

Language Policy and the Use of English as the Medium of Instruction in Pakistan

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Abstract

Pakistan is linguistically a diverse country. The language policies of successive governments resemble a kind of educational apartheid, where local languages have continuously been neglected. The paper reviews the various language policies in Pakistan, and then, critically examines the existing language policy, and its implications on medium of instruction. The analysis suggests that linguistic cohesion with multi-linguistic policies are needed to adopt a multi-lingual approach in language planning policy in Pakistan. A more pluralist approach to language planning and policy (the mother tongue and regional language for local/regional communication, Urdu for national use, and English for national and international communication) may present a range of implementation challenges. The study is significant because it will shade light on the linguistic situation in Pakistan, and on the government language policy. It will also try to figure out how Pakistan can develop an ecologically valid model for bi/multiliteracy for such complex linguistic context.

Keywords: language policy, linguistic diversity in Pakistan, medium of instructions, Pakistan regional languages, planning, sociolinguistic implications

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Introduction

Linguistically, Pakistan is a diverse country. The National language is Urdu, whose native speakers form just eight percent of the total population, and the official language is English, with just 2.5 percent speakers (Mansoor, 2009.) Pakistan has five other major indigenous languages. Those five main vernacularⁱ languages are: Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Siraiki, and Balushi, but Grimes (2000) and Rahman (2009) have also recognized many other minority languages at the risk of disappearance, mainly in the northern part of the countryⁱⁱ. The choice of a national language in multilingual communities is generally agreed to symbolize the country's unity (see, e.g., Holmes, 2001). In the Pakistani context, the adoption of Urdu as The national language has led to political, linguistic, and social problems. One of these problems was indicated by Jahan, (1972), who pointed out that this policy had generated resistance and violence especially from the other major indigenous language groupsⁱⁱⁱ. The problems of language and ethnicity have been recognized in the Pakistani context by a number of authors. Speakers felt marginalization of their ethnic languages, and is evident in a number of incidents. There has been unrest between Bengali speakers and the government on Urdu as the national language, which led to the split of Bangladesh into a nation of its own in 1971^{iv}. Ethnic language unrest in Pakistan was highlighted by the incidents in January 1971 and July 1972, when Sindhi speakers resented the teaching of Urdu in Sindhi schools^v.

English was supposed to continue as the official language in Pakistan, until settled national, local language replaced it. However, in practice, no national language has emerged to substitute English. Moreover, English is well-established in the domains of power in Pakistan as it has been since partition. The primary reason for this dominant position suits the ruling elite of Pakistan, who prefer English for the sake of modernization, and the country's development. But in fact, it is a policy that is political and ideological, and has been used to suppress other languages' rights. The national and official language choice in Pakistan has always been instrumental in stopping local languages^{vi}. Apart from the official and the national aspect of language in Pakistan, there are also the problems of language and its use in administration, education, higher commerce, and the media, which are also dominated by the use of English^{vii}.

This paper will focus on English as a medium of instruction in Pakistan. Since the partition of India, and Pakistan in 1947, English has been used as the medium of instruction in the elitist private schools. The vernacular languages, Urdu, Sindhi, and Pashto, have been used in government, religious, and non-elitist schools. Although since 1947, successive governments in Pakistan have formulated different language planning policies, their policies remain highly status-orientated. Some governments intentionally supported the division in the medium of instruction, others tried to change from English to Urdu, and others pretended to make English accessible to the masses in government schools, still, all governments have used language as a political agenda to gain the blessing of the groups in their voting campaigns.

The paper will review language policies in Pakistan since independence. Then, it will critically analyze current government policy regarding English as the medium of instruction. It will also shed light on the failure to consider local language seriously, which has resulted in sociolinguistics problems. Finally, it will offer recommendations as to how planning can create national cohesion, and can still maintain language diversity in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Historical Background

Pakistani government language policy has always favored English as the medium of instruction in elite private schools, and restricted the use of vernacular languages (Urdu, Sindh, and Pashto) in government schools. Generally, British colonizers' language policies in the Indian subcontinent have created a divide in the schooling system, in which the children of the British and Indian elites study in English private medium schools and the rest learn in vernacular schools where the medium of instruction was the indigenous local languages. That policy remains in use to date in Pakistan. Pakistani government language policy has been well documented by Rahman, (1996) and Mahboob, (2002).

From 1947 to 1977, Pakistani governments adopted the same policy as outlined above. In 1958, Field Marshal Ayub Khan suggested that the medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools in the public sector should be changed to Urdu, while English should continue to be the medium of higher education. During his rule, the language policy towards the medium of instruction was a status one that prevented the masses from reaching higher education^{viii}. In 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq took over the government in a military coup and tried to make Urdu the medium of instruction in all the Pakistani schooling system, including the elitist private schools which had always adopted English as the medium of instruction. His plan failed, due to the government's inability to provide Urdu texts in all subjects taught in schools. Moreover, elite parents objected strongly to such a policy^{ix}.

The period from 1989–1999 in Pakistan had seen political confusion during the governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. In 1989, Benazir Bhutto had decided to make English compulsory in all schools from Grade one. She wanted to make English accessible to the masses in the government schools from first grade. The implementation of this policy failed because the teaching of English in government schools needed the investment of appropriate research and considerable amounts of money. The government was not able to afford such investment. So, the medium of instruction remained the same in the government schools, (Shamim, 2008).

In 1999, General Pervaiz Musharraf assumed power through a military coup. He attempted to adopt the same policy as the last government, in which English teaching started since grade one in government schools. Still, the policy was not successful, due to local conditions, non-availability of the quality of teaching materials, insufficient investment, and also unavailability of trained English teachers see (Jalal, 2004). Thus, language planning policy has stated its intention of making English the medium of instruction in government schools, but the government had not implemented the policy. (For full details, see Qureshi & Shamim, 2009).

The next section discusses the sociolinguistic controversies towards the medium of instruction divide between both elitist private schools and government schools in the light of current planning policy.

Sociolinguistic Controversies in the medium of instruction

English Language Teaching Inequalities

There are Brief descriptions of the teaching and learning of English in Pakistan Blundell (1989) and Rahman, (2002). In terms of education and achievement in general, and English in

particular, a few in-depth studies on English language teaching at the classroom level have been conducted in government and other lower-performing schools in Pakistan by Shamim (1993, 2006) and Shamim and Allen (2000). The findings of those studies reveal that in government schools, teachers mainly concentrate on “doing a lesson” or “doing grammar,” irrespective of class size. In this regard, Shamim (1993) has said “Doing a lesson” mainly comprised a predictable set of activity types: reading the text (lesson) aloud by the teacher and, or the students; explaining the text, often in Urdu or the local language, giving the meanings of “difficult words” (p. 187) in English and, or Urdu/the local language; and getting the students to do follow-up textbook exercises in their notebooks.

Proficiency of English of The majority of teachers and students, in government schools, is relatively low. Inadequate proficiency in English encourages the teachers and learners to cope by using strategies such as code-switching in the classroom. It promotes rote memory -based approaches for teaching and learning^x. Meanwhile, learners in relatively high-income English-medium schools are more fluent in English than in government schools, probably due to the difference in the range of opportunities available for them to learn and use English both in school and in their homes and communities outside. The teaching methods in these schools are more modern, innovative and, interesting than in the local language medium schools and books are printed abroad, and have pictures and more general knowledge than existing in locally designed textbooks (Rahman, 2004).

Linguistic Genocide and Discrimination towards Local Languages

English is the language of power in the world. It spreads as the language of the colonies of Britain in African and Asian countries (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). When Britain left those colonies, English became even more widespread because of global economic changes and the spread of world media and international commerce. This globalization of the English language has created a “linguistic genocide” (Phillipson, 1992) in many countries where people try to be skillful in English and even ignore their local language. Which is condemned and considered “linguistic imperialism” by Phillipson (1992: p.38) and Tove, (2000), who call English a “Killer language” (p. 46.)

In Pakistan, the government supports the policy of language divide, which has led to drastic consequences for the indigenous languages in the country. The other local languages spoken in the provinces, including Punjabi, Sindhi, Pushto, and Balushi, were either ignored or relegated to an inferior status, and lack institutional support. A case in point is Punjabi: it is the mother tongue of about 50 percent of the citizens of Pakistan, but the government does not include it as a subject at school. Thus the children of Punjabi families cannot read or write in their mother tongue and are cut off from the rich literary heritage of their language. To a lesser extent, this is true of other Pakistani languages as well, a fact which is recognized by Rahman,(2009) and Mansoor (2009). Thus, the English language is the language of the media, quality education, military, commerce, and other powerful institutions, which has led to the marginalization of indigenous languages.

Language Shame

The elitist schools are mostly composed of students from wealthy classes. The medium of instruction in these schools is English, and the books they use are used in British schools, whose contents do not include anything about Pakistani culture. Moreover, Pakistani government

language policy has created a generation who undervalue their local languages and literature (Rahman, 2004). Also, and as Metha, (2003) indicated, elite groups encourage the continuation of English as the medium of instruction in their schools because it differentiates them from the masses; “it gave them a competitive edge over those with Urdu-medium or traditional education; and, above all, was the kind of cultural capital which had snob value and constituted a class-identity marker” (pp. 261-264). Moreover, it is not only the elite who are ashamed of the local languages and their literature, the middle class also feel uncomfortable towards their local languages, mainly in the attainment of education, because of the realities on the ground which favor English in all aspects of power. They are willing to send their children to English medium school apparently because of the status the English language enjoys.

The government supports other types of schools called “non elit private schools,” which have mushroomed all over Pakistan and pretend to be English medium. However, as analyzed by several Pakistani researchers, such as Quddus (1990) and Rahman (1996). These schools, which are mostly used by middle class and low-income parents, use English foreign books, but the methods of teaching English are ineffective, and the teachers have not received adequate training in English language. This policy of creating private schools that adopt English as a medium of instruction for middle and low-class masses has weakened the local languages, and lower their status in their countries, and prevent linguistic diversity in the country.

Mansoor, (1993) has documented a study about the issue of language-shame or being embarrassed about one’s language about the Punjabi language. She indicates that there is a widespread shame among Punjabi people about the use of Punjabi language^{xi}.

Language Death

Rahman (2009) made it clear that negative attitudes towards local languages have a “squeezing effect” (p. 7) on Pakistani languages. According to him, Urdu is safe because it is the national language in Pakistan. Punjabi has the largest speakers in Pakistan, but it suffers from cultural humiliation and abandonment. Sindhi to some extent, is the language of power and education and is the primary language used in rural Sindh. Pashto is an identity marker in Pashto speaking cities, and is a language used in some domains of power in Afghanistan. The language is now primarily mixed with Urdu words. It seems that the language is under pressure. Whereas, Balochi and Brahvi are much smaller languages, and these are frequently under pressure from Urdu. However, there is enough consciousness among educated Balochi speaking classes to protect and preserve their language. Balochi and Brahvi languages are not in power domains; the chances are that these will survive as informal languages in the private field. It seems that city varieties of these languages will be highly Urduified, (Rahman, 2009).

The fifty-plus small languages of Pakistan Rahman (2009) recognized that, mostly in Northern Pakistan, which are under tremendous pressure. The Karakorum Highway, which links these areas to the plains, has put much pressure on these languages. Urdu and English words have already entrenched themselves in “Shina” and “Burushaski,” and, as people immigrate to the cities, they are shifting to Urdu. Even in Karachi, the “Gujrati” language is being abandoned, at least in the written form, as young people seek to be literate in Urdu and English.

In short, under pressure languages of Pakistan are under threat, and any policy which can help them cope with the dangers of internal linguistic pressure, and globalization should be welcomed, for details on this issue (Grimes, 2000).

Access to the Digital World

The digital world functions in English in Pakistan, but not in other local language. The majority of students study in government schools where instruction occurs in vernacular languages. That is why, most students' English skills are weak. Moreover, since there are no localizations of digital programs in Urdu or any local language, the result is that, as Rahman (2007) states: "most Pakistanis are either excluded from the digital world or function in it as handicapped aliens" (p. 1). Besides, since only the wealthy can afford personal computers, and very few people go to educational institutions which use computers, the number of Pakistanis students who benefit from computers is small.

Limited Access to Higher Education

Apart from its linguistic effects, Pakistan's government language planning policy has resulted in a significant social problem, namely that those who get an education in elitist private schools have more highly paid jobs. Globalization increases the power of English and opens up more jobs for those who graduated in English. Jobs are controlled by multinationals, and the dominant language of business is English, which increases the demand for English schooling. English language domination increases the pressure on all the languages of the world, especially the neglected indigenous languages not taught in schools, and not used in good jobs (Mansoor, 2009; Rahman, 2009).

Governments develop language policies, but poorly implement them mainly based on extra-linguistic considerations, and poorly implemented, which increase levels of illiteracy in general in English. The result is the disempowering of the masses by limiting their access to the benefits of English language education. Brock-Utne (2000) asserts that even "the concept of 'education for all' becomes an empty concept, if the linguistic environment of the essential learners is not taken into account" (p. 141). Hence, the urgent need for developing a viable model for bi/multiliteracy and serious implementation strategies in Pakistan is very crucial.

Discussion

Most studies are consistent in their findings that there exist language inequalities, low language proficiency, and poor teaching practices. The local languages are continuously neglected. Successive language policies adopted by previous governments give the impression that the governments by and large supportive towards making the English language instruction widely accessible to the majority of students, at least in government schools. However, the ground realities, implementation of language training of teachers, national literacy and other education and language indicators suggest poor state of affairs of language learning environment in Pakistan.

Conclusion

English is the language of scientific, technological development, and economic advancement. The language policy of successive governments in Pakistan has deprived the masses

of any realistic chance of learning this vital language. Furthermore, the approach resembles educational apartheid, where English is preferred and the local languages not.

For linguistic cohesion in the country, Pakistan needs to adopt a multilingual approach in its language planning policy. English-medium education is essential for individual and national development, which is confirmed by Vavrus (2002), who argues that the sociopolitics of English does not mean the banning of teaching of English in post-colonial countries because of fears of reproducing social inequalities. On the other hand, Pakistan should adopt a bi/multilingualism policy which permits the teaching of local languages as well as English (Clegg, 2007; Imam, 2005, and Mahboob, 2002). A more pluralist approach to language planning and policy, similar to the one undertaken in other contexts such as South Africa, with a focus on learning at least four languages – the mother tongue and regional language for local/regional communication, and Urdu and English for international and international communication, respectively – may present a range of implementation challenges, in addition to those noted above. Implementing a pluralist language education policy in less developed, and developing countries such as Pakistan will be very challenging due to their highly complex linguistic, educational, social and political contexts. There is a need for further research to develop an ecologically valid model for bi/multiliteracy, (Hornberger, 2002), for such complex linguistic contexts.

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Notes:

ⁱ The term vernacular is used in sociolinguistics to refer to languages in multilingual communities which have not been standardized and which does not have official status and which are often used for a relatively narrow range of informal functions, (Holmes, 2001).

ⁱⁱ Some of these languages are already dead (for details see Grimes, 2000) and (Rahman, 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ Rahman (2009) also indicated that “favoring Urdu was for the sake to create a vernacular-medium education that costs less than English-medium education” (p. 8).

^{iv} For full details, see (Jalal, 2004; Bughio, 2006).

^v For full details on this issue see: (Ahmed, 1992; Rahman, 1996, 1997, 2009).

^{vi} For full details on English as an official language in Pakistan and its impact on local languages; see (Hussain, 1979; Rahman, 2002).

^{vii}. See: (Mansoor, 1993; 2010; Malik, 1996; Faroz, 1998).

^{viii} For full details on this planning policy, see, Shamim, (2008).

^{ix} For full details about his planning policy and its failure, see (Haque, 1993; Rahman, 1996; Mahboob, 2002).

^x See Shamim (2008) and Qureshi and Shamim (2009).

^{xi} Parents and teachers in the elitist English-medium schools in Lahore showed their embarrassment about students who speak Punjabi, and there were even policies forbidding students from speaking the language in the schools.

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