language, much less dispute a professional opinion.

Numerous texts have been written about "discordance" as a communication issue that has a "solution" (typically an interpreter). Interpretation is necessary, but this article suggests that it is not a complete solution. Language is an unequally distributed and unequally valued resource (Bourdieu, 1991). It is up to the institution to select the language it works in. Frontline workers decide whether to arrange an interpreter and whose account is believable, and they typically make this decision under time constraints. As stated in the proposal behind this article, the person who is more comfortable in the language of the institution tends to control how a problem is described, understood and solved. Discordance is, thus, situated at the intersection of linguistic inequality, institutional power and professional discretion. While social work advocates for social justice, self-determination and anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002), diversity in language is rarely included in social work practice, education and research (Gustafsson et al., 2023). It is a social inequality that can be made visible by the concepts of sociolinguistics.

Background of the Study

The question takes a new twist in Pakistan. In the 2023 census (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2024), Punjabi is the most common mother tongue (36.98%), followed by Pashto (18.15%), Sindhi (14.31%) and Saraiki (12.00%). According to the PBS (2024), Urdu is the mother tongue of 9.25% of the population of Pakistan. English and Urdu are the languages of official and working life. Discordance here has less to do with the experience of migrants facing a national majority, as is typical in European work, and is more an everyday part of the experience of citizens interacting with their public institutions.

Research Questions

The main research question is: how does linguistic inequality, including language discordance and institutional language practices, affect service-user voice, participation and decision-making agency in frontline social work? There are four supporting questions below.

1. How do linguistic hierarchies shape communication between social workers and Service-Users?
2. How can language differences affect Service-Users' ability to express their needs, preferences and disagreement?
3. How do institutional practices and professional discretion influence whether Service-Users' voices are heard and acted on?
4. What are the implications for inclusive, anti-oppressive and socially just social work practice, particularly in multilingual contexts such as Pakistan?

Research Objectives

Initially, it was proposed that interviews with Service-Users and social workers in Pakistan would take place. This article proposes an alternative design and provides a review of the published evidence. It aims to combine the findings of existing studies on the experience of discordance reported by Service-Users, explore the implications of language difference for how Service-Users express needs, preferences and disagreement, identify patterns in the communication strategies reported by social workers, understand how institutional language practice and interpreting arrangements influence participation, and suggest practice and policy implications based on the evidence.

Statement of the Problem

Social work decisions are constructed on the basis of the expressions of Service-Users; however, many Service-Users in multilingual settings encounter service providers and institutions which operate in a language that is not fully shared. In such a case, their situation, wishes and disagreement might not be documented or considered in the decision. Current studies on this focus primarily on communication problems and the role of interpreting as their solution, and are based mainly on professionals' experiences in European welfare systems. Little is known about how linguistic inequality affects the influence of Service-Users over decisions, and almost no studies have analyzed this in Pakistan, where most people's mother tongues are other languages, while English and Urdu dominate institutions.

Significance of the Research

The study links the concepts of sociolinguistics and social work in one perspective, explaining how language difference becomes unequal influence over decisions using Bourdieu, Fraser and Lipsky. It distinguishes between being informed and being heard, a difference that can be overlooked in practice and policy. It synthesises the existing evidence from health care and education and proposes the questions that empirical studies of social work in Pakistan should explore. It can be used to guide social workers in their work with multilingual Service-Users, social work training, and the language-access policies of welfare institutions.

Delimitations of the Study

The study is based only on secondary research. It does not gather its own data and relies on published data, theory and public documents. Empirical sources are limited to those published in the period 2020–2026; earlier work is used only to provide continuity and foundational theory. Only publications in English were used. It does not focus on language teaching, translation technology or clinical diagnosis, but rather on frontline social work experiences and how these are influenced by institutional language practices. The application of the framework is discussed within the context of Pakistan, rather than presented as a new finding about Pakistan.

Literature Review

Conceptual Background: Language, Voice and Social Work

The analysis is organised around four concepts.

Language Discordance

Language discordance is when the professional and the Service-User do not share enough language skills for the task at hand (Buzungu & Rugkåsa, 2023). The words "for the task at hand" are significant. Proficiency is assessed by what is required for the meeting, and a social work meeting requires a lot: discussing emotion, family relationships, legal rights and procedures, all in the same meeting. Based on social work meetings observed in Norway, Buzungu (2023) found that a high level of fluency is required for a Service-User to be able to participate effectively in the meetings.

Linguistic Inequality

Linguistic inequality is the different social value of languages, varieties and ways of speaking. Two people can be equally articulate, while only one of them is fluent in the institution's language.

Service-User Voice

Here, "service-user voice" is used in a demanding sense. A person has voice when they can influence the definition of their situation and what is decided about it. Attending a meeting or being given information is a lower threshold. The distinction between being informed and being heard runs throughout the entire article.

Language Ideologies

Language ideologies are the beliefs people and institutions have about languages: What are "proper" languages? Which languages are appropriate for official business? Which languages indicate competence? Larjanko et al. (2025) have identified three different approaches in research on multilingual welfare work: language as a problem, language as a right and language as a resource. Problem framing is the most prevalent, and the authors argue that the right and resource framings provide a more solid basis for equitable practice.

These ideas transfer the focus from the "limited proficiency" of each Service-User to the relationship, the institution and the distribution of linguistic value. From this perspective, a Service-User is a person whose languages the institution has chosen not to work in.

What Discordance Does to the Encounter

Nordic social work research provides the most detailed recent evidence. Based on observations of social work meetings in Norway and interviews with those who use social work services, Buzungu (2023) concludes that when discordance is not addressed, social workers are unable to do their work effectively and face difficulties in achieving participation by Service-Users. Buzungu and

Rugkåsa (2023) come up with a less obvious finding. In discordant meetings, social workers at times described the problems with communicating as being due to "cultural difference", which the authors term culturalisation. A language issue was identified as a cultural trait of the client. The finding is relevant for this article for two reasons: firstly, it indicates that discordance changes the way the Service-User is categorised and, secondly, it suggests that less of the Service-User's account is understood.

Previous studies of other welfare systems point to the same effect. In the UK, Chand (2005) discussed language barriers as a significant obstacle to working with minority ethnic families when writing about child protection. In a study of language use in Canadian child welfare, Maiter et al. (2017) discovered that child welfare workers generally dealt with language issues as they went along, with no definite direction from their agencies. Both studies are largely based upon practitioners' accounts, and both are in agreement with the newer studies.

Interpreting: Necessary and Insufficient

Interpreting is the standard institutional response, and the evidence backs it up. Westlake and Jones (2018) conducted audio analysis of home visits with interpreters in England and concluded that skilled practitioners could work effectively with interpreters when they managed the conversation assertively. Pollock (2023) noted that social workers often receive little training for working with interpreters and that training can help social workers build the knowledge, values and skills that support good working relationships with interpreters.

However, the picture does not look so bright when professional interpreting does not exist. Child interpreting was found by Lucas (2021) to be inescapable in some social work situations, where social workers responded to the situation by monitoring, scaffolding or stopping the encounter. While well-intentioned, policies to prevent informal interpreting can result in people who speak limited English ending up without any viable means of communication, argues Pollock (2021). Buzungu (2023) noted that lack of competence among interpreters posed challenges of its own.

This evidence is of varying quality. The majority of the studies on interpreting are based on the practitioners' point of view or on recordings that are analysed with regard to their communicative effectiveness. Few enquire of Service-Users whether they felt able to disagree, and few follow up to find out whether different decisions were made as a result of having an interpreted meeting, compared to a meeting in a shared language. The research provides a lot of information about whether messages get through. It provides much less information about whether influence gets through.

Institutions, Ideology and Monolingual Design

The other body of work comes from a social policy perspective and moves from the encounter to the institution. In a study based on Bourdieu's approach, Holzinger (2020) demonstrated that institutional actors in the Austrian employment services rarely considered or downplayed linguistic discrimination. Ratzmann (2022) found that even when EU migrants had clear legal rights to benefits, they faced informal language barriers in German job centres. In Finland, integration social workers reported that the monolingual service system led to unworkable situations for Service-Users and to problems for the social workers too (Kara et al., 2025).

Simola et al. (2025) trace this field from three angles: language policy and social injustice, language ideologies (such as nativist discourse) and how both shape welfare at street level. In a scoping review of 441 records that identified 13 relevant studies, Larjanko et al. (2025) point out that formal language policy is rarely made at the front line, while frontline workers implement it with a high degree of discretion. The same review notes the under-representation of Service-Users' perspectives and the predominance of studies from European and Anglo-American contexts.

This geographical limit applies to the field as a whole. The discourse on discordance is related to migration and takes the national language as the dominant one. Work on bilingual practitioners is a partial exception: Andersson (2022) revealed that bilingual social workers in Sweden experienced their languages as a professional resource and also faced additional demands. Even this study takes place in a monolingual national system.

Pakistan's Evidence Base

No studies were identified in the literature that directly focus on language issues in Pakistani social work encounters; therefore, the current review draws on related areas. Rahman's (1996) history of language conflict in Pakistan showed that this conflict has historically been related to the struggle for political dominance. More contemporary studies in the field of sociolinguistics demonstrate that both English and Urdu function as forms of capital. Tamim (2021) showed that even when students attended the

same institutions, access to valued languages was class-based, and this shaped exclusion in education. Syed and Shah (2025) contend that dominant framings of multilingualism in education in Pakistan rest on postcolonial and neoliberal ideologies that treat languages as commodities.

Health care is the closest professional parallel. Mustafa et al. (2023) conducted interviews with recently qualified physicians in Punjab and found that they experienced a number of difficulties due to language barriers, including frustration, lack of rapport, mistrust, lack of adherence to treatment and risks to patient safety. Irfan et al. (2025) point out that most health professionals in Pakistan are trained in English and that the lack of standard medical terminology in local languages makes communication ambiguous. The studies mentioned here are referred to as related evidence. They describe clinics and classrooms, and their findings are not necessarily applicable to social welfare offices.

Research on social work within Pakistan focuses on the development of the profession. Riaz and Granich (2023) report that there is no licensing, no practice standards and no clear job role description, and recommend indigenous models of education and practice. A profession that is largely based on generalist practice is described by Butt and Ashiq (2022). Neither study treats language as a central concern.

he Research Gap

Some studies have been carried out in the fields of language and welfare. What is lacking is work that connects four elements: discordance in the encounter, institutional linguistic power, frontline discretion and Service-Users' real power over decisions. The study of social work is likely to be about the encounter, and the study of social policy is likely to be about institutions. Both rely predominantly on professionals' voices. There are very few studies that have attempted to distinguish communicative access from decision-making influence, and even fewer from multilingual countries in the Global South, where discordance is a domestic matter as well as a matter of migration. This article addresses that gap at the conceptual and evidence-synthesis level and tries to delineate the study areas for empirical research in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

Integrated Theoretical Framework

In the framework, each of the three theorists provides an answer to a different aspect of the problem.

Bourdieu offers an explanation of why some voices count for more. Bourdieu (1991) considers that language is a means of communication as well as a medium of power. Utterances are valued in a linguistic market where certain languages and ways of speaking are valued and others are devalued. Speakers have linguistic capital, which can be more or less successfully converted into credibility and influence. Symbolic power operates in part through misrecognition: the dominance of the legitimate language seems to be natural. This is why a Service-User's account can be treated differently in a social work office depending on the language, accent or register it is presented in, even if the professional intends to be fair. The stratification of voice is explained by Bourdieu.

Fraser provides the standard by which to measure fairness. Fraser (2000) suggests a status model of recognition, where misrecognition is an institutionalised pattern of cultural value which excludes some people from participating in social life as peers. On this model, justice requires participatory parity. Applied to social work, the question is whether a Service-User was able to participate as an equal in the decision-making process regarding their life. Whatever the goodwill of individual workers, a service that routinely carries on its business in languages some Service-Users do not know well fails this test.

Lipsky explains where the rules become real. Lipsky (2010) demonstrated that in public occupations (including social work), frontline staff effectively make policy through the many discretionary decisions they take under the acute pressures of high caseloads, poorly defined objectives and limited resources. They ration services, simplify cases and establish routines that make impossible workloads manageable. Language policies, interpreter budgets and recording guidelines exist on paper. Whether an interpreter is booked, whether a meeting is rescheduled, or whether a half-understood answer is accepted is decided in the moment by a worker who is running out of time.

The three theories are linked in a linear manner. Bourdieu describes the unequal distribution of linguistic capital and why the institution's preferred languages seem more "neutral" than they actually are. Lipsky describes how this inequality is reproduced or disrupted on a daily basis. Fraser provides a measurement of the outcome: the Service-User as part of the decision-making process, or the Service-User as the object of the decision-making process.

From this framework, the article makes a working proposition: language discordance turns into linguistic inequality when the institutions' language preferences, passed down through limited frontline discretion, limit a Service-User's ability to be a peer decision-maker. The proposition is conditional. It allows that discretion can help resolve discordance and that multilingual practitioners can make linguistic difference an asset. It is aimed at identifying the institutional and structural determinants of inequality, as well as the points at which inequality can be interrupted.

Philosophy and Design

The study uses an interpretivist and critical approach. It sees published research as written accounts from specific perspectives and reads them with attention to power. The design is qualitative secondary research: an integrative critical literature review (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) with structured searching and thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). An integrative design is appropriate for evidence from a variety of sources, such as observational, interview-based and policy-analytic studies, as well as theoretical work that a narrower systematic review might not include. There was no primary data collection in the form of interviews, surveys or observation.

Search Strategy

The four sets of terms were combined using Boolean operators:

- Language: ("language discordan*" OR "language barrier*" OR multilingual* OR bilingual* OR "linguistic disadvantage" OR "linguistic inequality" OR interpret*)
- Field: AND ("social work*" OR "social welfare" OR "street-level" OR "welfare service*" OR "child welfare")
- Participation and power: AND (participat* OR empower* OR voice OR discretion OR "decision-making" OR recognition OR "anti-oppressive")
- Context, in a supplementary search: AND (Pakistan OR "South Asia" OR Urdu OR Punjabi OR Pashto OR Sindhi OR Saraiki OR Balochi)

Open scholarly indexes (those indexed by Google Scholar, publisher platforms and university repositories) and the Crossref metadata service were used for searching, and backward citation tracking was performed from two recent reviews (Larjanko et al., 2025; Simola et al., 2025). This version did not have access to Scopus and Web of Science. This is a limitation, and the same strings should be run in both databases prior to submission. Since it was an iterative search, the article does not include screening counts or a PRISMA diagram. Any other figures mentioned, e.g. the 441 records screened by Larjanko et al. (2025), are reported by the authors of those studies.

Period and Eligibility

Only the years 2020–2026 could be used for empirical sources. Earlier works were cited as a foundation for the theory (Bourdieu, 1991; Fraser, 2000; Lipsky, 2010), and older empirical research was cited to show continuity (Chand, 2005; Maiter et al., 2017; Westlake & Jones, 2018).

A source was considered if it was a peer-reviewed article, a scholarly book or an official statistical or policy document; if it addressed language in interactions between frontline professionals and Service-Users, or institutional language practices that influence these interactions; and if it was available in English. Sources were excluded if they covered only L2 teaching, translation technology or clinical diagnosis; if they could not be traced to a verifiable publisher; or if they were opinion pieces without an analytical foundation. Pakistani health and education studies were included by design and are labelled as related evidence throughout.

Selection, Coding and Synthesis

Relevance was determined from the title and abstract, and then from the available full text or longer abstracts. The three steps of the synthesis process described by Thomas and Harden (2008) were followed: line-by-line coding of reported findings, grouping of codes into descriptive themes and development of analytical themes beyond the findings of the original studies. The theoretical framework was used for coding, but codes not included in the theoretical framework were not excluded, for example the resource value of bilingual workers. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which considers themes as the analyst's own constructions, was used in the development of themes.

Credibility, Reflexivity and Ethics

All references were cross-referenced with a publisher, repository or Crossref record. Reported findings are kept separate from interpretation, and claims made by the review are signalled in the text ("this review argues"). A deliberate attempt was made to find evidence that would throw the argument into doubt. The author holds a bachelor's degree in English Linguistics (specialisation: sociolinguistics) and has been accepted as a postgraduate student in social work, but has not yet completed this degree. That background focuses on language and power and might result in down-weighting or overlooking the organisational factors which are familiar to practitioners. Secondary research does not pose any direct risks to participants, but it still carries responsibilities: representing other authors accurately, avoiding overstatement of findings known only from abstracts, and avoiding presenting other researchers' participants as one's own data.

Thematic Findings and Analysis

Five analytical themes were created. Each begins with what the literature reports and then provides this review's interpretation.

Theme 1: The Institution's Language as an Unwritten Condition of Service

Across settings, the institution's working language is a condition of service that is not stated in any rule. Ratzmann (2022) records informal language barriers to benefits that are fully available in law. As shown by Holzinger (2020), institutional actors view these barriers as something other than discrimination. Kara et al. (2025) present practitioners in a system that is organised around the national languages.

Interpretation. In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, the institution's language is the legitimate language of the field, and its dominance is misrecognised as "neutral administration". Linguistic capital turns into an unseen prerequisite, and Service-Users without such capital must labour harder to access something that they have the right to access. This is the first response to supporting question 1: linguistic hierarchies condition communication prior to any actual dialogue, setting the terms within which the dialogue can occur.

Theme 2: Voice and Credibility in Discordance

The evidence from observations reveals that discordance limits what the Service-User can communicate and changes how Service-Users are read by the professional. Buzungu (2023) notes that it is hard to achieve participation. Buzungu and Rugkåsa (2023) demonstrate how difficulty in communicating is reinterpreted as cultural difference. A related pattern is reported in Pakistani health care research, where language barriers are associated with poor rapport and mistrust (Mustafa et al., 2023).

Interpretation. Discordance diminishes information, as well as its standing. The most difficult things to communicate in a different language are nuance, doubt and objection, which are the most important for self-determination. If a Service-User is unable to express their disagreement in the words of the institution, it can be documented as confusion, non-compliance or cultural difference. This is in response to supporting question 2. So much is lost in language that sometimes the Service-User's preference is lost as well, and it reaches the file translated into something else. The proposal behind this study raises the practical issue: difficulty in communicating is not synonymous with unwillingness, lack of cooperation or lack of understanding.

Theme 3: Interpreting, Access and Professional Control

Professional interpreting is beneficial when professionals manage communication skilfully (Westlake & Jones, 2018) and are trained to do so (Pollock, 2023). In the absence of professional interpreters, informal arrangements are used to bridge the gap, such as children interpreting for parents, and it is acknowledged that there are risks involved in this (Lucas, 2021; Pollock, 2021).

Interpretation. The evidence is consistent with interpreting being a necessary but insufficient condition for voice. Words are carried by the interpreter, while the agenda, the pace and the record remain with the professional. Fraser's (2000) standard makes the point even clearer. Parity must have a pathway for speech and must have a way in which speech can make a difference. None of the studies reviewed measured the second condition directly. That gap is the limit of the current evidence, and it is the heart of the argument in this article.

Theme 4: Discretion Is Where Language Policy Is Made

Larjanko et al. (2025) find that frontline workers exercise substantial discretion in multilingual encounters, with implications for their clients. Workers improvise because there is no consistent guidance (Maiter et al., 2017). Pollock (2023) states that there is limited training. The practitioners described by Kara et al. (2025) report difficulty within the system.

Interpretation. It is Lipsky's (2010) street-level bureaucracy, in this case linguistic. When time is short, the decision whether to book an interpreter, accept a partial response or use a relative to translate is a rationing decision. This sort of choice is seldom documented as a language choice, and so the inequality that results is left unnoticed. This answers supporting question 3. The conditions are set by institutional practices, and a few moments of discretion determine whether service-user voice is won or lost. For the same reason, discretion is also where change is possible.

Theme 5: Multilingual Practice as a Resource

The literature also documents some things that work. Andersson (2022) demonstrates that bilingual social workers use their languages as a professional resource, but also face additional demands and assumptions. Hall and Valdiviezo (2020) suggest a model of language difference that is based on resources, in which competence means being able to operate in a "third place" between the worker's frame and the client's frame. Larjanko et al. (2025) judge the right and resource orientations to be ethically stronger than the problem orientation.

Interpretation. This theme qualifies the argument: language difference produces inequality under particular institutional conditions. Much of what discordance takes away can be retained where institutions acknowledge multilingual staff, plan for language and view the languages of Service-Users as legitimate. This is the most promising result for practice in Pakistan, since many practitioners and Service-Users are already multilingual.

Synthesis Across Themes

When the themes are read together, they are linked in a chain. The language used in the institution sets the terms of the encounter (Theme 1). Within those terms, discordance reduces the range of what the Service-User can say and reduces the impact of what the Service-User does say (Theme 2). Interpreting widens the channel, while control of the agenda and record remains with the professional (Theme 3). Under pressure, discretion determines which repairs are made (Theme 4). Multilingual resources, where institutions recognise them, can break the chain at several points (Theme 5). The answer to the main research question follows. Linguistic inequality impacts the voice of Service-Users not so much through one-off misunderstandings as through a cumulative, largely unrecorded process that turns the unequal distribution of language resources into an unequal distribution of influence over decisions.

Critical Discussion

Communication Problem or Structural Inequality?

The evidence supports both readings at different levels. In a single encounter, discordance is a communication problem, and better interpreting and better skills help. The patterns in Themes 1 and 4 are, however, systematic. They are the result of institutional decisions on the languages in which to work and of resource situations which encourage workers to take shortcuts. In this regard, discordance is of a structural nature. The integrated framework avoids a forced choice between these levels: Bourdieu locates the structure, Lipsky the mechanism and Fraser the standard. A technical solution might be able to improve the transfer of messages without affecting the structure.

Do the Two Expressions "Informed" and "Heard" Mean the Same Thing?

This review argues that they do not. A great amount of research, and a good deal of policy, judges success on the basis of whether or not information got to the Service-User. Fraser's (2000) concept of participation asks whether the Service-User could influence the decision as a peer. The two can come apart. It is possible to have a fully interpreted meeting in which the plan was determined in advance. Social work's dedication to self-determination should keep social workers from treating communicative access as voice. This distinction comes from the synthesis and is offered as an argument. The reviewed studies seldom tracked encounters through to the decisions that resulted from them.

Competing Perspectives and Contradictions

There are helpful differences within the literature. Buzungu (2023) emphasises the harmful effect of not dealing with discordance, while Westlake and Jones (2018) are relatively hopeful that skilled practitioners can manage interpreted work. Part of the difference is method. Recordings chosen for analysis capture meetings in which an interpreter was provided, while ethnographic observation also captures meetings without an interpreter. A second concern is informal interpreters. Policies against them preserve accuracy and confidentiality, but, as Pollock (2021) notes, strict restriction can leave people with no workable means of communication. There is a third question relating to culture. Practices that are culturally responsive are valued and accepted within social work, but, as Buzungu and Rugkåsa (2023) demonstrate, "culture" can be a false culprit for a language divide. Being culturally responsive without being linguistically aware can perpetuate the very issue that it is intended to address.

Does Traditional Social Work Have an Awareness of Linguistic Inequality?

Based on this evidence, most of the time it does not. Gustafsson et al. (2023) point out that language diversity is rarely addressed in the fields of research, education and practice in social work. Anti-oppressive frameworks are more likely to mention race, class, gender and disability than language (Dominelli, 2002). The role of sociolinguistics is to bring into view language as an independent dimension of inequality, which intersects with class, region and ethnicity but is not reducible to them.

What Transfers to Pakistan?

Caution is needed here. The European studies are based on the assumption of a well-resourced welfare state, a single national language and migration as the source of discordance. Pakistan is different in all three respects. Discordance is likely to arise between citizens and their own institutions, between English or Urdu professional registers and regional mother tongues, and between urban professionals and Service-Users in rural areas. This is supported by the related Pakistani evidence, where professionals are trained in English, patients and students use regional languages, and access to valued languages is class-linked (Irfan et al., 2025; Mustafa et al., 2023; Tamim, 2021). This evidence does not show how social work encounters unfold, and conditions vary from province to province and from government department to NGO to hospital social work unit. The framework transfers more easily than the findings. Pakistan's hierarchy of languages (English, Urdu and regional) is strikingly similar to Bourdieu's linguistic market. Lipsky's description of discretion in the face of scarcity plausibly fits under-resourced frontline services. Fraser's standard applies everywhere. Whether the particular patterns observed in Europe are also valid in Pakistan is an empirical question for Pakistani scholars.

Implications

Implications for Professional Social Work Practice

The themes indicate that a few changes in practice are needed. At the point of initial contact with a Service-User, the social worker should record the language of their choice, and this should be considered part of the assessment process. If a professional interpreter is required and not provided, this should be explicitly identified as a discretionary choice and documented in writing. In interpreted meetings, and in meetings held in a partly shared language, there should be specific checks for disagreement: ask the Service-User to repeat the plan in their own words and then ask for objections in a direct question: Is there any disagreement? If an explanation is based on "culture", the practitioner must first consider whether it may be due to language. In Pakistan, many people speak more than one language, so agencies can match workers to Service-Users on the basis of language, if possible, and recognise that skill formally rather than relying on it informally. Children should be used as interpreters in sensitive situations only when there is no other option, and with the precautions outlined by Lucas (2021).

Implications for Social Work Education and Institutional Policy

For education, the review recommends teaching critical language awareness in social work programmes, incorporating sociolinguistic concepts like linguistic capital and language ideology, along with teaching about interpreter-mediated practice (Hall & Valdiviezo, 2020; Pollock, 2023). Pakistani programmes, which are already working towards the development of indigenous models (Riaz & Granich, 2023), could make the multilingualism of Pakistan an integral part of their professional studies. This would be aided by teaching in regional languages and placements in linguistically mixed settings.

For institutional policy, language access policies should be in writing and have budgets, as discretion in times of scarcity predictably reduces interpreting. Consent forms, rights information and care plans should be made available in the primary regional languages. A glossary of Urdu and regional social welfare terms would address the terminology problem reported in the health care sector in

Pakistan (Irfan et al., 2025). It is important that agencies also track whether Service-Users influenced decisions, as well as whether or not an interpreter was used, to measure the difference between having been informed and having been heard.

Limitations Of the Study

A direct search of Scopus and Web of Science has not been conducted, so relevant studies might have been missed. Several sources were evaluated on the basis of abstracts and available portions of the publications, and claims were restricted to that level. The study was narrow in scope, as only English-language literature was searched, which is a drawback in a study on linguistic inequality, since literature in Urdu and other languages was not covered. The international evidence is concentrated in Northern Europe, while the Pakistani evidence comes from related fields. The themes are constructions shaped by a certain framework and by the author's disciplinary background, and they could be different if another reviewer had organised the material.

Conclusion

The title asks what is lost in language. The answer from this review is the Service-User's capacity to influence decisions: their detail, their preferences and most of all their disagreement. In discordance, the voice that shapes the intervention is more often the voice that speaks the institution's language. This is generally not the intention of social workers. It is rooted in the unequal value of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), in frontline discretion under pressure, which has a tendency to accept partial understanding (Lipsky, 2010), and in institutions that equate informing an individual with involving them. Measured against participatory parity (Fraser, 2000), this equation does not hold.

The outcome is open to change. Much can be retained when interpreting is done well and when multilingual practitioners and institutions view language as a right and a resource. The primary conclusion for Pakistan is the need for evidence. The framework is especially relevant to the country's language hierarchy, but few studies look at language in social work encounters directly. Research which traces encounters to decisions and incorporates Service-Users' own voices in their own languages would reveal whether the patterns outlined here persist and where they can best be interrupted.

References

1. Andersson, E. (2022). Language as resource and challenge among bilingual social workers in the Swedish social services. *Nordic Social Work Research, 12*(4), 480–491. https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2020.1835697
2. Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (J. B. Thompson, Ed.; G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Polity Press.
3. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 18*(3), 328–352. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238
4. Butt, B. I., & Ashiq, U. (2022). Education of generalist social work and fieldwork practice: Review of contemporary structures in Pakistan. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review, 6*(2), 73–82. https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2022(6-II)07
5. Buzungu, H. F. (2023). *Language discordant social work in a multilingual world: The space between.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003349822
6. Buzungu, H. F., & Rugkåsa, M. (2023). Lost in culture: Language discordance and culturalization in social work with migrants. *Nordic Social Work Research, 13*(4), 537–549. https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2023.2216707
7. Chand, A. (2005). Do you speak English? Language barriers in child protection social work with minority ethnic families. *British Journal of Social Work, 35*(6), 807–821. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bch205
8. Dominelli, L. (2002). *Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice.* Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4039-1400-2
9. Fraser, N. (2000). Rethinking recognition. *New Left Review, 3*, 107–120.
10. Gustafsson, K., Åberg, L., Gruber, S., & Norström, E. (2023). Social work in a multilingual world. *Nordic Social Work Research, 13*(4), 501–509. https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2023.2274217
11. Hall, J., & Valdiviezo, S. (2020). The social worker as language worker in a multilingual world: Educating for language competence. *Journal of Social Work Education, 56*(1), 17–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1642275

12. Holzinger, C. (2020). 'We don't worry that much about language': Street-level bureaucracy in the context of linguistic diversity. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 46*(9), 1792–1808. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1610365

13. Irfan, H., Farooq, A., & Toseef, M. U. (2025). Language as a catalyst for success: A blueprint for standardized terminology and multilingual health literacy in Pakistan. *The Lancet Regional Health: Southeast Asia, 34*, Article 100544. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lansea.2025.100544

14. Kara, H., Nordberg, C., Jäppinen, M., & Riitaoja, A.-L. (2025). Linguistic autonomy in a monolingual social imaginary: Social work practitioners' sense-making of the role of language in migrant 'integration'. *Social Policy and Society, 24*(1), 100–111. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746424000605

15. Larjanko, L., Pötzsch, T., Granholm, C., & Julkunen, I. (2025). Bilingualism and multilingualism in street level social welfare service settings: A scoping review. *Ethics and Social Welfare, 20*(1), 26–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2025.2520295

16. Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services* (30th anniversary expanded ed.). Russell Sage Foundation.

17. Lucas, S. (2021). Social workers' management of child interpreting: A qualitative study. *British Journal of Social Work, 51*(2), 673–691. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa204

18. Maiter, S., Alaggia, R., Chan, A. S., & Leslie, B. (2017). Trial and error: Attending to language barriers in child welfare service provision from the perspective of frontline workers. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*(1), 165–174. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12214

19. Mustafa, R., Mahboob, U., Khan, R. A., & Anjum, A. (2023). Impact of language barriers in doctor-patient relationship: A qualitative study. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences, 39*(1), 41–45. https://doi.org/10.12669/pjms.39.1.5805

20. Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. (2024). *7th population and housing census 2023: Pakistan census data* [Data sheet]. https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/material/pakistan_census_data.pdf

21. Pollock, S. (2021). More than words can say: Why health and social care policy makers should reconsider their position on informal interpreters. *Critical Social Policy, 41*(1), 128–147. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018320911819

22. Pollock, S. (2023). Social work with interpreters: Using practitioner knowledge to improve practice. *British Journal of Social Work, 53*(8), 3685–3703. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad118

23. Rahman, T. (1996). *Language and politics in Pakistan.* Oxford University Press.

24. Ratzmann, N. (2022). "No German, no service": EU migrants' unequal access to welfare entitlements in Germany. *Social Inclusion, 10*(1), 227–238. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i1.4647

25. Riaz, S., & Granich, S. (2023). Professional development of social work education and practice in Pakistan within a global context. *Social Work Education, 42*(8), 1402–1417. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2022.2032631

26. Simola, A., Nordberg, C., & Kara, H. (2025). Conceptualising linguistic disadvantage in the context of diversifying welfare institutions. *Social Policy and Society, 24*(1), 89–99. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746425100821

27. Syed, H., & Shah, W. A. (2025). Dissecting the dominant framings of multilingualism in education in Pakistan: A southern perspective. *Language in Society, 55*(2), 304–327. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404525000016

28. Tamim, T. (2021). Language, class, and education: Deconstructing the centre to rethink inclusivity in education in Pakistan. *Cogent Education, 8*(1), Article 1897933. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2021.1897933

29. Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology, 8*, Article 45. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-8-45

30. Westlake, D., & Jones, R. K. (2018). Breaking down language barriers: A practice-near study of social work using interpreters. *British Journal of Social Work, 48*(5), 1388–1408. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx073

31. Whittemore, R., & Knafl, K. (2005). The integrative review: Updated methodology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 52*(5), 546–553. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2005.03621.x



2026 by the authors; Journal of Global Social Transformation (JGST). This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).