

Language politics and role of English in Pakistan

Tariq Umrani

Faraz Ali Bughio

Abstract

This paper highlights the importance and status of English in Pakistan and argues that English is used as a gatekeeper to prevent the access of common man to the elite club of power and prosperity. This paper discusses the central role English plays in language politics in Pakistan; the place of English contrasting with Urdu (the national language) and regional languages is also discussed. Furthermore, this paper briefly discusses the parallel system of education in Pakistan. Finally, it is suggested that quality education in English can provide better economic opportunities to the people of Pakistan.

Key Terms: Status of English, language and power, language and politics

Introduction

English is the symbol of status in Pakistan; the ability to speak and write English opens many career opportunities and can be seen as a stepping stone in life. English as the language of power has been used to politically dominate masses, whereas English can be used to empower and liberate the downtrodden people of Pakistan. Shamim (2008) argues that “English is considered the vehicle for achieving modernization, scientific and technological development and economic advancement for self and the country; in short, for improving one’s life chances”. Haque (1982) emphasizing the importance of English in official working argues that “English in Pakistan is more the language of Macaulay than of Shakespeare”. He argues that working of federal and provincial governments, proceeding of courts, and communication in the field of science, technology, information, industrial and business sectors is carried out in English.

Haque (1982) also claims that the influence of English has also helped Pakistan play a vital role in the world diplomacy; especially in the third world and Islamic countries. The importance of being educated in English can be gauged from the fact that in last two decades private non-elite English medium schools have appeared in large numbers all over Pakistan, even in the small towns; English medium education has become synonymous with quality education (Shamim, 2008).

English is the official language of Pakistan, it is the language of civil and military bureaucracy, and federal and provincial civil service examinations are conducted in English (Haque 1982; Rahman 2001). Rahman (2008) argues that Pakistan is a multilingual country having six major languages. According to the 1998 population census (cited in Rahman 2008) Punjabi is spoken by 44.15 % of the total population, Pashto 15.42%, Sindhi 14.10%, Siraiki 10.53%, Urdu 7.57% and Balochi 3.57%. Besides these major languages some 57 minor language are also spoken throughout the country. It is argued that from 1846 to 1947 Pakistan has inherited certain policies of language and education from British India. When Sindh was conquered in 1846 and Punjab was conquered in 1849 by the British, it was allowed that madrassas would be run by Muslim *Ulema* (Islamic Scholars). There were public schools for poor children where Urdu was the medium of instruction, except in Sindh where Sindhi was the medium of instruction. It can therefore be said that the British have left behind a legacy of three parallel education systems on the basis of socio-economic classes. Rahman (2001) elaborates that English is the medium of instruction in “elitist schools”, private and expensive English medium schools, and indirectly state-run cadet colleges. English is taught as a subject in state-controlled “vernacular medium” schools and to a very small number of students in Islamic seminaries (Madrassas). There are three major types of English medium schools in Pakistan. They are: (1) state-influenced elitist public schools, (2) private elitist schools and (3) non-elitist schools. The madrassas provide education for very poor and rural children, the vernacular medium for working class and lower middle class and English medium schools for middle and upper middle classes (Rahman, 2001). These English medium schools charge very high tuition fees, only affordable by the rich, and prepare students for Cambridge ‘O’ and ‘A’ level examinations. Besides, the private sector universities of the country attract a significant number of students because their medium of instruction is English and they provide elitist infrastructure and facilities such as well-equipped and air-conditioned class rooms and libraries (Rahman 2001). Apart from these expensive elitist

schools there are non-elitist English medium schools which charge comparatively less as a fee but do not provide the same level of quality education and good English. They are growing for commercial reasons rather than better education.

The status of English in Pakistan has always been superior compared to other local languages. Due to its international scope it is used as a visa to enter international bureaucracy and business. Even those who support the 'Urdu lobby' try to send their children to English medium schools, if they can afford it financially. This can be seen as a sort of investment, ensuring cultural predominance and distinction from non-elites, facilitating the entry of children in positions of power and privilege and opening the possibilities of entering the international, very highly paid, job market (Rahman, 1997, Tamim, 2014). Therefore, English was and will remain the most sought after language in Pakistan. The importance of English is immense compared to other provincial languages. It is "marker of class, urbane upbringing affluent family background sophistication and gave psychological and social advantage to those who were fluent in it. Thus not only upper middle class but even feudal and tribal chiefs from illiterate families sought to educate their children in the elitist English schools" (Rahman, 1997).

Private schools offer 'quality' education to elite children in highly resourced classrooms through the medium of English. The outcomes for these children, who also have acquisition-rich home environments, are higher levels of proficiency in English compared to those children studying in poorly resourced classrooms who have little or no exposure to English outside the 30–35-minute English class every day in school.

(Shamim, 2011)

This section highlights the importance of English in Pakistan and shows that proficiency in English language is very essential for high-paid jobs both in government and private sector. This discussion also shows that parallel system of education in Pakistan is the legacy of British Raj. The parallel system of education favours the rich and elite, and the majority of people in Pakistan cannot afford quality English medium education. The following section presents the discussion on language politics in Pakistan.

Critical Review

Language politics in Pakistan

English has been at the center of language politics in Pakistan, throughout the political history of Pakistan and there has been continuous debate on the status of English as the official language, with efforts to replace it with Urdu. This problem has political dimensions; it is a power struggle, on the one hand, between English speaking elite and supporters of Urdu, and on the other hand, between supporters of Urdu and supporters of provincial or regional languages (Rahman, 1997). Joseph (2006) argues that “language determines who stands where in social hierarchy, who can be entrusted with power and responsibility. There is further linguistic-political dimension in how those in power or desiring power deploy language in order to achieve their aims”.

English is seen as the language of power and status in Pakistan, whereas Urdu is considered the national language and symbol of national unity. Supporters of Urdu (called ‘pro-elite’ by Rahman, 1997) want English to be replaced by Urdu and used in all official business and communication as well as the medium for instruction in academic institutions. Urdu is the mother tongue for 7.57% of people in Pakistan, and despite the official patronage of Urdu, English has remained the language of power and influence in Pakistan and its status still remains unchallenged. While pro-elite supporters seek a greater role for Urdu in the name of national interest and unity, ethno-nationalists want regional languages to flourish and to be used as the medium of instruction and official business in their respective provinces (Rahman, 1997).

Khalique (2007) argues that English is the language of the upper class society. It is used for official correspondence and as a status symbol, whereas Urdu is used for the purpose of entertainment and journalism and widely used by the populace. The official language of the province will be chosen by its people. However, Urdu will serve as the language that could bridge the gap between the people of different states (Jinnah, 1989 cited in Khalique 2007). Shamim (2011) argues that there is no systematic discussion and policy analysis regarding the need for English in Pakistan. She maintains that low literacy level and commonly held perception that English is indispensable for progress influence people’s decision about the medium of instruction and the age/level when their children should be taught through English.

Since independence in 1947, the official policy has been to promote Urdu, as an official language. It is used as a “symbol of national identity and integration and to help avoid regional autonomy and separation” (Mansoor, 2004:335). Khalique (2007) recalls that with the formation of ‘The Commission on National Education’ commonly called the ‘Sharif Commission’ in 1959, it was decided that Urdu and Bangla will be the medium of instruction from class six (age 11-12) onwards. The Commission has also recommended that until Urdu becomes the substitute for English, English would continue to be used for the purpose of higher education and research. However, on the other hand a new issue arose in the province of Sindh where Sindhi was already the medium of instruction. Sindh felt that this was a serious blow to their language, culture and heritage. The decision was reversed in the province of Sindh in favor of the Sindhi language but this created a gap between the Sindhi and Muhajir (migrants from India whose first language is Urdu) communities of the Sindh province. According to article 251(3) of the Constitution (cited in Khalique 2007), Sindhi was promoted as an official language of the province of Sindh but this situation resulted in Sindhi-Muhajir riots in Sindh. Little could be done in any real sense to give Sindhi its official status. However, Urdu was adopted by provisional governments as the medium of instruction and as an official language in the province of Balochistan and North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) but at the federal level and in elitist institutions English remained supreme. Consequently the under-privileged continued to fighting over language and culture whereas the elite class continued to rule in English (Khalique 2007). Jabeen et al, (2010) argue that policy of making Urdu the official language of Pakistan led to the secession of East Pakistan. They argue:

All native languages of Pakistan should be given liberty to flourish and this will ensure the preservation of our languages, culture, unity and pride by ensuring respect among the various ethnic and distinctive groups of Pakistani nationhood.

(Jabeen et al, 2010:122).

Despite this pro-Urdu policy, English continues to grow and is considered the language of power in Pakistan. English has remained official language and the language of upper class; and it is the key to most influential and high paid jobs in Pakistan (Mansoor 2004; Rahman 1996). However, while Urdu flourishes because of official support, regional languages i.e. Punjabi,

Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Siraiki, are neglected and do not get official patronage in education, at any level, but especially in higher education. The constitution of Pakistan (1956, 1962, 1973) clearly states in article 251 (clause 3) that “without prejudice to the status of 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” (Mansoor, 2004: 335).

The education and language policies of Pakistan are influenced by the interests of the upper class and the ruling elite. This lobby has been using several ways to strengthen its hold upon society, by using language politics in the name of religion and other ethnic ideals. One of the serious consequences of the strengthening of English and privatization of education in English is that it has led to “ghettoization”. The weak and poor classes remain underprivileged and are denied the access to English and good education. Hence this becomes a significant hurdle between the poor and progress (Rahman 2008). Shamim (2011) argues that in order to address the language apartheid in Pakistan, bilingual educational programmes, in Urdu and English, should be developed. She maintains, in Pakistan, we need a dialogue to develop a language policy which ensures the voice of all stakeholders and provides equal opportunities for both individual and national progress. Shamim (2011) argues:

The terms ‘Urdu medium’ and ‘English medium’ in Pakistan are heavily loaded with economic and socio-cultural connotations. Hence their use denotes more than just the medium of instruction through which a person has studied in school or in an institution of higher education. In fact, a person with an ‘English medium’ education is considered superior in all dimensions compared to someone with an Urdu medium educational background. Thus we seem to be moving towards a state of language apartheid.

(Shamim, 2011)

This discussion shows that Pakistan’s language policy and the resultant language politics have created distrust among the linguistic communities of Pakistan and deprived the masses of quality English medium education. The above discussion underlines two main reasons for the failures of language policy in Pakistan: 1) promotion of Urdu as the national language and, 2) retaining English as the official language and hence mandatory for all important jobs. Consequently, regional languages of Pakistan have been

ignored and their speakers have developed prejudice against the pro-Urdu establishment (Mansoor, 2004). The retention of English as an official language policy, without the provision of free and quality education for masses, has limited the fruits of English for the privileged class.

English as language of dominance or liberation

In terms of the status and role of English in Pakistan an analogy can be drawn with India, the fast developing and powerful neighbor of Pakistan. English has assumed an important role in the political milieu of present-day India, where speakers of minority languages use English to curtail the influence of majority languages both at the Centre and State government level. As an example, in Central government non-Hindi speakers use English to stop the dominance of Hindi; in the same way, speakers of minority languages in certain states use English to stop the dominance of majority languages (Annamalai, 2004).

English, as the language of power, has become an effective mode of communication for the down-trodden, lower castes and minority people. They use English to express their grievances and register protest, because they think English makes their voice heard. “The powerless believe that they can attain a position of power using the power of English” (Annamalai, 2004). In Pakistan, English is supported by the speakers of regional languages as well. It is argued that in Punjab province, Punjabi is considered the “sign of rusticity, lack of sophistication and lack of good breeding”. Other provincial languages have managed their sense of prestige and identity amongst their local languages but still they acknowledge English as the language of power and progress. They believe English is the language of technology and knowledge (Rahman 2001).

Mansoor (2004:339), in a research study, finds out that the majority of students who had Urdu as their medium of instruction were from public sector institutions. Those who had English as their medium of instruction came from private sector institutions. In the same survey, “in terms of attitudes to languages, the results in our study show that all students (male and female) prefer English medium education to Urdu medium at all levels and display a low preference for regional languages as a medium of instruction”. In the same study (Mansoor, 2004:345) it is proposed that English, considering its global importance, should be the medium of instruction in higher education, early education should start in the mother tongue and primary education should be imparted in regional languages.

It can be seen that at a grass-root level, people realize the importance of English and want their children to have a quality education in English (Rahman, 2001; Mansoor 2004). However, it is paradoxical that successive governments have retained English as the official language but have failed to provide equal opportunities of language learning to the general populace. It is argued that far from removing inequality in academic education, the state is responsible for creating parallel systems of education, one for the rich elite and other for the masses. Rahman (2001:248) maintains that “English, always an elite preserve in South Asia, is still available to the elite of money and power. The common people find difficulty in having access to it”. Pakistan has a population of approximately 180 million and the population which can comprehend, write and speak in English is less than two percent. If government cannot provide equal opportunities of quality education in English, Urdu should replace English at the federal level and other national languages at provisional and district levels to manage the affairs of the state and to include more people in decision making. If English continues as the official language of Pakistan, all Pakistanis must be given equal access to good quality education in English. Joseph (2006) argues that opting for a larger language on account of its educational and economic benefits is a politically neutral choice. Rahman (2001) suggests that English should not only remain the medium of instruction in “elitist schools” but it should be taught to all children in state-run schools in the same manner. If this is not possible English should be replaced. Individual mother tongues should be compulsorily taught in schools and colleges, besides Urdu. Urdu should also become the main language of academic discourse and the medium of instruction for humanities, physical and social science subjects, and more at higher levels of education. Shamim (2011) argues that existing resources for English language teaching and learning are inadequate considering the ever-growing demand of English in Pakistan. She argues that the question whether to teach English or not has become obsolete and now the debate focuses if all subjects should be taught through English.

A recent study (Tamim, 2014) shows the impact of English and Urdu medium education on learners’ academic and personal lives, career opportunities and social status. The study (Tamim, 2014) investigates the differential impacts of languages in education on participants’ freedom of opportunity for wider participation and access in the multilingual context of Pakistan. The data for this study is gathered from 32 participants (16 final year secondary school students and 16 their same-sex five-to-six years older siblings). The pairs of siblings were selected from seven schools, four

private and three governments, from Lahore and Karachi.

The main findings of the study (Tamim, 2014) shows that the government school graduates (GSG) had not learnt English by the end of secondary school education. Urdu medium is considered as a stigma and Urdu medium learners as ill-mannered. Urdu medium students are not encouraged in co-curricular and sports activities. Regional languages are not encouraged in English medium schools. In higher education good students from government schools feel constrained and do not participate in classroom discussions because of poor English. The participants of the study feel that linguistic capital of Urdu has little value at higher education level. Private School Graduates (PSG) are confident, they lead discussions in the classroom and are part of important social networks both inside and outside the classroom. One GSG from lower middle class background secures the career of her choice and all other abandon HE without completion. One GSG admits that from job interview to office presentations and communication English is very important. PSG complete HE successfully and feel that their communication skills they can achieve anything. The findings of this recent study (Tamim, 2014) are briefly reproduced to show the impact of parallel system of education in Pakistan. This study (Tamim, 2014), shows that the medium of instruction does not only affect learners' career opportunities but their socio-psychological identities are also shaped by the choice of language in education.

Conclusion

English has been used to dominate and rule over the general population as suggested earlier and, if English has to remain the official language, equal opportunities must be provided to all people to be educated in English. The elite governing class of Pakistan has deliberately denied opportunities of quality education, fearing that an enlightened and educated populace would threaten the status quo and they would lose their grip on power. It is not an accident that 66 years after independence, Pakistan does not have either the infrastructure or policies to improve the lives of its people through education. Quality education in English has been, by design, made expensive and thus inaccessible for the poor. Access to English language learning and quality education can change lives in Pakistan by providing knowledge empowerment and economic opportunities. English has been used to dominate, but considering the global importance of English, it can also be used to liberate the underprivileged people of Pakistan.

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