

# Historical Development and Sociolinguistic Dynamics of Bundeli Language: Variation, Identity, and Language Shift

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## Abstract

In this paper, the historical evolution and sociolinguistic dynamics of Bundeli in the region of Bundelkhand are examined, with emphasis on variation, regional identity, and language shift among youth. Although Bundeli is traditionally regarded as part of the Western Hindi group of the Indo-Aryan languages, research reveals that Bundeli has distinct linguistic characteristics and strong links to the cultural tradition of Bundelkhand (Grierson 1903–1928, Jaiswal 1963, Mishra and Bali 2011). Using a qualitative approach grounded in linguistic analysis, cultural studies, and sociolinguistics, the paper concludes that despite the growing dominance of standard Hindi in formal education and socio-economic aspirations, Bundeli continues to serve as a language of locality, intimacy, and cultural heritage (Singh 2020, Wardhaugh & Fuller 2015). Bundeli can be described as ‘uneven maintenance’ rather than ‘language loss’, since symbolic commitment is still preserved despite restricted domains and language shift among the younger generation (Labov 1972, Trudgill 2000).

## Keywords

Bundeli, sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, language shift, regional identity, dialect variation

## 1. Introduction

Although Bundeli plays a critical role in the language and culture of Bundelkhand, it does not receive the kind of academic attention that it deserves, given its richness both linguistically and sociologically. While Bundeli is considered to belong to the sub-group of Western Hindi, studies have clearly indicated that it is far more than just a distorted version of the language. Bundeli is rather a regionally distinctive language form with identifiable linguistic traits, socio-cultural characteristics, and ongoing relevance in Central India (Grierson 1903 to 1928, Jaiswal 1963).

Bundeli not only holds a unique status as a language, but it also has a significant place in the culture of Bundelkhand. This language is connected closely to the folk traditions of Bundelkhand and serves as the means by which oral folklore of the region has been handed down through generations, preserved and kept alive (Singh 2020). In the field of sociolinguistics, languages like Bundeli can never be examined in

terms of their linguistic structure alone. Therefore, Bundeli provides an especially interesting example for studying how a regional language could retain cultural vitality despite its declining prestige in official contexts.

The issue has become increasingly relevant in modern-day India. Studies of language shift demonstrate that education, migration, literacy, media influence, and the prestige of dominant languages often result in changes in intergenerational language use without immediate loss of the individual identification with the ancestral language Fishman 1991, Wardhaugh and Fuller 2015 and more recent studies of language shift in India. In many speech communities, the native language maintains its existence in personal communication, culturally related contexts, and at home, whereas the standard language establishes its dominance in education, job opportunities, and administration. The situation seems to correspond to what is observed in Bundeli, with speakers maintaining identification with their language but showing selective language use (Mishra and Bali 2011).

Bundeli belongs to the Indo Aryan language group and is usually classified as belonging to the Western Hindi languages. In light of this context, the current paper studies the Bundeli language through an integrated approach comprising historical linguistics and sociolinguistics. Three related aspects of the subject are studied, namely the historical evolution of the language, sociolinguistic diversity, and the connection between identity and language change among young people in Bundelkhand. By examining these three dimensions collectively, this research aims to prove that Bundeli is not only a dialect of regional significance but also a pivotal point in understanding vernacular preservation, prestige disparity, and evolving linguistic behaviours in modern India.

## 2. Review of Literature

The scholarly investigation of Bundeli commences with descriptive and classificatory research that recognises It as a genuine subject of linguistic inquiry rather than merely a poorly defined substandard form of Hindi. The Linguistic Survey of India is seminal in this regard, as it classifies Bundeli as part of the Western Hindi subgroup and thus provides the first historical classification of the language among north Indian languages (Grierson, 1903-1928). Subsequent linguistic research by Jaiswal reinforced this view by presenting a full-fledged structural description of the language, demonstrating that Bundeli possesses a unique phonology and grammar and therefore cannot be regarded simply as a dialect. It is essential for this paper that such linguistic research lays down the historical and structural foundation for subsequent sociolinguistic analysis.

The second kind of literature deals with the categorisation, geographical distribution, and diversity of Bundeli. Through comparative study of dialects of Hindi and regional language classification, scholars have tried to classify Bundeli within the larger spectrum of Central Indo-Aryan and Western Hindi languages, but at the same time, they acknowledge the presence of multiple varieties within Bundeli. In fact, there are some descriptive pieces of literature that illustrate the distribution of Bundeli in different regions of Bundelkhand, where dialects are possible. All these works become important since they contribute toward proving that Bundeli is not just one language but a language complex with multiple varieties.

The third major theme of research involves studying Bundelkhand as a social and cultural landscape where the use of Bundeli is an expression medium. The paper on Bundeli folklore indicates that the Bundelkhand region has an abundance of folk songs, idioms, customs, and culture memory that

continue to play a significant role in the lives of people in this region. This genre of literature is significant in sociolinguistic analysis since it moves away from analysing language structures and looks into language as a means of expressing indigenous knowledge, social identity, and cultural practices.

The final strand of literature stems from sociolinguistics theories regarding language maintenance and language shift. This line of research is particularly useful due to Fishman's contribution in illustrating how endangered languages continue to persist symbolically and domestically despite being threatened institutionally, and he underlines intergenerational continuity as a crucial sign of language viability (Fishman 1991). In later sociolinguistics studies, it is also made clear that language shift is a slow process, occurring within a specific context, and that prestige, education, mobility, and ideology determine the persistence of a heritage language or its replacement by another. The applicability of this body of knowledge to Bundeli is self-evident since the language exhibits a typical sociolinguistics scenario where there is high cultural affiliation but declining formal and aspirational uses in favour of standard Hindi.

Additional research on language attitudes within India also highlights this particular notion. In fact, research on language ideologies and identity demonstrates that language users may feel strong identification towards a language without using it actively daily. This separation of identity claim from communicative practices is essential when discussing Bundeli in relation to its use among younger speakers, who may identify with the language and view it as their heritage language but opt for Hindi in various settings. Thus, existing studies indicate that Bundeli cannot be evaluated merely based on visibility or affective connections associated with it.

When taken collectively, the findings in the existing literature show a gap that is evident. Descriptive linguistics has demonstrated the validity of Bundeli, cultural linguistics has described the language's orality, and sociolinguistic theory has provided explanations as to the behaviour of pressured languages in multilingual contexts. Where there exists a relative paucity of information is the integration of Bundeli's historical evolution, its genetic classification, geographical spread, and current sociolinguistic trends within its speech community in Bundelkhand. This study intends to fill such a gap through an integrated approach.

### **3. Research Methodology and Research Design**

The current study utilises a qualitative interpretive research design that employs textual analysis, historical synthesis, and sociolinguistic interpretation as its methodology. This methodology draws on descriptions of the Bundeli language in linguistic texts, comparative studies of Hindi dialects, cultural studies of the Bundelkhand region, and the existing literature on language shift, identity, and domain language use in multilingual societies. This approach is appropriate for the current study because the language in question is examined as one that has undergone historical development and social negotiations, rather than being analysed from a limited linguistic perspective.

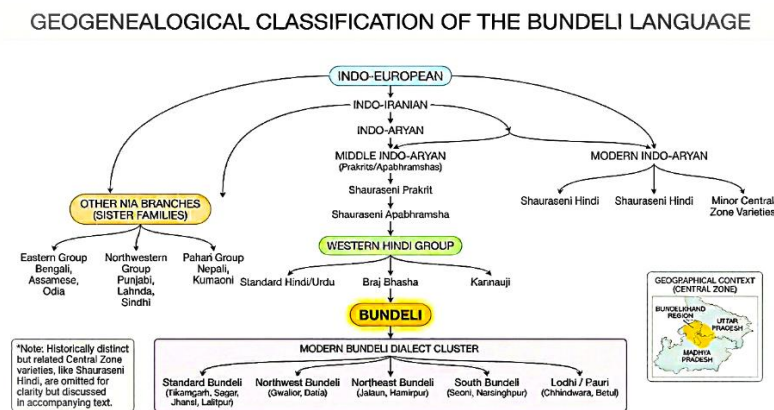
Methodologically, the research will be conducted as a regional language investigation based on theoretical insights. The historical facts used in the research come from classification-based studies as well as those that include descriptive data situating Bundeli in the context of Indo Aryan languages, while at the same time pointing out its own structural specificity. Sociolinguistic analysis in this case relies on such notions as speech community, prestige, functional diversity, language ideology, language maintenance, and language shift in order to reveal the way a language can be culturally vital and socially marginalised at the same time.

### 3.1 About the Language

Bundeli is a historically grounded regional variant of language that finds its usage in the region of Bundelkhand, and which has been used in the past as a medium for oral communication, folklore, memory and local traditions. Early descriptions of the language show that Bundeli indeed has some phonetic and grammatical characteristics that distinguish it from other languages. It should therefore not be seen as an accidental and distorted form of the Hindi language, which makes up another crucial point to take into consideration when dealing with this language. In this research, Bundeli is seen as a socially relevant language form, whose importance is not limited to its linguistic qualities but also to its role in transmitting intimacy, locality and cultural tradition.

### 3.2 Genetic Affiliation

Genetically speaking, Bundeli falls under the Indo-European category through its subcategories Indo-Iranian and Indo-Aryan, and in contemporary classification theory, Bundeli tends to be categorised under Western Hindi as part of New Indo-Aryan. Furthermore, in terms of historical linguistics, such north Indian dialects have historically been traced back even farther to Middle Indo Aryan and Apabhramsha, which serves to give a lengthy background for understanding Bundeli in terms of its development in north India. Such information is valuable not simply as an addition to the classification list, but rather it is useful because it enables us to differentiate the structure that the language inherited genetically from the changes that occurred due to language contact and ideological factors brought about by the hegemony of standard Hindi.



**Figure 1.** Genealogical classification of Bundeli within the Indo Aryan language family.

**Source:** Diagram generated by Gemini (Google AI), May 2026, based on classifications from G.A. Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India and Colin P. Masica's The Indo-Aryan Languages

### 3.3 Geographical Status

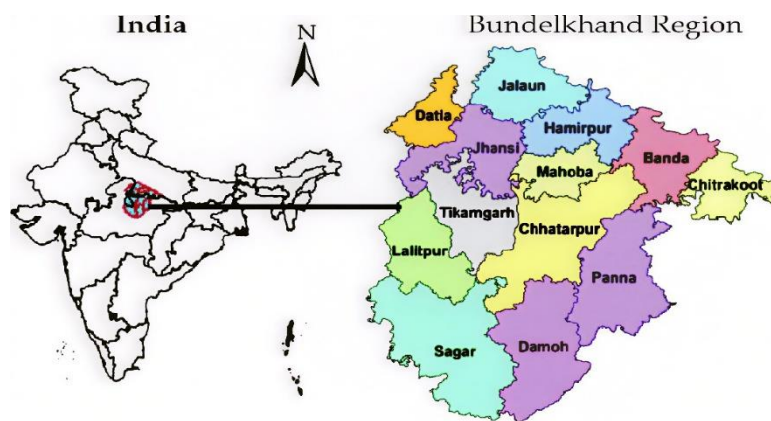
Bundeli is geographically tied to the Bundelkhand region that spans areas within modern Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, incorporating a culturally coherent yet heterogeneous geography rather than a single homogeneous administrative zone. The Bundelkhand region of the north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh is the core Bundeli-speaking area (Census of India 2011). It dominates in some districts of Uttar Pradesh, such as Lalitpur, Jalaun, Hamirpur, Sampati, Banda and Jhansi. Whereas,

in Madhya Pradesh, it is distributed in the districts of Chhatarpur, Panna, Damoh, Sagar, Datia, and Tikamgarh (Wikipedia 2024).

This geographic context becomes significant in the current research since the geographical coverage area affects the development of variations in the linguistic repertoire owing to the influence of the area itself, contact relations, urban-rural differences, and the vicinity to other languages. The geographical positioning of Bundeli helps explain the sociolinguistic complexity associated with the language. While in villages and semi-urban communities, the language can be used actively for communicative purposes, in other environments, the speaker is compelled to use Standard Hindi for social reasons related to education, mobility, governance, etc. The geographical character of Bundeli is thus an important aspect that influences the development of linguistic variations.

**Figure 2.** Geographical Distribution of Bundeli Language in Bundelkhand Region

**Source:** <https://in.images.search.yahoo.com/search/images?p=linguistics+map+of+bundelkhand>



### 3.4 Research Problem

- Bundeli has had considerably less academic and institutional recognition than Standard Hindi, despite its importance historically and linguistically.
- The use of Bundeli language is increasingly limited to the realm of the personal, familial and local, while Hindi is increasingly used in formal and professional contexts.
- The intergenerational transmission of Bundeli may be breaking down, especially as younger speakers have been exposed to education and the effects of urban migration.
- There seems to be a clear divide between linguistic identity and language use, since speakers have a strong cultural identity with the Bundeli language, but they actually use Hindi more often in public spaces.
- As Hindi and English gain increasing prestige among young people, the use of Bundeli becomes increasingly marginalised and socially disadvantaged.

### 3.5 Aims and Objectives

This research is designed to achieve the following aims.

- To study the historical and linguistic background of Bundeli with respect to the larger family of languages of Indo Aryan and Western Hindi.
- To study the sociolinguistic role of Bundeli regarding linguistic variation and prestige associated with regional identity in Bundelkhand
- To understand the factors involved in the processes of language maintenance and language shift by young Bundeli speakers
- To explore the function of Bundeli in various communication contexts, such as domestic, cultural, informal, and public domains

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

Based on historical investigation, viewing Bundeli as a historically stratified regional variety of language with a stable structure and strong territorial foundation, rather than just an accidental deviation from standard Hindi. The affiliation of Bundeli to Western Hindi doesn't cancel its intrinsic specificity. On the contrary, based on the findings of a comparative linguistic study, it is clear that Bundeli possesses regular phonetic and morphological traits, which provide grounds for comparison with other languages, including standard Hindi, Bagheli, Kanauji, and Awadhi. This proves that Bundeli has formed its linguistic identity throughout history.

Speaking about the sociolinguistic perspective, it can be stated that Bundeli is currently standing on the border of vitality and marginalisation. It maintains its cultural role in the sphere of folklore, oral tradition, regional memory, and everyday communication. This means that it still serves as an indicator of identity for the population of Bundelkhand. However, cultural significance doesn't mean institutional relevance and viability in the spheres of education, administration, and mobility. Such a process of functional restructuring carries particular importance for younger speakers. Youngsters are brought up listening to Bundeli in their immediate environment, while at school, they come to associate Hindi with study, writing, examination, work, and social ascent. This does not necessarily involve an outright domination of Bundeli but can lead to the development of a gradient of bilingualism, whereby Bundeli continues to be a strong language of intimacy, joke-telling, story-telling, and emotion, whereas Hindi becomes the dominant language of formal self-presentation and writing. This kind of process involves domain separation, but could also turn into a step towards a transition if transfer begins to weaken.

The identity factor still serves to be among the most powerful assets for the sustainability of Bundeli. It has been observed that regional languages endure due to their greater ability to evoke emotions than other languages that are dominant at the same time as standard. Within the context of Bundelkhand, Bundeli language seems to signify the essence of authenticity, traditionality, rusticity, humour, and rooted culture through songs and proverbs. This way, a language may stay in vogue despite lacking strong institutional support. But if the identity element stays merely symbolic without being reinforced in any way, then its usage will decrease.

For research, this suggests that the likely outcome is a generation with a divided repertoire. The youth might know Bundeli very well, but only speak in select situations and shift in style according to the audience and context. They may also identify themselves as members of the community and not necessarily make use of the language across all domains. The distinction between these two aspects is

important for future fieldwork in that language vitality cannot solely rely on emotional connection or census counting.

## 5. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that Bundeli has a unique position in the linguistic ecology of Bundelkhand, being a genuine and well-defined dialect with strong roots in the cultural history of Central India. At the same time, Bundeli has become a language that exists on the brink, functioning successfully in its traditional domains while facing numerous challenges in its ability to attract new generations and preserve its vitality in the face of increased standardisation of Hindi in education, mobility-oriented spheres, and public life.

It is necessary to emphasise that the main finding of this study is that Bundeli cannot be considered either extinct or a prosperous dialect. Instead, it faces selective retention, contraction of domains, and symbolic resistance on the part of young people who have grown up in a multilingual environment. It becomes clear that, from a scholarly perspective, further studies in Bundeli would benefit from focusing on youth language use, attitudes, code-switching, oral performance, and family language transmission. From a practical point of view, the documentation of the language for making policies, creation of regional literature, use of local media, and pedagogy are likely to be essential tools for supporting Bundeli as a living language.

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