THE LANGUAGE OF POWER: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH-MEDIUM DISCOURSE IN PAKISTANI EDUCATION POLICIES

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Abstract
This study investigates how English-medium discourse functions as a tool of power, ideology, and social hierarchy within Pakistan's education-policy documents. Drawing upon Norman Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it explores how language legitimizes English as a symbol of prestige and authority while marginalizing local languages and identities. Using a qualitative analytical framework, the study examines the language used in key education policies from 1972, 1998, 2009, and 2017, focusing on lexical choices, modality, and ideological framing. The analysis reveals that English-medium discourse reproduces colonial power structures by presenting English as a neutral or modern necessity rather than a class-dividing mechanism. While policies claim to promote equality, they implicitly sustain linguistic elitism and educational stratification. The study concludes that Pakistan's language-policy reform must move beyond symbolic inclusion of Urdu and regional languages toward genuine linguistic democratization.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, English Medium, Education Policy, Power, Language Ideology, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a social instrument through which ideology, authority, and inequality are produced and maintained. Within the Pakistani context, language is deeply tied to colonial history, class stratification, and identity politics. Among all languages used in Pakistan's multilingual landscape, English occupies a privileged and contentious position. It is both the language of power and exclusion, symbolizing modernity and progress while simultaneously reinforcing socioeconomic divides. Despite more than seven decades of independence, English continues to dominate the spheres of governance, higher education, and elite schooling, shaping who gains access to prestige, employment, and influence (Rahman 13).

The persistence of English in Pakistan's education system cannot be understood merely as a pedagogical choice; it is a deeply ideological phenomenon. From the colonial policy of Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education* (1835) to modern reforms, English has functioned as an index of "civilization" and "competence." The British legacy of privileging English-medium instruction institutionalized linguistic inequality that successive Pakistani governments have failed or perhaps chosen not to dismantle. Even after independence, policymakers often justified English as a "neutral" medium necessary for modernization and global communication, without interrogating its role in reproducing class hierarchies (Phillipson 51). This ideological persistence has profound implications for education policy. Every major education policy since 1947; whether in the name of national unity, economic progress, or globalization has reinforced the centrality of English while marginalizing Urdu and regional

languages. English-medium schooling, in particular, is presented as a pathway to "quality education" and "international standards." Yet beneath these benign phrases lies a politics of privilege: English-medium education is accessible primarily to the urban upper and middle classes, while the majority of the population remains confined to Urdu- or regional-medium institutions of lower quality (Mansoor 117). This dual system creates two distinct educational publics: one empowered by linguistic capital and another disempowered by its absence.

1.1 Background Study

The linguistic situation in Pakistan is historically rooted in colonial power relations. When the British established their administration in the Indian subcontinent, English became the language of governance, bureaucracy, and higher learning. Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 *Minute on Indian Education* explicitly aimed to create "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." This policy institutionalized linguistic hierarchy, elevating English as a language of enlightenment and relegating indigenous tongues to the status of folklore.

After independence in 1947, Pakistan inherited this colonial linguistic infrastructure. The new state sought national cohesion through Urdu but simultaneously preserved English for official and academic purposes. Over time, English evolved into a symbol of modernity and progress, its mastery considered essential for upward mobility. The rapid expansion of English-medium private schools during the 1980s and 1990s further entrenched social division, producing an elite class fluent in the language of global capital.

This historical continuity makes English in Pakistan a deeply political phenomenon. It is not simply a neutral medium of instruction but a site of ideological contestation between colonial legacy, national identity, and globalization. Understanding how policy discourse legitimizes this hierarchy requires attention to the language of the policies themselves; how they describe, justify, and normalize English-medium education as inevitable.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite recurring claims of reform and equality, Pakistan's education policies continue to reproduce colonial linguistic hierarchies. The persistent glorification of English reflects what Fairclough calls the "naturalization of ideology" (Fairclough 38): privilege becomes common sense. Under the rhetoric of globalization and development, English is portrayed as indispensable for progress, yet the structural inequalities between English-medium and vernacular-medium institutions remain unacknowledged. Consequently, English proficiency functions as symbolic capital determining access to power, knowledge, and employment.

1.3 Research Gap

Most existing studies on language and education in Pakistan focus on classroom dynamics, teacher attitudes, and bilingual competence (Shamim 95; Mansoor 112). However, the *language of policy itself* and the textual discourse that constructs and circulates these ideologies remains underexplored. Rahman's historical work (*Language and Politics in Pakistan*, 1996) outlines political developments but does not employ systematic CDA. The absence of critical analysis of policy language leaves unexamined how official documents themselves sustain linguistic inequality. This study addresses that gap by applying Fairclough's model of CDA to national education policies to reveal how language reproduces power.

1.4 Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this research is to uncover how English-medium discourse in Pakistan's education-policy documents functions as a mechanism of power and ideology. By exposing the linguistic strategies that privilege English, the study seeks to challenge the assumption that English dominance is pedagogically neutral or socially inevitable. Its significance lies in connecting language policy with broader issues of social justice and equity. Revealing how

discourse shapes policy may inform future reforms that genuinely promote multilingual inclusion rather than symbolic representation.

1.5 Research Objectives
1. To examine the linguistic representation of English-medium education in Pakistan's national education-policy discourse.
2. To identify rhetorical and ideological strategies that normalize English as essential for progress and modernization.
3. To analyze how this discourse reinforces or challenges class and power hierarchies within the education system.

1.6 Research Questions
1. How is English-medium education represented linguistically and ideologically in Pakistan's education-policy discourse?
2. What specific linguistic and rhetorical devices, lexical choices, modality, metaphors are used to naturalize English as a symbol of progress?
3. How does this discourse contribute to the reproduction of social and linguistic hierarchies within the education system?

1.7 Overview
By addressing these questions, the present study contributes to critical language research in Pakistan, bridging the gap between sociolinguistic observation and discourse-analytic interpretation. It aims to expose the ideological power embedded in policy language and to encourage the development of educational frameworks that value Pakistan's multilingual heritage. The introduction therefore situates English not simply as a means of instruction but as a discourse of power that continues to shape social consciousness and educational opportunity in post-colonial Pakistan.

2. Literature Review
Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a framework for studying how language enacts and sustains power relations in society (Fairclough 20; van Dijk 18). CDA views discourse as a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by ideology. Wodak observes that language is not only a reflection of social reality but also a means of constructing it (Wodak 23). Thus, examining the discourse of education policies can reveal how linguistic choices legitimize certain ideologies while marginalizing others. In postcolonial societies, English often symbolizes modernity and development but simultaneously reinforces dependence and inequality. Phillipson describes this as "linguistic imperialism," where English functions as a form of cultural domination (Phillipson 47). Likewise, Pennycook argues that English operates as a "discourse of coloniality," producing subjects who internalize Western norms of knowledge and communication (Pennycook 65).

2.2 English in Pakistan's Educational Context
The privileged status of English in Pakistan is a colonial inheritance. During British rule, English became the language of administration and elite education. Post-independence governments retained this structure under the rhetoric of modernization and international competitiveness (Rahman 56). Scholars such as Mansoor and Shamim have noted that English functions as both a linguistic and class barrier, separating elite English-medium schools from underfunded Urdu- or regional-medium institutions (Mansoor 112; Shamim 93).

The 1972 Education Policy was the first to declare Urdu the medium of instruction, yet English remained dominant in higher education and bureaucracy. The 1998 Policy introduced the concept of "bilingual competence" but in practice elevated English proficiency as essential for economic success. The 2009 National Education Policy reaffirmed this by calling English the "language of international discourse." Finally, the 2017 Policy Framework continued the trend,

reinforcing English as indispensable for global integration while offering only symbolic recognition to local languages.

2.3 CDA and Policy Discourse

Fairclough's three-dimensional model, textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice offers a robust framework for analyzing education-policy discourse. The textual level examines vocabulary, grammar, and modality; the discursive-practice level studies how policies are produced and interpreted; and the social-practice level links these discourses to broader social structures (Fairclough 92).

Previous CDA research, such as Wodak and Meyer's study of European Union education policy, shows that educational texts often reproduce neoliberal ideology (Wodak and Meyer 11). In South Asia, Shamim and Rahman have discussed English as a linguistic gatekeeper in Pakistan's schools. However, little work focuses on *policy discourse itself*—the specific wording that constructs English as natural and desirable. This absence underscores the need for a discourse-analytic approach to Pakistan's education-policy language.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study applies Fairclough's model to uncover how English-medium discourse employs lexical choices, modality, and intertextuality to naturalize hierarchy. It also draws from Bourdieu's concept of *linguistic capital*, linking language proficiency to social power (Bourdieu 55). In Pakistan, English operates as symbolic capital: the more fluent one is, the greater the access to privilege, authority, and opportunity.

3. Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis. The objective is interpretive; to reveal how discourse constructs ideological meaning—rather than quantitative.

3.1 Data Selection

Four major national education-policy documents were purposively selected as representing distinct ideological moments in Pakistan's educational development:

1. *The Education Policy of 1972*
2. *The National Education Policy 1998 – 2010*
3. *The National Education Policy 2009*
4. *The National Education Policy Framework 2017 – 2025*

3.2 Analytical Tools

Following Fairclough's model, three dimensions guided textual analysis:

- **Lexical Choices** – how words frame English in relation to progress, science, and globalization.
- **Modality and Evaluation** – how necessity and desirability are expressed through modals such as *must*, *should*, and *need to*.
- **Intertextuality** – references to international standards and competitiveness that legitimize English dominance.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

Each policy document was read and coded for recurring lexical and modal patterns. Excerpts were grouped under major thematic categories: *modernization discourse*, *national unity*, and *educational access*. The linguistic findings were then linked to social ideology, aligning textual detail with Pakistan's sociopolitical context.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

All texts analyzed are publicly available government publications. The researcher maintained critical neutrality, aiming to foster reflection among policymakers and educators rather than political critique.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1 English and the Ideology of Modernization

Across all four policy texts, English is consistently represented as the hallmark of progress and intellect. The 2009 *National Education Policy* asserts that "English shall be introduced as a compulsory subject to ensure access to global knowledge." The syntactic pairing of *English* with *knowledge* constructs the language as the exclusive conduit to learning. Fairclough's concept of *technologization of discourse* explains how technocratic phrasing '*shall*', '*ensure*', '*access*' masks ideological intent behind bureaucratic form (Fairclough 75).

Similarly, the 1972 Policy, while nationalistic in tone, declares that English "shall remain essential for higher learning and international communication." The verb *remain* naturalizes continuity, legitimizing colonial linguistic hierarchy as practical necessity. Thus, English is framed as both modern and traditional: modern because it connects Pakistan to global science, traditional because its authority is inherited.

4.2 Globalization and the Neoliberal Turn

Policies after the 1990s merge linguistic and economic discourse. The 1998 Policy claims, "To participate effectively in the global economy, English proficiency is a necessity." Here, economic participation replaces cultural identity as justification. The noun *necessity* erases debate, presenting English as an economic imperative. By 2017, the policy language fully embraces neoliberalism: *"Global competitiveness," "international benchmarks,"* and *"human resource development"* dominate the text. Wodak and Meyer describe such usage as *discursive colonization* market rhetoric invading education (Wodak and Meyer 14).

Evaluative lexis, *quality*, *standard*, *innovation* and *excellence* frequently collocates with *English-medium*; generating positive semantic prosody. In contrast, *mother tongue* and *regional language* appear with limiting adjectives such as *basic* or *early*, embedding hierarchy at the lexical level.

4.3 English as a Language of Unity and Neutrality

The 1998 Policy portrays English as "a unifying medium for diverse linguistic groups." CDA exposes the paradox: English is accessible mainly to elites yet described as socially cohesive. Van Dijk's concept of *positive self-presentation* clarifies this rhetorical move; the ruling class portrays its own language as beneficial to all (van Dijk 27). The metaphor of *gateway*; "English as the gateway to higher learning" frames access and exclusion simultaneously: a door open only to those with resources.

4.4 The Marginalization of Vernacular Languages

The *2017 Policy Framework*'s statement: "Mother tongue may be used where possible" illustrates how vague modality (*may*) functions ideologically. It conveys permission rather than commitment, allowing policymakers to appear inclusive without redistributing linguistic power. Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi are referenced mainly for "early education" or "cultural enrichment," never as mediums for science or administration. By excluding indigenous languages from higher learning, policy discourse delegitimizes local epistemologies and narrows the horizon of knowledge.

Rahman contends that this stratification "mirrors the hierarchy of classes in Pakistan" (104). English symbolizes the ruling elite, Urdu represents middle-class aspiration, and regional languages mark the marginalized periphery. This hierarchy, embedded in discourse, sustains the nation's social order while cloaking it in progressive rhetoric. Fairclough's framework shows that such linguistic representations are not descriptive but performative; they *produce* the very inequalities they name.

4.5 Policy Contradictions and Discursive Tensions

All four policies exhibit internal contradictions that reveal Fairclough's concept of *interdiscursivity*; the blending of conflicting ideological voices (98). The 1972 document elevates Urdu for national identity yet retains English for "international exchange." The 1998

Policy praises bilingualism but links employability exclusively to English. The 2009 Policy promotes inclusivity while mandating English from Grade I. These contradictions are not accidental; they express Pakistan's struggle to balance nationalism and neoliberal globalization.

The coexistence of patriotic and globalized discourses enables elites to maintain hegemony through consent rather than coercion. By invoking Urdu symbolically while privileging English materially, the state satisfies nationalist sentiment and international pressure simultaneously. CDA exposes this as a rhetorical equilibrium of inequality; the illusion of reform that leaves structural hierarchies untouched.

4.6 The Social Consequences of English-Medium Discourse

The dominance of English carries profound social implications. Bourdieu's notion of *linguistic capital* (59) explains how proficiency becomes convertible wealth. Graduates from elite English-medium institutions monopolize access to bureaucracy, media, and corporate leadership, while vernacular-medium students encounter systemic exclusion. Policies that present English as meritocratic thus obscure its role as gatekeeper of privilege.

Symbolic violence operates when inequality is misrecognized as fairness. When a student internalizes the idea that success depends on mastering English, structural barriers appear as personal failure. The education system thereby reproduces hierarchy while promising mobility. As Pennycook notes, "English not only speaks to the world but speaks for it" (79). In Pakistan, it speaks for the privileged few, scripting whose voices count as educated and whose remain inaudible.

5. Conclusion

This study revealed that English-medium discourse in Pakistan's education policies is not neutral but deeply ideological. Through Critical Discourse Analysis of the 1972, 1998, 2009, and 2017 policy texts, English emerged as a linguistic emblem of progress, globalization, and unity—yet one that conceals structural inequality. Policy language naturalizes English as obligatory (*must, shall*) and associates it with *quality* and *modernization*, while Urdu and regional languages are relegated to limited, symbolic roles.

The findings affirm that the policies reproduce colonial hierarchies under new rhetoric. English proficiency continues to function as cultural capital and a gatekeeper of privilege. Achieving linguistic equity therefore requires shifting from symbolic inclusion to genuine multilingual empowerment in which Urdu and regional languages are recognized as legitimate mediums of learning alongside English. Only through such reform can Pakistan move toward an education system that serves all citizens rather than a linguistic elite.

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