

HARRIS KHALIQUE

## The Urdu-English Relationship and Its Impact on Pakistan's Social Development\*

### Introduction

Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?  
Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full,  
One for my master, one for the dame,  
And one for the little boy who lives down the lane.

**T**HE BLACK SHEEP run the country. The first bag is English, to serve the masters, to gain favors and to be worn on one's sleeve always, announcing your social class. The second is Urdu, kept as a language of sensational journalism, popular entertainment and to send out meta-messages to the populace at large. Populace is the dame that has to be kept tamed and used for political gains or acquiring the so-called moral legitimacy for the powers that be, elected or unelected. The third bag is the array of the various mother tongues of Pakistan, the little boy with a very limited share in power and who virtually lives down the lane.

This paper attempts to outline the political decisions taken in Pakistan by the State and the meta-messages relayed to society at large in defining the relationship between Urdu and English. It further explores the impact of this relationship, which has not been constant throughout, on the country's social development. Here, what is meant by social development is the broadening of people's choices and their involvement and participation in the decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods. This may range from their role in the provision and acquisition of fundamental

---

\*Originally presented at the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg (IWH) International Workshop titled "Between State Ideology and Popular Culture: Urdu Literature and Urdu Media in Contemporary Pakistan," held in Heidelberg, Germany, 20–22 July 2006.

municipal services and their access to basic as well as higher education, to larger issues such as the electoral process, legislation, people's intellectual well being, opportunities offered to them by the State and private sector, and the realization of their genius in all walks of life.

The paper relates examples of the language divide, the perceptions and understanding of the members of marginalized communities across Pakistan, the switch over from one to the other in a particular situation and its effect. These examples are collected from the author's work as a community development professional. Most of the people interviewed and most of the events recorded for the purpose of this analysis involved individuals who speak Urdu as their second language. The information and analysis is not necessarily organized in a linear fashion but there is an attempt to follow a structure.

### **Policy Making on the Issue: A Brief Overview**

**1947 to 1973:** I would like to begin with the speech of Pakistan's founding father, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, made at the convocation of Dhaka University in 1948. He stated that in that province it was to be the will of people living there that would determine the official language of the province. However, it could only be Urdu that would serve as a bridge between the peoples of different provinces and be the official language of the Pakistani State (1989, 183). You will hear the latter part of this speech quoted and stressed by both quarters—those who criticize his support for Urdu as the sole national language as well as those who emphasize that only Urdu should be promoted in Pakistan, whether or not at the cost of other languages. Jinnah called it the "State Language of Pakistan," neither national nor official. But the Bengali intelligentsia were unhappy because their language was called provincial and not national. After a language rights movement and agitation by the Bengali opposition in the early 1950s, Bangla was given the status of a national language. This same issue persists in what is left of Jinnah's Pakistan. If he would have termed all the languages spoken in Pakistan as national languages and Urdu as the official language of the Pakistani State, many such perceptions could have been dispelled. If the local languages would have been taught in schools and adopted as official languages in the provinces, the issue of an official language for the State would have been resolved to a greater extent. However, everybody who had to work at the State level would have to learn Urdu. In my view, this is what Jinnah meant and he is thoroughly

misinterpreted by the two opposing lobbies. The third opinion prevailed, which was sometimes stated in clear terms and sometimes only practiced but not stated. That was, to continue with English as the official language of Pakistan while it was seen and promoted as a compromise candidate (Haque 1993, 14). It remains a compromise candidate, as it were, for the multilingual intelligentsia in India and is promoted as such in today's Pakistan. However, we shall see how true it is in the latter's case.

The Advisory Board of Education in its first meeting in 1948 had resolved that the mother tongue should be the medium of instruction at the primary stage. Also, a number of institutions were established or supported by the State to do basic work in Urdu: from coining new terms, to translations, to developing new tools and techniques to expedite its adoption as an official language (Rahman 1996, 233).

General Ayub's martial rule saw a revived emphasis on English as a medium of instruction in all élite schools. He established cadet colleges and other institutions besides patronizing the likes of Aitchison, Burn Hall, Lawrence College, Karachi Grammar School, many convent schools across Pakistan, etc. where Urdu was considered a language of servants and taxi drivers. Whereas, for the common folk, Urdu-medium schools and institutions were created in order to provide the élite and affluent middle class with an underclass of clerks, munshis and literate servants. There was complete agreement between the anglicized military generals and the famous Civil Services of Pakistan (CSP) about the use and higher status of English. While Faiz Ahmed Faiz was traveling to Moscow via Delhi to receive his Lenin Prize (1962), he stayed at a senior Pakistani diplomat's residence in Delhi, probably the high commissioner. The diplomat's young son asked him for an autograph. Faiz inscribed one of his verses and his signature. The boy looked at his autograph book and asked Faiz, "Uncle, you know such good English. Dad told me you were also the editor of a daily and you have given me your autograph in Khansaman's language?" This incident was related by Faiz himself in front of Mahmood Faridooon, Khalique Ibrahim Khalique and myself at Begum Majeed Malik's residence in Karachi in 1982. It sums up the language policy and preferences in Ayub's era.

The dame had to be given a bag too. The Sharif Commission, formed in 1959, had recommended that both Urdu and Bangla be used as mediums of instruction from Class VI onward and in this way, in about fifteen years, Urdu would reach a point of development where it would become the medium of instruction at the university level. The Commission had clearly stated that until Urdu was ready to replace English, English should

continue to be used for advanced study and research. Now, this statement served a purpose. It allowed confusion to take root in terms of how and when and by whom it would be determined that Urdu was ready to replace English. This was a convenient method of maintaining the status quo and English was given a fifteen-year lease.

On the other hand, based on the Commission's report, Urdu was introduced as the medium of instruction in all government schools across Pakistan. This created serious displeasure in Sindh, where Sindhi was already a medium of instruction from before. Sindhis saw it as a blow to their language and heritage, and rightly so. Sindh had Gujarati-medium schools as well, but the latter community was either being assimilated among the Sindhis in rural Sindh or among Urdu-speakers in urban Sindh. The decision had to be reversed in favor of Sindhi, nevertheless it contributed to a permanent wedge that developed between the Sindhi and Muhajir (migrants from India, mostly speaking Urdu as their first language) communities of the province. Therefore, while the underprivileged fought over their languages and cultures, the privileged continued to rule in English. Nonetheless, the Muhajir leadership, both cultural and political, cannot be absolved of its role in siding with the government on the language issue at that time.

The Hamood ur Rehman Commission Report, which also came out in the same era and looked at students' welfare and problems, simply confirms this assertion. It criticizes Karachi, Punjab and Sindh universities for allowing Urdu and Sindhi as languages for instruction and sitting exams. It says that some were swayed by sentiment rather than dispassionate judgment in accelerating the pace of changeover (Rahman 1996, 234).

**1973 to 2006:** The year 1971 not only created Bangladesh, it created a new Pakistan. Pakistan was reborn at that time after the majority of its population chose to secede, or was made to secede, from their once cherished homeland. This has no parallel in history (Khalique 2003, 9). It completely changed the dynamic among the stakeholders of the country and introduced new pressure groups and stakeholders. The language policy remained vague for people at large and clear to those who ruled. It would have been easier in the 1970s than now to have promoted and adopted Urdu and the other national languages of Pakistan at different levels ensuring the empowerment of people.

The 1973 Constitution of the Republic was promulgated with Article 251 stating:

(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 commencing day.

(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 measure[s] for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language.

The timing of the Constitution coincides with the lapse of the fifteen-year lease given to English by the Sharif Commission and hence refreshes that lease for another fifteen years. We will come to the interpretations made by the relevant authorities later. The contradiction that emerged in Bhutto's era was that on the one hand, he propagated a socialist ideology, nationalized industry and education, and stood for the rights of the poor. On the other hand, he did not make any effort to change the official language to include the poor in decision making.

When Sindhi was promoted and encouraged as an official language in the province of Sindh, in congruence with Article 251(3) of the Constitution, it resulted in language riots in the province. The government could not deal with this issue adequately and once again two national languages were seen pitched against each other. Sindhi became an official language of Sindh, but little has happened in real terms for giving its due official status. In the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan, similar efforts were made by the provincial governments to adopt Urdu. But at the federal level and in élite schools, English reigned supreme. Calling a language provincial was, in a way, repeating the same mistake that had fueled nationalist sentiments in Bengal. Therefore, a language is called national and no real adoption of that language takes place, but at the same time those relegated and called provincial look at the sole national language as an adversary.

Under General Zia-ul-Haq's martial rule of eleven years, while many steps were taken to Urdu-ize government functioning and government schooling, a parallel structure not only remained intact, it prospered. When Zia pursued a policy of denationalizing government educational institutions, those who had opted for Urdu as a medium reverted to English. Besides, all policy formation and decision making at the higher level continued to take place in English. The dame was given her bag, but the master kept getting his booty of the choicest wool. However, a signifi-

cant development during that period, which cannot be ignored, is the establishment of the National Language Authority (Muqtadira-i-Qaumi Zaban) in 1979. The Language Authority worked, and continues to work even now, on two fronts. One, creating an enabling environment by preparing detailed recommendations for the adoption of Urdu as an official language, including procedural and administrative steps, and two, developing academic and reference material. The General retracted and gave legal protection to the elitist schools in 1983, besides also allowing science subjects to be taught in English in non-elitist schools. Confusion marred the linguistic and educational policy making and implementation, and a generation going to Urdu- and Sindhi-medium schools became more incompetent in English (Mahboob 2003, 12).

The elected governments of Benazir and Nawaz Sharif continued with parallel education systems and encouraged private sector English-medium schools and higher educational institutions. One step that Benazir's first government took was the introduction of English as a compulsory subject from Class I in all government schools on the plea that it would enhance opportunities for poor children. The implementation remained weak because there was no quality teaching available. In 1993, when the Language Authority approached the Law Ministry, in order to prepare legislation for the adoption of Urdu in light of the Constitution, the Justice Division ruled that the said clause is recommendatory and not obligatory. The education policy of 1998, which had a twelve-year vision, failed to address the issue of parallel education systems at all.

General Musharraf's martial rule since 1999 is no different as far as redefining the language relationship is concerned. We see a mushrooming of poor quality English-medium schools, the anglicizing of state-run media, and no effort to adopt Urdu at any official level that matters. The Language Authority came up with another set of recommendations in 2005, but no appreciation or serious consideration is observed at the policy-making level. Only in the NWFP, to the dislike of most senior civil servants, is Urdu used as commonly as English in the provincial secretariat. This owes to the inability of the ruling alliance of religious parties to understand and use English. This may roll back with the departure of the incumbent government. The English-medium schools in the NWFP are not in any way affected.

In all parts of Pakistan, more public and private institutions are coming up and promoting the use of English. The recently held national education conference in Islamabad, attended by both the President and the Prime Minister, saw no signal change in the government's policy on

language education and the medium of instruction. The primary issue is not the choice of a medium or various mediums of instruction. It is the language in which the affairs of the state are managed, legislation is drafted and decisions are made.

### **Developing Popular Perceptions Today**

Currently, the élite dominated opinion makers are doing three things in order to popularize certain perceptions about Urdu and other languages of Pakistan vis-à-vis English.

English is a modern language and the prime language of knowledge, access to international markets, and communication. It would be a reverse gear, as it were, if it was replaced by a vernacular. Our own language brings an orthodoxy and limits our scope and vision.

Translations into Urdu are even more difficult than English and are understood by even fewer people. Especially, children and young people find it easier to use English.

Pakistan has many languages and, while Urdu remains the “link language,” switching over to it at an official level will create unrest among speakers of the other languages. (Hence relegating Urdu, rather than promoting other languages to a higher status in a hierarchy carved out by the State.)

These perceptions have gained strength among the élite, affluent middle class and the aspiring lower-middle class. The majority is neither counted nor consulted. We do not have any empirical data available for how people feel at the grassroots. Some case studies will be shared later that indicate how they react to language usage or a change in language. Also, many of these ideas may have substance, but the solution they offer only serves the minority English-speaking Pakistanis. There are answers to all three arguments, which will be discussed in the next two sections.

Interestingly, the surveys conducted by researchers and linguists on the subject fulfill the same purpose stated above, consciously or unconsciously. The questions they ask students or people in general are about their preferred medium of instruction, the relative importance of English and the value they attach to learning vernaculars. It is obvious that, increasingly, people, including students, would favor English and the percentages will keep going up. The questions that are seldom asked are:

how they would feel if the administrative and legislative work in Pakistan was done in Urdu, if the work of the province was done in whatever language they chose, if equal job opportunities were available to everyone, and if learning their mother tongue was an advantage, not a handicap for people.

### Impact on People's Development

The absence of a clear cut language policy in Pakistan and the adherence to English as the official language, the language required for a decent job and livelihood, for a better education, social prestige and for academic discourse, has marginalized the majority of Pakistanis. No serious step was ever taken nor was a resource allocation ever made to teach quality English to everyone. However, it remains highly debatable if this was ever possible because of demographic, economic, cultural and historic reasons. The result is an underclass that remains out of any public policy making, its upward mobility increasingly limited, and harboring a deep sense of inferiority. A majority of Pakistanis is unable to recognize car registration plates, many road signs that are only in English, the signboards of shops and offices, and it has become hard for them to follow what is said on public and private media. Last week, when I was watching a television program in Lahore, being telecast by the most watched state-run Pakistani station, the announcer said, "Viewers, *ājkal music kī line mēñ bobat sē singers ārahē haiñ, yeh ēk blessing hai.*" In issue-based seminars and conferences held across Pakistan, people feel completely alienated until someone starts speaking in Urdu. In some villages and urban areas where the poor live, private entrepreneurs or local community-based organizations have opened English-medium schools, but their quality is dismal because they cater to low-income groups where parents have no knowledge of English at all. And their number remains small.

**An Example from the Social Development Work of Strengthening Participatory Organisation (SPO):** I will now present a few instances and observations from my work at Strengthening Participatory Organisation (SPO), which is committed to the social and intellectual well being of people through the empowerment of civil society and through promoting dialogue among various stakeholders in development. In terms of outreach,



SPO is the largest community-centered, capacity building Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) of Pakistan. It defines itself as a rights-based organization, using a human rights framework with a focus on economic, cultural and social rights while maintaining their indivisibility from civil and political rights. SPO's program includes:

- Capacity building of community-based NGOs, women's organizations and local institutions in organizational and financial management, project development, gender issues, environmental awareness and political participation;
- Supporting communities in developing small scale infrastructure projects that may compensate for a lack of municipal services, taking methodical initiatives in education, health and livelihood improvement for women;
- Promoting knowledge and evidence-based advocacy for people's rights through strengthening the civil society networks of community organizations, media and professionals at the grassroots level;
- Help provide or facilitate state-led basic education through planning and management at the district and school level;
- Respond to community needs and provide relief in case of emergencies such as floods, droughts, earthquakes and civil unrest.

Our work brings us very close to groups representing the marginalized and downtrodden across Pakistan. SPO has assisted a couple of thousand organizations and community groups through its elaborate training programs and by holding workshops and seminars, producing literature on people's issues and on things that affect them, holding public meetings and funding or facilitating hundreds of projects in education, health, infrastructure, and livelihood support in agriculture, livestock, services and crafts. The members of the communities we work with on a permanent basis speak all dialects of Punjabi and Pashto, Seraiki, Hindko, Balochi, Brahvi, Sindhi, Gujarati, Urdu and Persian as their mother tongues. Others we have come across through short-term professional contacts include speakers of Shina, Brushiski, Khwar, Balti, Kohistani, Chitrali, Dhatki, Memoni, Kashmiri, Bangla, and many others. Pakistan has sixty-nine languages, including six major tongues. Our own organization includes people who speak at least nine different languages as their mother tongues. In this diversity, we explore the need, the demand and the evolution of a negotiated language of discourse, the discussion about a preferred medium of instruction, and ideas about the language for

running the affairs of state and of higher education and learning. The following are a few observations that hint at the linguistic changes and their impact over the years within and around SPO in relation to its work:

1. SPO became an independent, national nonprofit organization in 1994 after being transformed from a bilateral aid project. The Urdu-English ratio in the proceedings of its board and general body meetings increased continuously in favor of Urdu as more and more people from the community and the salaried classes joined them. Even if members were familiar with English, the language of the proceedings changed. However, the language for recording the conversation, ninety percent of which now takes places in Urdu, remains English. This will not change unless the general body decides one day to do so, or the official language of the State changes.

2. The training material of SPO was initially developed in Urdu. After a few years, a foreign consultant updated it and created a new manual in English. That remained the main coursework for years. In 2002, when we started updating this manual again, we did an initial survey and found out that most of our own trainers did not make full use of the latest manual and were quietly using the handouts and some lesson plans from the old manual just because that material was in Urdu. Moreover, they could not share a single handout from the current manual with the community, and both the trainers and the trainees struggled with the course content. We decided to create a detailed training toolkit and manuals in Urdu for all our courses, training programs and initiatives. It did wonders. We now observe highly animated training, full participation of trainees, and more confident trainers. In many places, the training content is primarily delivered in the local language with interludes of Urdu, while handouts are in Urdu.

3. There was a system for encouraging community-based organizations to develop project proposals, prepare a docket and submit it to SPO. It was all in English and particularly excluded women's groups, which were comprised of non-literate women as well. The non-literate women could understand their own language or Urdu to a large extent if someone would read out the project docket to them. For men's groups it was also difficult. As a result, SPO staff would develop these proposals in broken English and the whole purpose of training a community to develop projects in social sectors and income generation would fail. We decided,

in principle, to change the language of the project dockets in 2003. There is now a marked difference in the quality of the proposals and in the involvement of community members. Although it needs a lot more improvement in terms of quality, we have come a long way as far as the understanding and capacity of the communities is concerned.

4. Across the civil society and NGO sector generally, though less so in SPO specifically, there had been a trend to organize English-language seminars and academic and technical lectures related to our work, even when there were no foreigners present. This is changing fast and we now see all programs becoming bilingual at the very least. Those who still insist on organizing such events in English, fail to generate a valuable multidimensional discussion. In many places across the four provinces, local languages are used, in addition to Urdu, to express opinions and share concerns. The more people get a chance, the more they use their own languages. We now have a policy to translate the proceedings of all important conferences and workshops into Urdu if they must originally be held in English because of foreign participation. The supply has created a demand, which is empowering and makes people understand better. We try to advocate for and propagate all public information in Urdu and other local languages. But the government's apathy is remarkable. One example is a legislative bill that was being prepared to regulate small-scale and medium-sized nonprofit organizations. The deliberations went on for years and it occurred to no one that these few pages could have been translated into Urdu to solicit wider participation from smaller rural and urban organizations.

### **General Recommendations**

I would like to end with a few recommendations.

1. Pakistan has a population of approximately 160 million and the current portion of the population that is functional in verbal and written English is less than two percent. Urdu must replace English at the federal level, and other national languages at the provincial and district level, to manage the affairs of the State and to include people in decision making. In short, no wide-scale social development or good governance is possible if the status quo is maintained. If English continues as the official language of Pakistan, all

Pakistanis must be given equal access to good quality English language education and to schools that teach subjects in English. If this is not possible, and in my opinion it is not, English should be replaced.

2. The genius of Pakistanis can only be realized on a large scale, and to the benefit of society and country, if individuals are allowed to work in the language in which they think and express their feelings. Mother tongues must be taught compulsorily in schools and colleges. Preferably, they should be used as the medium of instruction in schools, besides Urdu. Urdu should also become the main language of academic discourse and the medium of instruction nationally for humanities, physical and social science subjects, etc. at the higher levels of education.
3. The importance of English can and should not be undermined. It is and will remain the most important international language for some time to come. Being a true global lingua franca and a language of both knowledge and trade, English must be taught as a subject and promoted as a means for acquiring specialized skills and new knowledge. Ideally, every Pakistani should be able to read, write and converse in English. Some will continue to use English more than the other languages spoken, understood, and now naturalized in Pakistan. The only proviso is that English must not be used to exclude people from political power, social prestige, a decent livelihood and equal opportunities in all fields.
4. Languages in general, and developing languages in particular, need support languages. English has become the support language of Urdu and has replaced Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit functionally, and to some extent linguistically.
5. Translating lexical items from one language into another, nouns and adjectives for example, is the first step. We increasingly see that the most developed languages creatively borrow syntactic patterns from other languages. This adaptation and its challenge expand the frontiers of the borrowing language.
6. Other European, Asian and African languages must be promoted and taught to Pakistanis, which would widen their intellectual horizons besides bringing an advantage in international diplomacy.
7. A number of sociological and political changes have taken place in Pakistan over the years and these are seldom factored into the planning and policy-making processes. These include increased access to advanced information and communication technology,

the shared political experience of people, the erosion of primitive feudal authority in the economic realm, the road network and an increased awareness of the importance of quality education. While these changes present English as the most advanced language, they provide an equal chance for Pakistani languages to develop and for users of Urdu to employ all modern technology to their benefit. A recent example is the development of Microsoft Windows in Urdu. Many other software programs are either available or being developed. In addition to a large number of Urdu television channels, exclusive Sindhi, Punjabi and Pashto channels are now being aired.

8. In 2006 the function of Urdu has changed from being an identity marker—a language imposed by the State of Pakistan at the cost of other national languages—to being a people’s language, a negotiated compromise language for running interregional affairs in addition to being the nationwide medium of journalism and entertainment. At the same time, there is an insufficient but increased awareness among the masses about the importance of their own native languages, culture and heritage. This awareness goes hand in hand with increased self-esteem and a sense of identity.
9. It may be of interest to many that more than three quarters of the literate population in Pakistan is literate only in Urdu. An analysis of the population census of 1981 provided the initial figures in this regard (Ahmed 1998, 266). Literacy has increased substantially since then, but mostly through government or nonformal schools where Urdu remains the primary language of instruction. This linguistic assimilation must be used to benefit the common people and while they are brought closer in political terms, they must also be provided with economic and political opportunities in Urdu.
10. Revised recommendations for the adoption of Urdu as the official language, prepared by the National Language Authority in 2005, need to be implemented at the earliest. They delineate procedures for the adoption of Urdu in the administrative, judicial and educational realms. □

### Works Cited

Ahmed, Feroz. 1998. *Ethnicity and Politics in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University

Press.

*Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*. 1973. Islamabad: Government of Pakistan. [http://www.pakistanconstitution-law.com/const\\_results.asp?artid=251&title=National%20language](http://www.pakistanconstitution-law.com/const_results.asp?artid=251&title=National%20language).

Haque, A. 1993. "The Position and Status of English in Pakistan." In *English Language in Pakistan*. Edited by R. Baumgardner. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Jinnah, Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali. 1989. *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah: Speeches and Statements as Governor General of Pakistan, 1947-1948*. Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Directorate of Films & Publications.

Khalique, Harris. 2003. *Pakistan: The Question of Identity*. Islamabad: Strengthening Participatory Organisation.

Mahboob, Ahmar. 2003. *The Future of English in Pakistan*. Islamabad: Strengthening Participatory Organisation.

National Language Authority. 2005. Recommendations for Adoption of Urdu as Official Language. Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, Cabinet Division, National Language Authority.

Rahman, Tariq. 1996. *Language and Politics in Pakistan*. 1998 paper edition. Karachi: Oxford University Press.