

Communication and Language Policy in Pakistan

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Abstract[†]

Communication and language policies have far-reaching educational, economic, and political effects. In multiethnic countries, like Pakistan, language policies can determine who has access to schools, who has opportunities for economic advancement, who participates in political decisions and who has access to jobs. In Pakistan, Urdu language has been given the status of the national language whereas English is the official language. In a country where more than 35 languages are spoken, privileging two languages over indigenous language can marginalize people whose mother-tongues are other than Urdu and English or who cannot speak these two languages. This paper critically analyses the communication and language policy of the government of Pakistan. Through the case studies of the government of Pakistan's 2009 educational policy and the media system in Pakistan, the authors explore how the current language policy further marginalize the already less-privileged ethnic groups in the smaller provinces. The authors argue that the problematic language policy curtails the cultural advancement of the indigenous groups, and deprives them of economic, political, and social opportunities. The authors recommend that government should give official status to the indigenous or native languages of Pakistan, and promote those languages by making them a part of the educational system and popular culture.

Keywords: Communication, Language, Urdu, Pakistan, Mass Media

Introduction

Pakistan is a multilingual and multiethnic country with six major and over 57 small languages. However, only Urdu and English are the languages of “the domains of power”—government, corporate sector, media, and education (Rahman, 1996). Urdu, which is spoken by only 7% of the population, is the national language,ⁱ while English is the official language.ⁱⁱ The small languages are under tremendous pressure, some of which have become extinct, while others are about to become extinct because of the state's favoring Urdu and English at the expense of others.

Urdu is spoken by the people who migrated from India to Pakistan at the time of partition. They are called *mohajirs*, meaning ‘refugees’ or ‘settlers’. Almost all of them settled in urban Sindh, southern province of Pakistan. Since they were relatively

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educated, they dominated the bureaucracy of Pakistan despite their numerical weakness: they were 3% of the total population of Pakistan.

With Urdu as the language of domain of power, indigenous people have to learn Urdu and English to get a job in public and private sectors. Therefore indigenous languages lost their vitality for their own people for pragmatic reasons. Rahman (2003) argues members of the elite class had a stake in the continuation of English because it differentiated them from the masses and constituted a class-identity marker. Thus, Urdu and English relegated the indigenous languages to a lower status where they became a stigma instead of repertoires of local knowledge/wisdom.

Background

Pakistan emerged as an independent Muslim state in 1947 when India was partitioned after the British left the sub-continent as their colony. The major ethnic groups that comprised the newly created state were Bengalis, Punjabis, Pakhtuns, Sindhis and Baloch. Bengalis were more than 50 per cent of the total population, who in 1971 seceded from Pakistan to become part of Bangladesh.

Privileging Urdu at the expense of their language, *Bangla*, was one of the grievances that led to the division of Pakistan on ethnic and linguistic lines. The imposition of Urdu as a national language served to denigrate the role of every other language, which alienated other language groups throughout the country (Ayres, 2003). In their zeal to build a nation state out of different nationalities, the different constitutions of Pakistan have waived aside as insignificant all the ethnic, racial, linguistic and cultural differences. As a result there is an almost total disregard for the existence of the various ethnic and linguistic groups.

Pakistan is home to four major ethnic groups with their own distinct languages, cultures, histories and geography. However, they share common religion of Islam, which itself has many shades and colors. Almost all the ethnic groups constitute a majority in their area of origin and are indigenous to it, but constitute a minority in comparison to the entire population of the country.

Languages of Pakistan	
Language	Percentage of speakers
Punjabi	44.15
Pashto	15.42
Sindhi	14.10
Siraiki	10.53
Urdu	7.57
Balochi	3.57
Other	4.66

Source: Census 1998

Punjabi is a major language which is spoken both in Indian and Pakistani Punjabs. In the Indian Punjab it is used in many domains of power. As Rahman (1996) notes, it is the language of songs, jokes, intimacy and informality in both Pakistan and India, which makes it the language of private pleasure. Pushto is the second largest tongue in Pakistan and a majority language in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, in the tribal areas of Pakistan, and in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, it is also used in the domain of power. Sindhi and Balochi are the two other major languages that give a different ethnic and racial identity to the people who speak them.

Language Policy in Pakistan

Language policies have far-reaching educational, economic, and political effects. In multiethnic countries, like Pakistan, language policies can determine who has access to schools, who has opportunities for economic advancement, who participates in political decisions and who has access to jobs. Ayres (2003) contends that despite the great diversity of languages and ethnicity in Pakistan, the government has paid little attention to language as policy “because of which some ethnic groups are disproportionately powerful and advantage” (pp. 51-51). At the same time, it has faced other languages with extinction.

Language policy in Pakistan is meant to strengthen the state by promoting Urdu as a national language. The language policy also claims to modernize the state through English as official language. There is an element of cultural imperialism about privileging Urdu i.e. the dominant language and aspects of its culture are passed on to people of other languages. Literate people of other cultures, especially those serving in the armed forces, speak Urdu with their children even at home to identify themselves with people of power. It alienates them from people of their own culture who stick to their mother tongue. This policy, however, boomeranged when Pakistan experienced its first language in riots in 1953, which culminated in the division of Pakistan on ethnic and linguistic lines in 1971.

Language and Education

In 1947, soon after Pakistan was created an *All Pakistan Education Conference* was held which recommended to the Constituent Assembly that Urdu should be declared lingua franca of Pakistan, and that it must be taught as a *compulsory* subject in schools across the country. Soon after the conference Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the first Governor General of Pakistan, and Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan announced that: “Pakistan is a Muslim state, and it must have its lingua franca, a language of the Muslim nation ... It is necessary for a nation to have one language and that language can be Urdu, no other language.”

This statement, instead of cementing, further divided the imagined nation when Bengalis launched a *language movement* against the state’s language policy. The state further stiffened its stance, which effectively alienated Bengalis who were not alone in opposing the hegemonic policy of Pakistan. Sindhis and Pakhtuns had also been demanding a national language status for their own tongues. As Ayres (2003) notes, “Most of

Pakistan's language problems grew out of regional linguistic groups' taking umbrage at the state's insistence on making Urdu the national language. The overarching problem in this regard was the government's unaccommodating language policies" (p. 57).

In 1959, the Commission on National Education called for upgrading the status of Urdu from lingua franca to national language on a par with the national anthem. Lt. Gen. Ziaul Haq, who toppled Pakistan's first popularly elected Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in order to justify his takeover, started 'Islamization' of laws which also saw a new language policy. *Islamyat*, which means 'the study of Islam,' and Arabic language were introduced as compulsory subjects at school and college levels. Plans were made to set up Arabic language centers countrywide and to enforce Urdu in previously English medium schools. Thus Urdu was once again privileged over other languages.

Right from 1947 till date English has been the official language of Pakistan which has further cornered regional languages. In 1973, the Parliament of Pakistan unanimously passed a new constitution—the first-ever by an elected Parliament. This constitution, which after several amendments is still enforced in the country, has the following provisions about language in the country:

1. The national language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes within fifteen years from the commencing day.
2. English may be used for official purposes until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu.
3. Without prejudice to the status of the national language, a provincial assembly may by law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language.

However, despite the lapse of almost 40 years, Urdu has yet to replace English as official language.

Language and Media

Because of bias in educational policy the mainstream mass media in Pakistan are Urdu- and English-based. Ironically, the most influential press in Pakistan is none other than English which draws a dividing line between the elite and the masses: English press is for the elite and Urdu press for the masses. Even the government has different approaches for Urdu and English media: English newspapers are more liberal in their coverage of news and commentary, while Urdu press is too circumspect. But the degree of freedom that the English press enjoys does not help the masses because it is elitist in its approach and barely discusses issues of the common people. These newspapers try to address more the foreign audience than the local people.

Almost 95% private television channels broadcast their content in Urdu. They concentrate mostly on urban areas, while the people of indigenous languages mostly live in rural areas. Private television channels are available only on cable and cables are

limited to urban areas. The state-run television does programming in indigenous languages, but they are too few as compared to programming in Urdu. Indigenous languages suffer from double jeopardy: 1) few programs of short duration, 2) they are not broadcasted in prime time. This means indigenous languages programs go on air at a time when few people have spare time to sit in front of TV or listen to radio.

A Case Study of Education Policy 2009

A critical implementation issue for language policy is education. Before the creation of Pakistan during the British colonial era the language in education policy was that Urdu should be the medium of instruction for the masses and that English should be the medium for the elite. Since 1947 Pakistan has formed several education policies, but their “implementation has generally failed to develop in line with policy” (OBE, 2010).

In the new education policy Pakistan makes a commitment to use Urdu as the medium of instruction in state schools. At the same time it wants to widen access to English language teaching. These two divergent goals are creating barriers to effective education, limiting economic mobility and undermining social cohesion. The new education policy says little about languages in education, which shows the level of interests—or disinterest—the government shows towards language as a tool of education. It also shows that the government is not concerned about the importance of mother tongue in education despite the rhetoric of promoting regional languages at least at primary level of education. For example, Section 5.4 of the education policy discusses the importance of literacy and non-formal learning but without saying anything at all about which language or which writing system people are to be helped to become literate in or what functions literacy is expected to have.

The state has always treated the issue of language in the different education policies as a factor of no significant relevance, and this is more so in case of languages other than Urdu and English. At cursory look at the different education policies shows that the new education policy is no different from the previous ones and that it is not going to have any positive impact like its predecessors.

Before 1947, when Pakistan was created, the British colonials had a policy of education for the local people which has little changed despite the lapse of more than 60 years. As a matter of policy the British masters implemented an education policy where Urdu was medium of instruction for general masses, while for the elite the medium of instruction was English. In 1959, Pakistan came up with its first education policy with a minor change to the one it had inherited from the British. This policy called for primary and secondary education in Urdu and higher education in English. However, at the implementation level there was no change in policy. Pakistan framed its first democratic constitution in 1973 which dealt with the language policy in just three articles—and they were never actually implemented.

According to this constitution, English is to be replaced by Urdu within 15 years as official language, and that provinces are free to develop their own language policy.

However, after a lapse of more than three decades Urdu has yet to replace English, as I have mentioned in previous pages. The local governments are undecided about the language policy because over the years people have made a “voluntary shift” from mother tongues to Urdu and English in education to have a share in jobs and have access to power in many garbs.

Furthermore, despite this provision in the constitution, education policy remained the same at the implementation level. Even this policy lasted for just five years. Zia ul Haq made a coup in 1977, imposed martial law and started ‘Islamization and Urduisation’ at every level—education included. This further marginalized the indigenous languages. Now English was to be taught as a compulsory subject from grade 4, while all schools have to prepare for conducting exams in all subjects in Urdu by 1989. This policy led to a mushroom growth in private English medium schools because parents wanted their children to master English which was still the language of domains of power, jobs and higher education.

In 1989, when the first democratic government was in place after eleven years, there was a change in the education policy which though was little effective at the implementation level. The new policy made English as a compulsory subject from grade one, which again ignored the basic role of mother tongue in primary or fundamental education. However, private elite schools continued with their English exclusive syllabi. Surprisingly, the government announced a new education policy in 1998 without a single statement regarding language policy. This shows that the government attaches no significance to the role of language in education. As a result private English medium schools flourished in urban areas, while in rural areas—where almost 70 per cent of the population lives—Urdu medium state-run schools continued with Urdu as medium of instruction in all subjects. This policy restricted the access of graduates of state-run schools to higher jobs because they could not compete with their peers who studied in the elite English medium schools.

A ‘white paper’ on education policy was issued in 2007 which stressed that English would be taught as a subject from grade 1, while mathematics and science are to be taught in English from grade 6. In the Punjab province the government had its own policy of teaching science in English from grade 10. But in both cases the mother tongue was ignored as medium of instruction. The current education policy, which was issued in 2009, science and mathematics are to be taught in English in grades 4 and 5, while all science and mathematics are to be taught in English from 2014. Punjab, the largest province of Pakistan, on its part declared that science was to be taught in English starting from grade 4.

Looking at the different education policies right from 1947, the colonial era Urdu plus English policy has remained in place which contributes to a sense of cultural anomie experienced by many ethnic groups in Pakistan. Of the 58 other indigenous languages only Sindhi has an official role as medium of instruction in primary schools in Sindh province and Pashto is used in government schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province.

English is a compulsory subject from grade 1. In practice, however, much depends on the availability of teachers; a few government schools have an English medium section whilst in others pupils do not get beyond learning the English alphabet in their five years in primary school.

Medium of instruction policy determines which social and linguistic groups have access to political and economic opportunities, and which groups are disenfranchised. “The current Urdu + English policy carries with it several characteristics, of which the following three are most prominent: 1) English is an examination subject, 2) English teachers do not use English and 3) other languages are marginalized” (OBE, 2010).

In government schools Urdu is the medium of instruction and yet Urdu is the first language of only 6.8% of the population. In non-elite private schools English is the medium of instruction and in the near future English will be the medium of instruction for certain subjects in government schools as well, yet English is the first language of only a tiny elite in Pakistan.

The Education Policy document 2009 actually says relatively little about languages in education in Pakistan. However, according to an estimate 95% of children in Pakistan do not have access to education in their mother tongue (OBE, 2010).

This ambiguous policy of Urdu as national and English as official language has resulted in three different types of education systems in Pakistan, which again discriminates against the indigenous languages. The top tier of educational institutions, which are mostly private, impart education in English; the second mainstream institutions use Urdu as medium of instruction; while the third, *madrassas* (religious seminaries) use Arabic and Urdu as medium of instruction.

In December 2006 the education ministry took many by surprise with a new policy announcement: From late 2007, the English language will be taught much earlier in all state schools, and English will take over from Urdu as the medium of instruction for natural sciences and mathematics.

This situation has caused a ‘voluntary shift’ where people are neglecting their own languages and learning Urdu and English for pragmatic reasons. “What happens is that market conditions are such that one’s language becomes deficit on what Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, would call cultural ‘capital’ (Rahman, 1996: 62).

Repercussions of the Language Policy

Pakistan’s language policy has undermined every region’s sense of identity. “Pakistan’s language policies have reflected the degree to which all but a few chosen were prevented from participating in the process” (Ayres, 2003, p.57). In reaction to this language policy, indigenous or regional languages have become identity markers. Rahman (2002) says that Pakistan’s language policy has made Urdu the obvious force to be resisted by ethnic groups, and strengthen their own language by corpus planning and acquisition planning.

Pakistan is one of 19 countries which are characterized by high linguistic fractionalization. There is thus an additional risk that inappropriate school language will contribute to long term political, social and economic instability and divisions along linguistic and ethnic lines. Pakistan is one of 11 countries which have high levels of ‘fragility or conflict’ with a consequent risk of ‘serious interactions of language policy with extended fragility’.

Conclusion

Pakistan has a nationalistic approach to language policy. The reason is that Pakistan is not ethnically or linguistically a homogenous country. The early policy-makers wanted to create a nation on the basis of common language. The people who migrated from India to Pakistan in 1947 and afterwards were more educated than the indigenous people and they spoke Urdu.

During the campaign for an independent Muslim country Urdu was associated with the Muslims of India while Hindi was considered the language of Hindus. This is also one of the reasons that Urdu was declared the national language of Pakistan. English had been—and has been—the language of the elite, it was declared as official language of the country.

Urdu and English became the languages of education and the mass media. The mainstream mass media of Pakistan are dominated by these two languages. There are very few newspapers and magazines that are published in indigenous languages. Urdu and English were privileged which set indigenous languages on the back foot. A majority of people cannot read or write their mother tongue (native language). Therefore the common people consume the Urdu media, both print and electronic, while the elite class gets their news and views from the English media.

As the result of language policies of Pakistan, the country is losing its cultural and linguistic diversity which is alienating the young generation “from their ancestors, their roots, their culture and their essential self. They do not add useful skills; they subtract from existing skills” (Rahman, 2003: 9).

Recommendations

Languages are repertoire of indigenous knowledge. When a language becomes extinct, humanity loses one storage of knowledge. Therefore, to reverse the language deficit Pakistan needs to adopt additive multilingualism as recommended by UNESCO. As recommended by several local parties and organizations, fundamental education should be imparted in mother tongue of the child. Since Urdu is the language of communication among the different ethnic groups, it can be taught as separate language. Not to be left behind in the knowledge of science and technology, English can be added to the curricula at secondary level.

Not surprisingly when a particular language is given no role to play in the education system, many parents respond by not encouraging the use of that language at home. “A

very effective way of killing a language is to deny it any place in the education system; parents themselves will then tend to take the next step of marginalizing the local language within the family in favor of the educationally privileged language or languages” (OBE, 2010).

The state-run Pakistan Television covers almost 95% landscape of Pakistan, more than any private media. This television service can be used for the promotion of indigenous languages by giving them proper representation in news, views and dramas. Private sector television channels concentrate mostly on urban areas because they are available only on cable and cables are limited to urban areas. Also, the private media are more commercial, like anywhere else. The state media are the only ones that have a duty beyond commercialism.

The state-run television does programming in indigenous languages, but they are too few as compared to programming in Urdu. Indigenous languages suffer from double jeopardy: 1) few programs of short duration, 2) they are not broadcast in prime time. This means indigenous language programs go on air at a time when few people have spare time to sit in front of TV or listen to radio. Television should produce more programs in indigenous languages and they should be aired in prime time. Languages also get their vitality by having its own film industry. Patronizing the production of films in indigenous languages and documenting local knowledge in local languages can also save the endangered languages from becoming extinct.

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Notes

ⁱA national language is a language that is spoken by the majority of the people within a nation. But in case of Pakistan, a language that is spoken by only 7% people is called national language. Presumably, the early leadership assumed that it could help build a nation out of different nationalities with their own distinct languages and cultures. Being a national language, Urdu is to be the medium of instruction in educational institutions and the different organs of the state would communicate with each other and with the public in Urdu. Also all the official documents, like constitution and legal documents, have to be produced in Urdu--which has not been materialized so far.

ⁱⁱAn official language is a language that has been declared by a government to be the language of the governed nation. English, being an official language of Pakistan, means that this language will be used for official purposes--which again is communication among different state institutions. But, ironically, the constitution of Pakistan is in English, the language and education policies' text is in English. Courts conduct their business in English. In short, Urdu is the language of the 'nation', which I think is still being shaped, while English is the language of the state.