

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE POLICY ON NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN PAKISTAN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Shuaib Muhammad

Subject Specialist English, Department of English, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad

Email: shuaib.uom333@gmail.com

Abdul Hameed Panhwar*

***Corresponding Author**

Professor in English, IELL university of Sindh Jamshoro

Email: hameed.panhwar@usindh.edu.pk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8528-7335>

Saima Gul

BS English Abdul Wali khan University Mardan

Email: myousaf1512021@gmail.com

Waheed Shahzad

Institute of Humanities and Arts, Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology Rahim Yar Khan

Email: waheed.shahzad@kfueit.edu.pk

ORIC ID: 0000-0002-2237-8237, Researcher ID: S-9501-2017,

IRED: AM2020059, Web of Science Researcher ID: HLQ-2923-2023

Abstract

Language policy contributes decisively to the construction of national identity, social cohesion, and political stability in multilingual states. This is particularly the case in Pakistan, where not only do several major languages of the subcontinent coexist (including Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi and Saraiki), but also where the question of establishing an inclusive language policy has been crucial for national integration since gaining independence. This paper critically analyzes the influence of a language policy on national integration in Pakistan. It considers the declaration of Urdu as the national language having brought a long-time tussle between ethnolinguistic divisions and the permanent ascendancy of English in administrative matters into sharp relief, thus fueling historical divides including East Pakistan's secession (now Bangladesh) while leaving behind on-going regional grudges. The study claims that the language policy of Pakistan is on one hand designed as a strategy to show political symbolism towards indebted state character, and on other it addresses sick needs, opening up an implementation-policy gulf. Despite the symbolic claims of Urdu as a nationalizing force, other languages such as Sindhi exert strong ethnolinguistic and power-based roles in people's lives: determining whether they belong or not, their access to resources and opportunities. The paper finally argues that language policy is not just an instrument of statecraft but a powerful weapon for nation-building, impacting both social cohesion and political order. This relationship is key to making sense of the ongoing tensions between centralization and regional autonomy in Pakistan.

Keywords: Language Policy, National Integration, Pakistan, Linguistic Identity, Multilingualism

Introduction

Language policy is crucial to the construction of a national identity, social cohesion and political stability in multilingual countries and Pakistan specifically with the presence of languages such as Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi and Saraiki which are spoken by millions has made it imperative to develop an inclusive language policy for nation building

after independence. Though presented as a factor of national integration in the new state, this generated conflict among ethnolinguistic groups and between provinces themselves (including adding to the Bengali language movement, followed by the call for autonomy by East Pakistan), when it was imposed in 1948 and established as the nation's official language after independence was achieved from British India (Rahman, 2011; Mahboob, 2002). According to academics, the language policies in Pakistan oscillate between political symbolism and pragmatic need and, as a result, there is disconnect between policy intent and implementation (Mansoor, 2004). Urdu and English are the national and administrative languages, and regional ones are powerful identifiers of ethnicity, power relations, access to resources and of a sense of being in relation to the state (Rahman, 1996). Consequently, language policy is a concern not only of education and government but also for questions of nation-building and social cohesion. Understanding the interplay of language policy and national integration is crucial, therefore in order to make sense of persistent centripetal and centrifugal pressures in Pakistan, and a close examination of its language policies reveals itself as it shows that coercive capacity plays a significant role when dealing with issues related to nation-building using such political decisions as well as how these are used or misused facilitate or undermine egalitarian order among diverse communities, thus explaining not just how (or why) state policies are facilitating inclusion/exclusion in the life world of Pakistani citizens but also why they appear the way they do.

Significance of Study

The value of this study offers a scholarly and up-to-date account which contributes to many different fields (sociolinguistics, political science, South Asian studies), by transcending historical narrative to provide an up-close look at power relations and the cognitive underpinnings of language planning programs whose ideologies conveniently lend themselves to analysis via theoretical constructs such as those advanced by Tollefson (1991) thereby elucidating how language policies in the past have functioned as levers of social integration or hegemony while linking policy history with nascent realities for instance, the class-mediating effects ensconced within English. The evidence presented is also pertinent for national policy and cohesion from an explanatory standpoint which not only provides us with empirical recommendations toward a just system upon the model of its own kind in terms of that which suppresses ethno-nationalist sentiments of being a people like those in Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa while respecting certain aspects of unity through diversity particularly when it comes to language (Rahman, 1996).

It also challenges linguistic stratification under education for perpetuating social inequality and promoting segregation through creating "two separate classes" (Manan et al., 2017) and supports mother-tongue-based multilingual education to promote equity and inclusive citizenship. The study also has implications for conflict resolution and inter-provincial harmony. How grievances on the basis of language are grounds for conflict is one important finding of this research, but at the same time it reinforces the importance of symbolic recognition to all major languages in order to build trust. Last but not least, although its primary focus is Pakistani, the study has global implications as a comparative case for other multilingual postcolonial states such as India and Nigeria hit by governance-and peacebuilding-related challenges by re-imagining language policy as an avenue to a more composite polity.

Theoretical Framework

This work is underpinned by a unified theoretical framework which constructs elements of Critical Language Policy (CLP) (Tollefson, 1991), Benedict Anderson's "Imagined

Communities" (1983), and Post-Colonial Theory (Phillipson, 1992) to carry out an analysis that critically dismantles the role of language policy in influencing the Pakistani nation-building enterprise. CLP affords the theoretical point of view and does not accept neutral language planning, analyzing policy as a tool of power that creates linguistic hierarchies leading to social inequality. This stands in opposition to Anderson's concept of "official nationalism," by which the state uses Urdu as a project directed from above toward the creation of a homogeneous national identity just as print-capitalism does in European history. Meanwhile Post-Colonial Theory explains the ever-present colonial shape of things, explaining English continued high status and neo-colonial lunacy in following a colonizer in organizing central government while negating it to an even greater degree by suppressing the regional languages. In weaving in and out of these polemics, the model moves beyond a purely descriptive stance as it critically examines language policy as a field of struggle between state-promoted dreams(visions?) of mononationarian goodwill on one hand, and subnational (language) identities on the other to ascertain how it concretizes potentialities and limits for national integration within our postcolonial multilingual context..

Research Objectives

- i. To critically analyze how language policies in Pakistan have shaped national identity and inter-ethnic relations since independence.
- ii. To evaluate the role of language policy in creating either unity or division among Pakistan's diverse linguistic communities.

Research Questions:

- i. How have specific language policies in Pakistan influenced feelings of inclusion or exclusion among different ethnic groups?
- ii. In what ways has the promotion of Urdu as a national language affected political participation and national cohesion across Pakistan's diverse regions?

Literature Review

This section briefly highlights the studies on the topic of ethnicity, nation, nationalism, language policy and planning generally and present cursory overview of LLP related studies in the context of Pakistan. Ethnicity or ethnic group are not just a group of people sharing similar cultural characteristics and history, but they are the ones who are self-aware of their discreteness among other groups. This idea of common origin and culture which strengthen their sense of groupness and community is not deliberately constructed but rather primordial (Smith, 1996, p.189). In case of 'Nation', it is a socially constructed modern phenomenon (May 2001), through state sponsored policies goaled at formation of a nation within state; nation-state' (Wright, 2000, p.3). Gellner (1994, p.286) defines nationalism, as a process of "striving to make culture and polity congruent, to endow a culture with its own political roof, and not more than one roof at that". He further added that although to define 'culture' is an ambiguous task, it is inevitable that language is an important criterion of culture. As a common language is crucial for instilling the sense of belonging to a nation in order to construct a cohesive and unity society. Gellner (1994) regarded Nationalism as political concept, as it plays an important role in politicization and culmination of nationalism that is essential in the creation of the state (Safran, 1999, p.77). Therefore, in the context of nationalism, language is perceived as an important political tool, which helps in shaping national identity, hence nation-state. Thus, language policy planning, national language planning particularly, is important in creating and maintaining national identity, nationalism and nation-state. The language policy refers to be government's deliberative planning efforts to affect or determine the status, corpus and acquisition of a language in a speech community (Cooper, 1989, Wright 2004). Most of

the states, who got independence after World War 2, associate the concept of “Nation” with a shared common language, which is primarily used to promote and preserve nationalism (Anderson 1991; Simpson, 2007). Language serves to be crucial symbolic marker of a group or individual’s identity, as it is used as a tool to integrate various groups into a single and common identity. After independence, the naïve states often adopt a common national/official language which would help them in nation-building process, in forming nation-states, in order to unify their citizens and promote socio-economic equality within their population (Simpson, 2007). Pakistan upon independence from British colonial rule with partition of sub-continent in 1947, adopted a policy of promoting the Urdu language as the only national language of Pakistan in order to forge common Pakistani identity and promote national unity. Given the Pakistan’s history and social reality, with its diverse multi-ethnic and multi-lingual population, its language policy is highly political and sensitive issue; only initiated by governments (Gill, 2005). With change in political structure, language policies also vary. After independence, two languages were dominant at that time: Bengali; spoken by 56% of the population and Urdu; constituting 3% of total population. For which Mahboob (2002) quoted Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s speech, “...it is for you, the people of this province, to decide what shall be the language of your province. But let make it clear to you that the State Language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language. Anyone who tries to mislead you is really the enemy of Pakistan.’ This approach received severe reaction from Bengali people who were in majority, leading to repeated protests against Urdu as the only national language which eventually leads to the creation of Bangladesh.

Research Design

For this investigation, a qualitative case study design was used. Pakistan was an important case study because of its historically complicated multilingual mosaic and the centrality of language to both political and nationalist movements in this region, including the iconic Bengali Language Movement (Rahman, 1996). The choice for this design was based on the capability to support an in-depth, multifaceted exploration of the phenomenon directly within its real-world context, providing the researcher with opportunities to explore and make sense (see Guba and Lincoln 1989) of complex issues related to policy, power, identity and/integration without suffering from oversimplification.

Data Collection Method

The main data source was the semi-structured interviews. A flexible approach was selected, providing a uniform route of enquiry to be held constant across participants and topic guide categories but with scope for delving more deeply into new or surprising areas which arose during the discussions supporting this. An interview schedule was thoughtfully planned to incorporate a standard introduction in order to secure informed consent, some standard background questions and then an array of key guiding questions created to solicit substantive responses on the participants’ own understanding of language policy, their perceptions of linguistic impact on identity and integration as well as personal or observed experiences of being included linguistically or excluded.

Population and Sampling

The target participants were people who, because of their profession and social roles, had extensive exposure to the negotiated relationship between language, education policy and identity politics in Pakistan. These were educationists, policymakers, linguists, journalists, and cultural activists. Twenty participants were interviewed - this was considered a large enough sample to reach data saturation, after which no new data's identity will yield new thematic insights (Guest et al., 2006). A mixed purpose and snowball sampling approach was employed:

the study initially involved public experts, who in turn nominated or introduced other knowledgeable individuals to facilitate access to an informed network of participants.

Data Analysis

Interview data were closely analyzed utilizing a systematic staged approach to thematic analysis based on that described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The verbatim transcribed audio recordings then received an in-depth reading of the textual data. Initial codes were subsequently developed by deductively identifying salient features from the entire data set. These codes were then compiled and categorized into possible themes, which were further scrutinized and revised to reflect the coded data and the entire corpus. Finally, every theme was rigorously defined and labeled prior to being used to construct a unified analytical account that was supported by anonymized verbatim extracts from participant interviews.

Ethical Considerations

Rigorous ethical measures were strictly followed during development of the study to presentation. Written informed consent was obtained from each individual before the start of interviews, explaining the objective and content of research and their rights to participate or refuse in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity were key; any identifiable details were erased from the transcripts, and a pseudo-name was given to each participant in the final report. Recordings and transcribes were maintained in a password protected directory and the recorded data was destroyed upon finalization of the transcripts. The researcher was sensitive to the fact that the topic could be emotionally charged and had a plan to stop or even abandon an interview if a participant showed signs of becoming upset, because ultimately it was important for participants' psychological welfare during the course of interaction.

Analysis

1. Language Policies and Identity Formation

The interviews analysis indicate that it is the policies of language in Pakistan to which national and ethnic assertions are pegged. Some 75 percent of the respondents (15 out of 20) said language possesses a strong symbolic value and that it determines how people view themselves within the context of nation. Several respondents also said that the state's forcible universalization of Urdu as a symbol of Pakistani identity has overprovided local identities with regional cultural names, particularly in provinces like Sindh, KP and Balochistan. Respondents from these areas stressed that local languages, which are closely linked to cultural, historical and social experiences they have lived through, find no visibility in the national-level dialogue. There is now a feeling that Pakistani identity was being homogenized through Urdu, and regional identities were either twisted or buried. So, it is apparent that language policy in Pakistan does not simply relate to administrative decisions; it fallout into identity landscape by communication of which languages, and appurtenant which identities are privileged at the level of homeland.

2. Experiences of Linguistic Inclusion and Exclusion

A recurrent discourse in interviews is that participants from non-Urdu speaking backgrounds feel linguistically marginalized. Some 85% of respondents (17 out of 20) said they had directly or indirectly suffered from exclusion on the basis of their language. These included struggling with the bureaucracy, feeling inadequate in academic and professional arenas because of their poor Urdu and suchlike. They said that they, being from Balochistan and rural Sindh, are discriminated against or judged on the basis of their language. Many of them were reflective about how they felt they needed to work harder for acceptance or respect in Urdu-dominated spaces. These stories indicate that language is a border which places those who comfortably fit within national linguistic standards on one side and those who are separatist "foreigners" inside

their own country on the other. There is no doubt that linguistic inclusion is limited, and exclusion a frequently lived experience for regional language speakers.

3. Urdu as a Tool of Integration and Control

Opinions about Urdu being National language of Pakistan – few interesting ones the responses to the topic that I am presenting below reflect much diversity and thus add an interest value! Out of 20 students, approximately 60% (12) believed that Urdu creates a sense of harmony as it serves as a common denominator in linguo-culturally multifaceted nation. They felt that Urdu was inclined/responsible in promulgating national over local identity. However, 70% (14 out of 20) respondents also felt that Urdu was used as a tool for the concentration of political and cultural power, thereby leading to depalitization of not speaking ethnic groups. Some also said that the emphasis on Urdu disadvantages speakers of languages spoken more exclusively in other parts of Pakistan, such as among Punjabi, Pashtun, Sindhi and Balochi people who are already frequently overlooked for urban elites with doggedly learned (read: book) Urdu to offer. This ambivalent stance towards Urdu highlights the ambiguity of language planning in multilingual states: while on one hand a language such as Urdu could be harnessed to promote national solidarity, its manipulation also becomes too convenient a means for linguistic-political repression, when more integrative policies do not hold sway.

4. Absence of Regional Languages in Education and Governance

An unmistakable dominant feeling is that of complete negation at the level of education and Government in regional languages. Almost 90% emphasized that regional languages have no or a minimal role in higher studies, administration and communication as such. Of these, little or no education in the mother tongue is provided to their children after early childhood schooling and not always then. The participants generally condemned the education system for promoting Urdu and English at a cost to native cultures. This lack of support, according to some, undermines linguistic diversity and produces low academic marks from students who are forced into schooling in a language they do not speak. A corollary of the findings is that non-representation of regional languages in formal politics reproduces or enables language hierarchical orders and social inequality.

5. Language Policy and Political Participation

The interviews also indicate that language policy affects political participation and activism. Three-quarters of our respondents (15 out of 20) reported that they encounter obstacles related to language primarily of Urdu domination that deny them access to political information and public services, as well as spaces on the street level up to the civic. Rural and language-diverse voters felt that political oratory, government notifications and election material were not meant for them as non-Urdu speakers found no mention in political vocabulary. Also, as few responded that not even the regional languages are communicated with political (even low participation & impact on voting/campaigns/community activities and etc.) These discoveries affirm, language is not simply an instrument of communication but rather that there are implications for democratic inclusion, who can fully participate in national level processes of decision making as a citizen.

6. Demand for Inclusive and Multilingual Language Policies

Nearly all respondents (95%, 19 of the 20) were very much in support for inclusivist language policies which mirror Pakistan's linguistic diversity. Suggestions from the respondents were focused on MNBE reforms, provincial autonomy (language planning and administrative) unit in media and education use of regional languages. Several others remained insistent that promoting regional languages alongside Urdu would not detract from but rather enhance national unity by ensuring that every speech community felt respected and a part of the whole.

They said it was being practiced in a number of successful, multilingual countries and Pakistan had to follow suit. Multiculturalism There's a pretty broad consensus that multiculturalism, and particularly multilingualism can contribute towards a culture which is more united, more just and culturally richer.

Findings

The critical analysis suggests that language policy in Pakistan has actually undermined the process of national integration rather than facilitating it. Historical enquiry reveals that policy always followed an ideological crusade for a monolithic national identity, and the top-down imposition of Urdu as not just one amongst many nationalist symbols, but 'the' national symbol is no exception, which was from day one designed to marginalize other major languages relegated to the status of others. This has led to a layered system of citizenship, the haves who are linked powerfully via English, while Urdu provides the link between culture and bureaucracy in local terms and other languages such as Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi push to be heard but are cast aside by larger structure of second-class citizenship. This linguistic pecking order come out with full violence in the secession of Bangladesh, based on language as its primary trigger, and is still a source that drives ethno-nationalist resentments and political discontent in other provinces like Sindh or Balochistan. Moreover, the education system was revealed as a site of struggle, with an overtly multi-level structure which reproduces social inequality in practice and deepens one's sense of linguistic and cultural marginalization from early on.

Discussion

These findings provide robust support for the study's theoretical orientation, which frames language policy as constituting a core mechanism of state power in line with Critical Language Policy. The state's project was not a neutral administration of this, but an active project to make the specific linguistic elite in fact and law be the basis for power, making each into aiming at obtaining their own privileges in a process that fragmented national unity. In Benedict Anderson's eyes, the state project to manufacture a unitary "imagined community" in Urdu backfired disastrously, it fanned "counter-imaginings", cementing sub-national identities with regional languages as their base. This state of affairs is fundamentally saturated with a post-colonial paradox which involved Pakistan discarding the English language in rhetoric and adopting its colonial role on a smaller scale, by installing Urdu as a new national power-language whilst neglecting indigenous language peripheries. Finally, the evidence strongly indicates that assimilationist policies themselves have contributed to betraying national integration true cohesion can only be built on diversity rather than being crushed by linguistic homogenization.

Conclusion

To conclude, the present study demonstrates that the persistent failure to formulate and implement a progressive and inclusive language policy constitutes one of the most consequential yet avoidable impediments to national integration in Pakistan. The sustained pursuit of a monolingual ideological framework has not fostered unity; rather, it has contributed to sociopolitical fragmentation by alienating substantial segments of the population and reinforcing structural inequalities. Such a policy orientation has generated recurring tensions, particularly in linguistically diverse regions, thereby weakening the state's capacity for inclusive integration.

A sustainable pathway toward national cohesion necessitates a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualization of nationhood from an assimilationist model grounded in linguistic uniformity to an accommodative framework that recognizes and institutionalizes diversity.

This transition requires explicit acknowledgment of the limitations embedded in earlier language policies and a deliberate commitment to addressing their long-term consequences. Concretely, it calls for the adoption of a constitutionally grounded and practically operational model of official multilingualism, wherein major regional languages are systematically integrated into education, governance, and public communication.

National unity, therefore, cannot be secured through the coercive elevation of a single language to hegemonic status; rather, it must be cultivated through equitable linguistic inclusion and the recognition of diversity as a foundational national asset.

References

- Ali, A. (2018). *Language planning and education in Pakistan: Policies and practices*. Routledge.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Cooper, R. L. (1989). *Language planning and social change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Gellner, E. (1994). *Encounters with nationalism*. Blackwell.
- Gill, S. K. (2005). Language policy in Pakistan: Multiple motivations. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 15(1), 1–14.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Liddicoat, A. J., & Baldauf, R. B. (Eds.). (2008). *Language planning and policy: Language planning in local contexts*. Multilingual Matters.
- Mahboob, A. (2002). No English, no future: Language policy in Pakistan. *Journal of International Affairs*, 56(1), 127–134.
- Mahboob, A. (2002). No English, no future: Language policy in Pakistan. In S. G. Heggins & A. F. He (Eds.), *Power, prestige, and positioning in global Englishes* (pp. 43–56). Hong Kong University Press.
- Manan, S. A., David, M. K., & Dumanig, F. P. (2017). Ethnolinguistic crisis and the English language in Pakistan. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 16(4), 215–226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2017.1328286>
- Mansoor, S. (2004). The status and role of regional languages in higher education in Pakistan. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25(4), 333–345.
- May, S. (2001). *Language and minority rights: Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of language*. Longman.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford University Press.
- Rahman, T. (1996). *Language and politics in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.
- Rahman, T. (2011). *From Hindi to Urdu: A social and political history*. Orient Blackswan.
- Safran, W. (1999). Nationalism and ethno-nationalism: Some conceptual reflections. *International Social Science Journal*, 51(162), 77–85.
- Shohamy, E. (2006). *Language policy: Hidden agendas and new approaches*. Routledge.
- Simpson, A. (2007). *Language and national identity in Asia*. Oxford University Press.
- Smith, A. D. (1996). *National identity*. University of Nevada Press.
- Tollefson, J. W. (1991). *Planning language, planning inequality: Language policy in the community*. Longman.
- Wright, S. (2000). *Community and communication: The role of language in nation state building and European integration*. Multilingual Matters.
- Wright, S. (2004). *Language policy and language planning: From nationalism to globalization*. Palgrave Macmillan.