

**Urdu Language and the Issue of Regional and National Identities: Looking into the  
Politics of Language in Pakistan**

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**Statement**

I certify that all material included in this study which is not my own work, has been collected from reliable sources and has been identified and acknowledged from the department concerned; and that no material is included for which I am liable to plagiarism or for which a degree has already been conferred upon me.

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Rukhsana Anjum

*Abstract*

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the issues relating to the survival of regional languages in the face of multilingualism, globalization and the ever increasing use of Urdu and English language, It also aims to determine factors due to which Pakistanis could not achieve their national identity on the basis of Urdu as national language; instead English took the place of national language which exercised adverse impact not only on Urdu, but also on the regional languages and culture equally. Data is collected through questionnaire, group interviews and by document analysis and is analyzed by using qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques. The plan includes unfolding power politics on the basis of language resulting in elimination of regional language and culture. The results show that modernization, globalization and lack of effective language policy planning and practice are the factors responsible for the loss of culture and regional varieties of language; and if timely steps are not taken we will be deprived of our cultural heritage.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. The Purpose of the Study**

In a conference on “THE STATE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES: CURRENT SCENARIO AND EMERGING TRENDS” held in Islamabad, on September 26-27, 2003; Joan L.G. Baart in his article “Sustainable development and the maintenance of Pakistan’s indigenous languages” stated:

*“All around the world, indigenous cultures and languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. Pakistan itself is the home of some seventy different languages, many of which can be further divided into various distinct dialects. In Pakistan, too, the future viability of many of these unique language varieties is seriously endangered”.*

It is true in case of Pakistan that indigenous languages are giving way to more dominant languages like Urdu and English, and also there is a situation when native languages are being maintained in the face of pressure from a more powerful language (powerful languages in the sense that they are used by the elite class who usually are handling political affairs of the country as well).

This situation on one hand is creating immense problems, grievances, deprivation, anger, and prejudice among the very sensitive and educated sects of Pakistani society in particular and among the masses in general; and on another hand, this deprivation has spread a wave of enlightenment and awareness among the masses to raise their voice to protect their indigenous language and indigenous culture. It also came into the observation of the researcher that the Governmental institutions responsible for language planning activities, either decline to monitor the scenario or else they have their own preferences. While the whole situation demands an active observation and vigilant action to identify facts and take apt measures in this regard. This is why the researcher felt the need to study the scenario in

order to have a better understanding of the nature of problem in order to move towards practical solution of the problem.

## **1.2. Contextual Background**

In the capacity of English language teacher, and living in a diglossic society the researcher is associated with the phenomenon of language status and language change which is occurring in our society and the traces can be found out in our young generation who display language behaviours through their speech and language use which is a mixture of Urdu and English; it would not be wrong to say that neither it is pure Urdu nor pure English. In day do day communication the researcher comes across students, parents, administrators, policy planners and people from different walks of life and the researcher is overwhelmed with the feelings that drastic and rapid changes are taking place in regard to language use, language loss and language spread; language use with reference to Urdu and English, language loss regarding indigenous languages of Pakistan, and language spread with special reference to English language due to which even the use and role of Urdu has been overshadowed and there is a likelihood that the use of Urdu is diminishing imperceptibly and if this situation continues, the day is not far when Urdu itself will be the part of history.

Pakistan is a multilingual country with a population (in 1994) of about 128 million. There are four major nationalities in Pakistan: the Punjabi, Sindhi, Pakhtun, and Baluchi (Bangladesh, the former East Pakistan, has been left out here). To this list, the Siraiki was added in the 1960s and an effort to make Muhajir a nationality began in the 1980s. The official point of view is that there is one Pakistani nation united by the bonds of Islam and the national language, Urdu. It also came to researcher's observation that national language Urdu which is claimed to be the identity marker of the whole Pakistani nation is actually the territory of native speakers only who constitute about 7% of the country's population. Any

other person speaking Urdu throughout his life remains a non-Urdu speaker; on the other hand, he is doing so at the cost of his mother tongue and loss of his regional culture (as the children are not learning/ using their mother tongue in middle class and upper strata of society). Hence the researcher was inspired to investigate the issue with all its solemnity so that the pace of losing regional languages and cultural diversity may be halted by suggesting effective measures in the direction of language maintenance preserving our diversity of culture.

*Map of Pakistan*



*Figure:1.1*

### **1.3. Loss of Language and Culture: Current Scenario**

The loss of languages around the world is connected to the socio-economic difficulties faced by local communities, and these difficulties in turn are connected in one way or the other to the economic development in modern scenario. Prior to discussing the issues in detail, let's have a look upon the following details about the population and the use of different languages in rural and urban areas in order to have a better look at the language issues in Pakistan:

Table: 1.1 Population of Pakistan

Total Population:	162,419,950 (2005 estimate)
<b>Population growth</b>	
» Population growth rate:	2.03 percent (2005 estimate)
» Projected population in 2025:	228,822,199 (2005 estimate)
» Projected population in 2050:	294,995,104 (2005 estimate)

**Population density:** 209 persons per sq km (2005 estimate), 540 persons per sq mi (2005 estimate)

- **Urban/rural distribution**

» urban: 34 percent (2003 estimate)

» rural: 66 percent (2003 estimate)

- **Largest cities, with population**

» Karachi: 9,269,265 (1998)

» Lahore: 5,063,499 (1998)

» Faisalabad: 1,977,246 (1998)

» Rawalpindi: 1,406,214 (1998)

» Hyderabad: 1,151,274 (1998)

- **Linguistic and Ethnic groups**

» Punjabi:	48 percent
» Pashtun:	13 percent
Sindhi:	12 percent
» Saraiki:	10 percent
» Urdu:	8 percent
» Other:	9 percent

- **Languages**

- » Urdu (official)
- » English (official)
- » Punjabi, Sindhi,
- » Pashto, Balochi,
- » Saraiki

- **Religious affiliations**

» Sunni Muslim:	77 percent
» Shia Muslim:	20 percent
» Christian, Hindu, and other:	3 percent

Estimated population according to Population census organization Government of

Pakistan is 176486611

(june3, 2011).

## 1.2. Figure:

## Native languages in Pakistan

Source: CIA World Factbook



In case of Pakistan, People migrate to cities in order to get better jobs or education; hence they have to shift to Urdu & English for these purposes. They make less use of their indigenous languages due to several facts some of them include the low status of their own language, inaccessibility of their own language community, and adoption of urban culture to raise their status. The fact came to view that privileging of Urdu by the state has created ethnic opposition to it. However, as Rehman(2002) states that people learn languages for pragmatic reasons (Rahman 2002: 36), they are giving less importance to their heritage languages and are learning Urdu. This phenomenon, sometimes called ‘voluntary shift’, is not really ‘voluntary’ as the case of the native Hawaiians, narrated by Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, illustrates (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 94-97). What happens is that market conditions are such that one’s language becomes a deficit in relation to what Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, would call ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1991: 230-231).

In short, the state's use of Urdu as a symbol of national integration has had two consequences. First, it has made Urdu the obvious force to be resisted by ethnic groups. This resistance makes them strengthen their languages by corpus planning (writing books, dictionaries, grammars, orthographies etc) and acquisition planning (teaching the languages, using them in the media pressurizing the state to use them; for these terms see Cooper 1989). Secondly, it has jeopardized additive multilingualism as recommended by UNESCO and, of course, by many eminent linguists and educationists (Cf., Edwards 1994). The question arises, does language spread and language loss relate to social, economic and political dominance?

In this dissertation, the term "indigenous" is used for languages that are spoken as mother tongues by communities whose home areas are fully or partially within the current borders of Pakistan and Pakistani-administered areas. This also includes the people who have migrated from other areas due to some reasons in the past, but who now have made Pakistan their permanent home.

#### **1.4. Defining Language Issues and Key Concepts**

##### **Historical Background of Urdu & English**

Urdu was originated during the Mughal period (1526- 1858) and it literally means "a camp language", because it was spoken by the imperial Mughal troops from Central Asia as they mixed with speakers of the local dialects of northern India. It shows that Urdu is the youngest of the nation's languages and is not indigenous to Pakistan. Although many of the features of Urdu are similar to Hindi which is the official language of India, but still linguistic differences equally exist; e.g. Urdu emphasizes words of Persian and Arabic origin, whereas Hindi emphasizes words of Sanskrit origin. Urdu is written in a modified version of the Persian script (written from right to left), whereas Hindi is written in the

Devanagari script from left to right. Urdu was understood from Bengal to Khyber among the educated class of the Subcontinent. Urdu language had been promoted as the lingua franca of Indian Muslims by political and religious leaders such as Sir Khawaja Salimullah, Nawab Wiqar-ul- Mulk, and Maulvi Abdul Haq. After its inception in the year 1947, in consequence to Jinnah's utterance in Dacca on 21 Mar 1948 that Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan; Urdu became the marker of national identity for the Muslims of Pakistan. Urdu was declared as the national language of Pakistan and it is stated in the 1973 constitution as follows:

- (1) The National language of Pakistan is Urdu and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes within fifteen years from the commencement.
- (2) Subject to clause (1) the English language may be used for official purposes until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu.
- (3) Without prejudice to the status of the National language, a Provincial Assembly may by law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language (Article 251).

The national language Urdu was the language of minority who came from India after the creation of Pakistan in 1947, and is called Mohajir (refugee or immigrant and it was Urdu and Bengali from 1955 till 1971 when East Pakistan became Bangladesh) The 1956 Constitution prescribed the use of English for official purposes for 20 years, and the 1962 Constitution made the period indefinite. The 1973 Constitution, however, designated a 15-year transition period to the Urdu language, after which English would no longer be used for official purposes. But the situation is obvious that English not only is used rather its circle has been expanded to small cities and villages where English medium schools have

been opened up which charge huge amounts in the name of fee package and there is no check and balance in regard to the quality of education they impart.

### **1.5. Language Riots: The Opposition by the Bengali Intelligentsia**

The most significant consequence of the policy that Urdu would be the national language of Pakistan was its opposition by the Bengali intelligentsia or what the Pakistani sociologist Hamza Alavi calls the 'salarial'—people who draw salaries from the state (or other employers) and who aspire for jobs (Alavi 1987). One of the reasons for this opposition was that the Bengali Salarial would have been at great disadvantage in the sense that Urdu instead of Bengali had become the national language, so they were deprived of the jobs and hence power in administration, judiciary, education, media, military etc (a similar situation exists currently in regard to regional and indigenous languages in the face of Urdu and English).

So far as the West Pakistani wing is concerned, Urdu was not resented or opposed much except in Sindh where there were language riots in January 1971 and July 1972 (Ahmed 1992). As Alyssa Ayres points out ("The Politics of Language Policy in Pakistan", in Brown and Ganguly, eds., *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia*, MIT Press): "Conflicts over language identity are not merely about language: They are intertwined with struggles over power and access to it. The vast majority of Pakistan's rulers and policymakers have been Punjabi and mohajirs (settlers), while the military has been ruled by a Punjabi-Mohajir-Pathan nexus."

### **1.6. English Language and Globalization**

Many linguists and thinkers observe that globalization will increase the power of English because more jobs will be opened demanding English language since it is spoken and understood the world over. These jobs will be controlled by multinationals, which are

dominated by the U.S.A. They are also controlled by the international bureaucracy—United Nations, World Bank, IMF, donor agencies etc.—which have started operating increasingly in ‘English’. This will increase the demand for English schooling,

### **1.7. Transmission of Indigenous Language and Culture**

A country’s linguistic and cultural diversity can be seen as an obstacle, but it can certainly be seen as an asset as well; obstacle in the sense that at times it proves to be a great hindrance in bringing some positive change, and asset in the sense that diversity is the mark of identity and versatility of a country or the area. In current times, cultural versatility and indigenous varieties of language in Pakistan are facing the threat of extinction which in any case is not a good omen as has been pointed out by Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine in their book on *Language Extinction*, loss of linguistic diversity should be taken very seriously because it is itself an indication of a larger problem. We begin to see this when we recognize that “a language is not a self-sustaining entity, It can only exist where there is a community to speak and transmit it. A community of people can exist only when there is a viable environment for them to live in, and a means of making a living. Where communities cannot thrive, their languages are in danger.” (Nettle and Romaine 2000:5). The Ethnologies lists around 70 languages for Pakistan. A few of these are already on the verge of extinction.

### **1.8. Significance of the study**

The study is designed to make a transparent view of the existing situation in regard to language management, language loss and language spread. Secondly the study aims to estimate the gap between language planning and practice in this connection. Thirdly, it has also been tried to make recommendation for the improvement of the situation. Special care has been taken during the study that the data should be based on facts since the purpose of this study is to fill implementation gap and suggest the steps for the improvements.