

Language Borrowing in Oman: Evidence of Balushi Influence in Spoken Omani Dialect

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Received: 2025 Dec 15

Accepted: 2026 Jan 03

Published: 2026 Jan 13

Abstract

This study explores the borrowing of Balushi words into the Omani dialect, focusing on three commonly used terms: /s^ʕar.da/ (severe cold), /'pæn.ke/ (fan or propeller) and /'kun.bil/ (thick blanket). Through a survey of 50 participants from eight Omani governorates, the research examines the usage, pronunciation and recognition of these words among native speakers. The study suggests that while these terms may share origins with Farsi and Hindi, their phonetic features and local pronunciations point to more direct borrowing from Balushi. The research highlights the impact of multilingualism in Oman and the subtle ways in which borrowed words become embedded in local identity. Despite the limited sample size, this paper encourages further investigation into linguistic borrowing and regional variation in Oman.

Keywords: Omani Dialect, Balushi Language, Linguistic Borrowing, Multilingualism in Oman, Indo Iranian Languages

1. Introduction

Oman has always been a diverse country. Long time ago, people from some parts of the world settled alongside the original Omanis and became part of the community. One significant example is the Balushi people, descendants of people who migrated from the Makran coast of Balochistan (in present-day Iran and Pakistan) and settled in Oman, particularly in coastal regions like Muscat and Sur [1]. Historical records show that Balushi people began arriving in Oman as early as the 18th century, largely recruited into the Omani army or naval forces ("Omani Baloch") [2]. Despite being well integrated into Omani society, Balushi people have preserved their linguistic heritage, especially in family and community settings. At the same time, most Balushi Omanis are fluent Arabic speakers. This bilingualism has definitely created a possibility of borrowing between the two languages. As someone with a Balushi mother and a non-Balushi Omani father, I have observed this linguistic overlap firsthand. Members of my father's side, despite not speaking Balushi, use many Balushi terms as part of their everyday Omani speech. However, despite the presence of several studies on minority languages in Oman such as Zadjali and Kumzari (van der Wal Anonby), very few works specifically address the impact of the Balushi language on mainstream Omani Arabic [3].

This study was inspired by everyday observations. It aims to document and analyze a small set of commonly used Balushi words in the Omani dialect. The words selected for this re-

search are:

- /s^ʕar.da/ (سدرص) (sardah)
- /'pæn.ke/ (پنكباب) (bank)
- /'kun.bil/ (كبنك) (kunbil)

These words were chosen due to their high frequency in local speech. For example, the word şarda (سدرص), referring to a sudden wind or cold draft, is commonly used even in local weather updates. Its widespread use highlights how Balushi terms have entered mainstream usage in Oman, an observation that this paper explores further.

2. Methodology

As a student at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), I have the opportunity to regularly interact with Omani students from all governorates of the country. For this study, I collected data by engaging with 50 Omani students (both male and female) from a range of governorates. Importantly, none of the participants identify as Balushi, which was a deliberate choice. This selection aimed to ensure that the use of Balushi-origin words is not the result of bilingual code-switching or native language interference, but rather an instance of true borrowing into the broader Omani Arabic dialect. To achieve geographic and dialectal diversity, participants were chosen to represent a wide range of regions, allowing for analysis across multiple Omani dialects. This enhances the reliability of the findings, as lexical borrowing may vary in intensity between regions.

Participants were asked about their familiarity with and usage of three specific Balushi-origin words:

- /s^ʕar.da/ (فدرص) (sardah)
- /'pæn.ke/ (فكنااب) (bank)
- /'kun.bil/ (لبنك) (kunbil)

In addition, they were asked whether they were aware that these words were of Balushi origin. Data was collected multimodally via WhatsApp chats, selected for its accessibility and the informal, comfortable setting it provides for participants. The platform allowed participants to respond freely, often contributing additional spontaneous information that enriched the dataset.

The findings will be organized and presented in a table, categorized by:

- Frequency of usage of each word.
- Governorates of the participants.

This structure aims to highlight any regional variation and offer a clearer picture of how Balushi loanwords have spread within the spoken Omani dialect.

2.1. Analysis

The word /s^ʕar.da/ (فدرص) is widely used in Omani Arabic to describe intense or piercing cold, especially during winter. It is commonly heard in spoken conversations and even appears in local weather updates and forecasts, particularly on social media, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.



Figure 1



Figure 2

However, the word /s^ʕar.da/ is absent from standard Arabic dictionaries, and a search for the term often yields either no results or unrelated Arabic words with different meanings. This suggests that the term does not originate from Classical Arabic roots, and instead, it likely entered Omani Arabic through language contact. Interestingly, a closely related word exists in Farsi (Persian)—درس (sard), which also means cold. Given the historical and cultural interactions between Persian, Balushi, and Omani communities, particularly

through trade and migration, it is plausible that the term *şarda* entered Omani dialects either directly from Farsi or indirectly through Balushi, a language that itself shares many lexical items with Persian. While Persian (درس, *sard*) also means “cold,” the Balushi equivalent, pronounced /s^ʕa:r.da/, more closely matches the Omani form. The word likely underwent vowel shortening during Arabization, becoming /s^ʕar.da/, which aligns with typical Arabic phonological patterns. This close phonetic match, especially

the emphatic /s^ʕ/ and full word structure, suggests the term was borrowed directly from Balushi, not Persian. Persian may be the ultimate root, but Balushi is the more immediate origin. According to Holmes, words are usually borrowed into a language to expand its vocabulary to fit new contexts [4]. In this case, the word \s^ʕar.da\ means not just any cold, but severe cold. Considering Oman's generally warm climate, such extreme cold is rare; therefore, no native Omani word may have existed for this phenomenon. The word was likely borrowed to fill this gap and is possibly used more for exaggeration than to describe actual severe cold.

The word /'pæn.ke/ is used in both Balushi and Farsi to refer to a fan or propeller. Interestingly, a related word exists in Hindi: *pankha* (पंखा), which literally means "feather" or "wing." While it does not originally mean "fan," Hindi speakers often use *pankha* to refer to a traditional hand fan, and commonly pair it with *fain* (फैन), a direct borrowing from English to refer to electric fans. Few linguistic sources suggest that Farsi, and by extension Balushi, borrowed the Hindi word /'pəŋ.kʰa:/ and adapted it into /'pæn.ke/ by shortening the final vowel. This shorter, Balushi-influenced pronunciation is the same form commonly used in spoken Omani Arabic. Therefore, while it is tempting to assume that /'pæn.ke/ entered Omani dialects directly through

Balushi, this cannot be stated with full certainty. Oman has a long history of trade and cultural exchange with the Indian subcontinent, particularly with Hindi and Urdu-speaking communities. A direct borrowing from Hindi remains a possibility. However, based on how most Omanis pronounce the word today, using a vowel pattern and structure consistent with the Farsi/Balushi variant, it is more likely that the word was transmitted indirectly through Balushi rather than borrowed directly from Hindi.

The word /'kum.bil/, used in both Balushi and Farsi means a thick winter blanket. Its presence in both languages is likely due to historical linguistic exchange or shared etymological roots, as Balushi and Farsi both belong to the Iranian branch of the Indo-Iranian language family, which explains their frequent lexical overlap. In Balushi, the word is commonly pronounced /'kum.bil/, while in Omani dialect the word is pronounced by some speakers as /kun.bil/ to refer to the same meaning, heavy blankets. Although other regional words for "blanket" also exist across the country. Its presence in the Omani dialect, especially among speakers with no Balushi background, suggests it may have been borrowed through contact with Balushi speakers.

2.2. Findings

word	Governates of the Participants	Total Number of Participants Who Use the Word	Aware of Balushi Origin? (Yes/No)
/s ^ʕ ar.da/ (ةدرص)	8; Muscat, Dhofar, Musandam, Dakhiliyah, North Batinah, South Batinah, South Sharqiyah and North Sharqiyah.	48	No
/'pæn.ke/ (ةكناپ)	5; Muscat, Dakhiliyah, Musandam, North Batinah and South Batinah.	33	No
/'kun.bil/ (لبنك)	6; Muscat, Dhofar, Musandam, Dakhiliyah, North Batinah, South Batinah.	11	Only one did

Table 1

2.2.1. /s^ʕar.da/ (ةدرص) (Sardah)

The word /s^ʕar.da/ is clearly widespread among Omani speakers as a term for severe cold weather. According to the collected data, 48 out of 50 participants, representing eight governorates including Muscat, Dhofar, Musandam, and North and South Batinah, reported using the word. These eight governorates represent the full regional spread of the participant group; the remaining three Omani governorates were not represented originally in the collected sample. Notably, none of the participants were aware that the word is of Balushi origin. In fact, many believed it to be a purely Omani term, suggesting that /s^ʕar.da/ has been deeply integrated into the general Omani dialect. One particularly interesting observation came from a participant from Musandam, who also speaks Kumzari; a language with Persian influence. She recognized and uses the word /s^ʕar.da/ in Kumzari as well. This cross-linguistic usage hints at a broader etymological pathway. However, its deep integration into everyday speech, coupled with the lack of awareness of

its foreign origin, underscores how thoroughly it has become naturalized in Omani linguistic identity.

2.2.2. /'pæn.ke/ (ةكناپ) (Bank)

The word referring to a fan or propeller is the second most frequently used term in the findings, reported by 33 participants from five governorates, including Muscat, Dakhiliyah, and North and South Batinah. Unlike /s^ʕar.da/, one participant recognized the word as having Balushi origins, citing an Instagram video as her source. Another participant believed it to be an Indian (Hindi) word. The term indeed has a layered etymology. It likely originates from the Hindi word *pankha*, which means feather or wing and is commonly used to refer to a fan. Balushi and Farsi appear to have borrowed this term, adapting it phonetically into /'pæn.ke/, with a shortened vowel sound. While Oman's historical connections with the Indian subcontinent make direct borrowing from Hindi a plausible route, the pronunciation commonly used in Oman more closely aligns with the Balushi

and Farsi adaptations.

2.2.3. /'kun.bil/ (كُنْبِيل) (Kunbil)

This word refers to a thick winter blanket and is used by only 11 participants from six different governorates, including Dhofar, Muscat, and North Batinah. Unlike the other two words, one participant identified it as being of Balushi origin. This suggests that although its use is limited, some awareness of its linguistic origin remains, likely because the term sounds distinctly non-Arabic. In Balushi, it is pronounced /'kum.bil/, slightly different from the Omani pronunciation. The relatively low usage of this word in Oman may be due to the presence of common Arabic alternatives for “blanket,” which could reduce the visibility of the borrowed term in everyday speech. The overall findings reveal varying levels of integration of these Balushi words into the Omani dialect. The word \s^har.da\ shows the highest level of integration, with widespread usage across multiple governorates and little to no awareness of its Balushi origin. In contrast, \pæn.ke\ and \kun.bil\ remain less integrated, with \kun.bil\ being the least commonly used. This variation highlights how linguistic borrowing can manifest at different levels of assimilation, depending on factors such as necessity, exposure and phonetic fit within the borrowing language.

3. Conclusion

This paper explores the borrowing of Balushi words into the Omani dialect, focusing on three commonly used terms: (/s^har.da/), (/pæn.ke/) and (/kun.bil/). The findings reveal varying levels of use and recognition among Omani speakers. Personally, conducting this research has deepened my appreciation for Oman’s linguistic diversity and the subtle ways in which cultural interactions shape our everyday language. However, the study does have its limitations. The participant pool was limited to just 50 individuals, which is relatively small. With a larger sample

size, the results particularly the frequency of usage might have differed. While the data covered participants from eight different governorates, three governorates were not represented. Including all eleven would have provided a more comprehensive picture of Omani society and might have influenced the findings. Additionally, due to the limited existing literature on this topic, I was unable to delve deeply into the historical or social reasons behind the borrowing of these specific words, especially all of which being related to temperature. This opens avenues for future research to explore thematic borrowing in more depth. Further studies could also expand the number of Balushi-origin words examined and include a broader, more varied participant base. Investigating generational differences in the usage of borrowed terms could also provide valuable insight into how borrowing evolves over time. Though limited in scale, this paper serves as a starting point for exploring Oman’s rich multicultural linguistic heritage. I hope that educational and cultural institutions will continue to document and celebrate such linguistic phenomena.

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